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William L. Benoit

University of Alabama-Birmingham, wbenoit@uab.edu

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Meta-Analysis of Research on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse



William L. Benoit –University of Alabama, Birmingham



William L. Benoit (PhD , Wayne State University)

Dr. William L. Benoit (Ph.D. Wayne State University) is a professor of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. Bill has taught such courses as political communication, persuasive defense, argumentation, and persuasion. He developed and applied the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse as well as Image Repair Theory.

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Functional Theory has been applied to a variety of election campaign messages, including candidacy announcement speeches; TV spots; debates; direct mail brochures; candidate webpages; nomination acceptance addresses; vice presidential debates; senate, gubernatorial, and mayoral debates; senate, gubernatorial, and house TV spots; and debates and TV spots from other countries. This approach argues that election messages address one of three functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses) and one of two topics (policy, character). This study reports a meta-analysis of several Functional Theory predictions: acclaims are more common than attacks (defenses are consistently the least common function and were not tested here); policy is discussed more than character; when discussing past deeds incumbents acclaim more and attack less than challengers; attacks, and policy statements, are more common in general than primary campaigns; when addressing general goals and ideals, attacks outnumber acclaims. General goals were the basis of more acclaims and fewer attacks than future plans. Candidates use fewer acclaims and more attacks than other sources. Two hypotheses were not confirmed: incumbents did not attack more and acclaim less than challengers generally or when discussing future plans. The essay concludes with suggestions for future research in this area.

Key Words: Functions, Topics, speeches, TV spots, debates, brochures, webpages, incumbency, campaign phase, source

Election campaign messages undergird the political systems of many countries around the globe. Campaigns work to persuade citizens to cast their votes for the candidate. Legitimate criticisms can be leveled against election campaigns (e.g., candidates can be deceptive, demagoguery can thrive in a campaign, campaign donations can corrode the process of democracy, and too many voters are apathetic); nevertheless election campaigns are an essential part of democracy and ubiquitous today. In the United States candidates run for a diverse group of elective offices, including mayor, city council, congress (state and federal), governor, president, and in some jurisdictions, judgeships. The federal government in America has 537 offices (president, vice president, senators, and representatives). Citizens cast votes for 18,749 positions in state government. Local (city, county) governments in the U.S. hold elections for another 500,396 elected officials. So, the United States holds elections for almost 520,000 offices (Lawless,



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2011). For better or worse, the American approach to elections (use of advertising, debates, and other messages) has been used in many countries around the world. For example, political leaders' (president, prime minister, chancellor) debates have been held in many countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Poland, Scotland, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, the Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Wales. Television advertisements are employed in other countries although their use is limited by law in some countries. Some countries limit the time period in which TV spots can be used (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2006). In the UK, for example, political candidates are prohibited from running television spots. Political parties are allowed to air Party Election Broadcasts but "the maximum length of [PEBs] has declined progressively, from 30 minutes in 1955 to four minutes 40 seconds" (Scammell & Langer 2006, p. 76). Still, TV spots and other kinds of campaign messages are employed around the world in contemporary election campaigns. The sheer number of campaigns is a reason for election research.

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Second, literally billions of dollars are lavished on political campaigns (Benoit, 2014a). For example, Wilson (2012) determined that in the 2012 American general election presidential campaign, over a billion dollars was spent by Obama, Romney, and political groups (about twice as much as was spent in 2008). The *Washington Post* reported that as of October 19, 2016 over \$3.8 billion had been raised for Democrats and Republicans in the presidential primary and general election (2016); of course millions more in contributions were raised for down-ballot races. Additional money is spent for the hundreds of thousands of other campaigns for other political offices in the U.S. and around the world.

Third, it made a difference, for example, whether Democrat Hillary Clinton or Republican Donald Trump was elected as president in 2016. Regardless of which candidate one preferred, there is no doubt that Trump will pursue markedly different policies than Clinton would have done had she won the Electoral College. The same thing could be said of other candidates, such as Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012. It also matters whether Donald Trump, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio or one of the other Republican contenders won the nomination, just as it made a difference whether Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, or one of the other Democrats won their party's nomination.

Fourth, research documents effects from watching television advertising, an important campaign medium. Mulder (1979) reported that advertising in a Chicago mayoral race was positively related to attitudes toward the candidates. McClure and Patterson (1974) indicated that in the 1972 presidential campaign, "exposure to political advertising was consistently related to voter belief change" (p. 16; see also Atkin & Heald, 1976). Other research has found a positive relationship between ad spending and election outcomes (Joslyn, 1981; Palda, 1973; Wanat, 1974). Experimental research employing TV spots used by candidates in elections (Atkin, 1977; Basil, Schooler, & Reeves, 1991; Christ, Thorson, & Caywood, 1994; Faber & Storey, 1984; Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993; Garramone, 1984, 1985; Garramone & Smith, 1984; Geiger &



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Reeves, 1991; Hitchon & Chang, 1995; Johnston, 1989; Just, Crigler, & Wallach, 1990; Kaid, 1997; Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Kaid, Leland, & Whitney, 1992; Kaid & Sanders, 1978; Lang, 1991; McClure & Patterson, 1974; Merritt, 1984; Newhagen & Reeves, 1991) as well as studies on ads created by researchers (Becker & Doolittle, 1975; Cundy, 1986; Donohue, 1973; Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, & Cole, 1990; Hill, 1989; Meadow & Sigelman, 1982; Roddy & Garramone, 1988; Rudd, 1989; Thorson, Christ, & Caywood, 1991) demonstrates that televised political advertisements have a variety of effects (recall of ad content, attitudes toward candidates, voting intention) on viewers. Based on the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, Gordon and Hartmann (2013) reported that “our findings illustrate that advertising is capable of shifting the electoral votes of multiple states and consequently the outcome of an election” (p. 33). Significant effects from TV spots have been confirmed through meta-analysis (Benoit, Leshner, & Chattopadhyay, 2007). Jacobson’s (2015) literature review declares that “A review of the evidence leaves no doubt election campaigns do matter in a variety of important ways” (p. 31). McKinney and Warner (2013; see also Boydson, Glazier, Pietryka & Resnik, 2014; Jamieson, 2015; Warner & McKinney, Schill & Kirk, 2014) conclude that “the evidence is quite conclusive that campaign debates do indeed matter” (p. 256). Campaign messages do not affect every citizen, and they do not influence every one in the same way (Jarman, 2005), but they inform a significant number of voters and change or reinforce existing attitudes for many.

Research has also established that debates – another important campaign medium – have several effects on those who watch them (see, e.g., Benoit, Hansen, & Holbert, 2004; Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001; Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson, 2002; Benoit & Stephenson, 2004; Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998; Holbrook, 1996; McKinney & Carlin, 2004; Racine Group, 2002; Reinemann & Maurer, 2005; Shaw, 1999a, 1999b). Patterson (2003) reported that “Citizens learn more about the candidates during the ninety minutes of an October debate than they do in most other weeks of the campaign” (pp. 170-171). Significant effects from watching debates have been confirmed through meta-analysis (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). Research confirms effects of watching debates in non-presidential campaigns (e.g., Just, Crigler, & Wallach, 1990) and non-U.S. campaign debates (e.g., Blumler, 2011; Senior, 2008).

Campaign effects may not always be obvious but messages have substantial effects and can be very important. Sides and Vavrek (2013) offered a useful metaphor for understanding campaign effects, comparing presidential election campaigns to “a game of tug-of-war. Both sides are pulling very hard. If for some reason, one side let go – meaning they stop campaigning – the other side would soon benefit” (p. 9). So, if either major candidate in a contested election ceased producing campaign messages he or she would quickly drop in the polls.

Campaigns enable candidates to connect with citizens and provide opportunities for voters to participate in democracy. The candidates’ election messages which constitute campaigns deserve scholarly attention. One approach to understanding election campaign messages is provided by the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse. Textual literature reviews



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of research on Functional Theory are available in Benoit (2007, 2014a, 2014c). The purpose of this study is to report meta-analyses of data on eleven Functional Theory predictions.

Meta-analysis (see, e.g., Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981; Hunter & Schmidt, 1990, 2004; Rosenthal, 1991; or Wolf, 1986) is a statistical method for cumulating the findings of multiple studies of a given dependent variable. This method has important advantages over traditional, narrative literature reviews. First, it works from effect size rather than significance levels. Sullivan and Feinn (2010) explain that:

The effect size is the main finding of a quantitative study. While a *P* value can inform the reader whether an effect exists, the *P* value will not reveal the size of the effect. In reporting and interpreting studies, both the substantive significance (effect size) and statistical significance (*P* value) are essential results to be reported. (p. 279)

This consideration is important because significance levels are highly dependent on sample size and the sample size for the research on Functional Theory is quite large. Second, meta-analysis provides a statistical (relatively objective) approach to summarizing past research. Furthermore, it permits corrections for such factors as sampling error and measurement error.

Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

Functional Theory was developed for several reasons. First, far too much research into the nature (content) of election campaign messages is atheoretical. Functional Theory articulates assumptions about election discourse and offers several predictions about the content of such messages. Second, content analysis of political TV spots is quite common in the literature (with most research analyzing functions (positive versus negative ads) and/or topic (issue versus image ads). However, comparatively little research investigates the nature of other kinds of election messages, such as announcement speeches, televised primary and general election debates, announcement speeches and acceptance addresses, or candidate webpages. Functional Theory proposes a method that can be, and has been, applied across campaign media (and across level of office and country). Third, the content analysis that has been conducted of advertisements has limitations. Some studies do not examine both functions and topics (Functional Theory analyzes both). Most research uses the entire spot as the coding unit: TV spots were coded either as positive or negative (a few studies added a third possibility, comparative ads) and coded as addressing either policy or character. Kaid and Johnston (1991) acknowledged that using the entire spot as a coding unit has potential limitations: “Our method of dichotomizing the sample into positive and negative ads by determining a dominant focus on the candidate or his opponent is useful for analysis but may understate the amount of negative information about an opponent present even in a positive ad” (p. 62). Coding entire spots could also lead researchers to



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overestimate attacks. To illustrate this potential problem, consider this spot for George W. Bush in 2000:

Announcer: Under Clinton/Gore, prescription drug prices have skyrocketed, and nothing's been done. George Bush has a plan: Add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare.

Bush: Every senior will have access to prescription drug benefits.

Announcer: And Al Gore? He says he wants to fight for the people against HMOs, but his prescription drug plan forces seniors into one HMO selected by the federal government.

Al Gore: Federal HMO. George Bush: Seniors choose.

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Italicized utterances attack Gore whereas the other remarks acclaim Bush. To describe this entire spot as *either positive or negative* clearly erroneously classifies part of what is being said to voters. Even classifying this as a comparative ad (which implies a 50/50 split) overlooks the fact that about two-thirds of this ad is negative and one-third positive. Compare that ad, with both acclaims and attacks, with this spot used in the same campaign:

2.2 trillion dollars. That's a lot of money: 8,000 dollars for each American. It's our government's projected surplus over the next 10 years. Al Gore plans to spend it all and more. Gore's proposing three times the new spending President Clinton proposed, wiping out the entire surplus and creating a deficit again. Gore's big government spending plan threatens American prosperity.

Unlike the previous advertisement, this one is entirely negative. Yet using the entire ad as the coding unit would “count” these two messages the same, each as one attacking ad. The same problem arises in studies coding a spot as addressing either issue or image. Kaid (1994) took the unusual step of dividing presidential primary ads from the 1992 campaign into three groups: image ads, issue ads, and negative ads, a category system that implies that image and issue ads were distinct from negative spots. Surely negative ads can address issues and image (or both), but this classification system does not make that point clear. Benoit and Airne (2009), for example, studying Senate, House, and gubernatorial ads from 2004, found that 42% of the ads in their sample contained both acclaims and attacks and 75% of spots discussed both policy and character. Coding by themes allows the analysis to more accurately represent the content of these messages. Benoit and Benoit-Bryan (2014a) explain that “Themes are complete ideas, claims, or arguments; a single theme can vary in length from one phrase to an entire paragraph” (p. 159). A moment’s reflection will reveal that using the entire message as the coding unit would be useless for content analysis of speeches or other message forms. Finally, West (1997) uses the entire spot as his coding unit and for the period of 1952-1996 he reports more than 10% more negativity than Benoit (1999).

Fourth, much research on the content of election messages does not report inter-coder reliability. Studies of debates which do not report reliability include D’Alessandro (2017),



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Dragan (2016), and Rzepecka (2016); research on advertising which does not report reliability include Banda and Windett (2016), Carsey, Jackson, Stewart, and Nelson (2011), Dudek (2008), Lau and Redlawsk (2015), and Ridout and Holland (2010). Other research reports inter-coder reliability as simple agreement between coders (e.g., Kaid & Johnston, 2001). However, with two categories (positive or negative; issue or image) even monkeys pushing keys labeled “positive” or “negative” are likely to agree 50% of the time. Functional Theory uses Cohen’s (1960) κ , which controls for agreement by chance. This means we can place greater confidence in data produced by the Functional Theory than in many other studies.

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A fifth limitation of past research is that few studies go beyond functions (positive, negative) or topics (issue, image); Functional Theory divides the topics of policy and character into sub-categories (past deeds, future plans, general goals; personal qualities, leadership ability, ideals). Statements about policy and character can be sub-divided into more specific kinds of statements. Finally, Functional Theory adds a third function, defenses (refutations of attacks). Defenses are quite rare in political advertising, so this is not a telling criticism of research on ads, but in debates defenses can account for 5-10% of the candidate remarks. Thus, Functional Theory was developed in response to limitations of the existing literature.

This approach has received growing acceptance. For example, Nai and Walter (2015) edited a book on negative campaigning, adopting Functional Theory “as a baseline for defining and measuring negative campaigning” (p. 17). Hrbkova and Zagrapan (2014), studying political leaders’ debates, wrote that “The most influential attempt at systematic analysis of political debates based on a specific theoretical construct is the functional theory by William Benoit” (p. 736). Isotalus (2011) wrote that “One of the most used and systematically tested theories in the studies of the content of television debates has been functional theory” (p. 31). This theory merits scholarly attention.

This theory makes five assumptions about election campaigns (Benoit, 2007). First, voting is a comparative act. To win elective office, candidates only need to appear – and it is important to remember that political campaigns are about voters’ perceptions – preferable to their opponents. Candidates do not need to persuade all citizens (or even all voters) of their superiority; they must only persuade enough voters to win the election. The idea that political candidates do not have to persuade all voters of their preferability is very important because many issues are controversial and people disagree about the most important character traits of a president: Candidates cannot hope to persuade all voters of their preferability on either policy or character. Candidates who espouse a particular position on any given controversial issue are likely to simultaneously attract and repel different groups of voters who embrace different beliefs and values; it is lucky that a political candidate does not have to persuade all voters to win an election.

Second, candidates must call attention to areas of contrast between themselves and their



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opponent(s). Those seeking elective office do not have to disagree with opponents on every conceivable issue: Who would oppose curbing inflation, creating jobs, or protecting the country from terrorists? Nevertheless, voters would have no reason to prefer one candidate over another if the candidates appear identical in every regard. Candidates must distinguish themselves from opponents on at least some points of comparison if they are to appear preferable to opponents. The need to reach voters to create some contrasts between or among candidates means that communication is vital to political election campaigns.

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The third assumption is that citizens obtain information about candidates and their issue stands through election messages from a variety of sources, including candidates, their supporters, the news media, and special interest groups. Candidates use messages in a variety of media to inform voters about themselves and their policies and to identify differences between opponents, including TV spots, debates, speeches, webpages, and Facebook pages. In the 2016 campaign Donald Trump made headlines repeatedly with his tweets.

Fourth, candidates can establish preferability to opponents by using messages that employ the functions of acclaims, attacks, and defenses. Acclaims tout a candidate's strengths or advantages. Attacks identify an opponent's alleged weaknesses or disadvantages. Defenses respond to, or refute, attacks made against a candidate. These functions work together as an informal version of cost-benefit analysis. This observation does not mean Functional Theory assumes that voters quantify benefits (acclaims) or costs (attacks and defenses) or that they engage in mathematical calculations (adding or averaging costs and benefits) to make vote choices. Acclaims are capable of increasing a candidate's perceived benefits. Attacks can increase the apparent costs of an opponent. Defenses have the potential to reduce a candidate's perceived costs. Functional Theory does not assume that acclaims, attacks, and defenses are necessarily persuasive: Some messages are poorly conceived or do not reach the intended audience; some voters are far from open-minded. Furthermore, knowledge and attitudes of voters differs, as does the way citizens perceive messages from and about candidates.

Election discourse can address two potential topics, policy and character, a fifth assumption of Functional Theory. Candidates can acclaim, attack, and defend (1) *what he or she has done or will do* in office (policy) and (2) *who he or she is* (character). These terms (policy, character) are preferable to other terms often encountered in the literature: issue and image. The term "issue" refers to disputable questions. Because candidates often discuss their personalities, it is possible for *character* to be an *issue* in a campaign. Furthermore citizens develop perceptions – impressions or images – of the candidates' policy positions as well as their character, which means one could talk about voters' *images* of the candidates' *policy* positions. Using the terms policy and character avoids these potential difficulties.

It is important to note that these two topics are not entirely discrete. When a candidate takes a particular position on an issue (policy) could influence the audience's perceptions of that



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candidate (character). For example, espousing a proposal to help the homeless (policy) could foster the impression that the candidate is compassionate (character). Similarly, a candidate thought to be a bigot (a character trait) could be assumed to oppose legislation to help minorities (policy). Still, legislation to help the homeless or on minorities is different from the personal qualities of compassion or bigotry. High values for inter-coder reliability in research using the Functional approach (see below) on topics of campaign discourse demonstrates that despite some overlap, policy and character are distinct topics.

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Functional theory further divides discourse on policy into past deeds (record in office), future plans (means or specific proposals for policy), and general goals (ends, desired future state of affairs). Functional Theory focuses on the past (past deeds) and the future (future plans and general goals). It does not have a category to represent campaign discourse using the present tense. For example, candidates sometimes make statements like “I am working hard to create jobs.” If this work has actually created any jobs, that accomplishment should be (and almost certainly would be) used as the basis for an acclaim on past deeds (e.g., “Job creation increased 15% under my stewardship”). If that hard work has not actually produced any results, the statement is essentially an acclaim on general goals (“My goal is job creation”). This analysis comports well with theories of voting from political science which identify two theories of vote choice: Retrospective voting, where vote choice is based on an assessment of what the candidates have accomplished in the past, versus prospective voting, which bases vote choice on speculation about what the candidates will likely accomplish (in the future) if elected (Lanoue, 1994). There is no third theory of voting concerned with the present. Functional Theory also sub-divides utterances on character into statements about personal qualities (personality), leadership ability (experience in elective office, ability to lead), and ideals (values or principles, this concept is not derived from social psychology).

Predictions

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse makes a number of predictions, eleven of which are tested here (it also offers other predictions – e.g., that news coverage discusses attacks more than candidates actually use attacks – but the data on these other predictions are too sparse to justify meta-analysis).

Acclams have no drawbacks, attacks have one drawback (many voters dislike mudslinging, so an attack can generate backlash – see, e.g., Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975), and defenses have three limitations (defenses can make a candidate appear reactive rather than proactive; because attacks usually address the target’s weaknesses, defenses often take a candidate off message; one must identify an attack in order to refute it, so a defense can inform or remind voters of a potential weakness). So, candidates have reasons to use more acclams than attacks and more attacks than defenses. Some authors believe that attacks are very common in candidate messages. For example, West (2001) indicated that more of advertisements were negative than



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positive. Kamber (1997), for example, notes that “previous eras saw severe personal attack on political candidates, but they also saw detailed and sometimes inspiring deliberation over the issues. Our present political discourse is nothing but spleen” (p. 4). Broder (2002), a journalist, wrote that “the ads people are seeing are relentlessly negative... often never a hint as to why a voter should support the person paying for the TV spot.” However, Functional Theory predicts that acclaims are more common than attacks.

H1. Acclaims will be more common than attacks.

Concerns about backlash from attacks are only one consideration that influences the frequency of attacks in campaign messages. For example, challengers tend to attack more than incumbents, candidates who trail their opponents usually attack more than leaders, the frequency of attacks by a candidate is directly related to the number of attacks made against that candidate, the use of attacks is directly related to competitiveness, attacks increase as election day approaches, and ads sponsored by political parties and political groups are usually more negative than spots from candidates (see, e.g., Benoit, 2014a; Damore, 2002; Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2010; Maier & Jansen, 2015; Ridout & Holland, 2010; Sullivan & Sapir, 2012). Presidential television advertisements from candidates who trailed throughout the general election campaign attacked more often than their opponents (who led during the entire general election campaign) or candidates in races where the lead changed during the campaign (Benoit, 2014a).

It is important to acknowledge that attacks are not inherently false or misleading (Benoit, 2013): Some attacks are reasonable just as some acclaims are false or misleading. Geer (2006) argues that informed decision making requires an understanding of pros and cons, so attacks can be an important part of the democratic process. He also notes that attacks are more likely to include evidence than acclaims. Defenses are consistently the least common function so this function was not included in this prediction.

A second prediction holds that candidates for elective office will discuss policy more often than character. Many believe that character is more important than policy. Clarke and Evans (1983) surveyed 82 reporters, concluding that:

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)

Skewes (2007) notes that “in covering candidates for the White House, the one aspect of coverage that journalists universally agreed was important. . . was coverage of the candidates’ character” (p. 57). So, many writers hold the belief that character is more important than policy. Research has demonstrated that the *New York Times* reports character remarks more often than candidates make



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such remarks (Benoit, Hemmer, & Stein, 2010; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). News coverage of American senate, gubernatorial, and mayoral election campaigns (Benoit, Furgerson, Seifert, & Sargardia, 2013) and of prime minister campaigns in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Benoit, Compton, & Phillips, 2013) show the same pattern, with news discussing character more than the candidates themselves. However, King (2002) noted the “almost universal belief that leaders’ and candidates’ personalities are almost invariably hugely important in determining the outcomes of elections is simply wrong” (p. 216). Scholars and journalists alike stress character over policy.

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Of course, some citizens do think the most important function of a president (prime minister, chancellor) is to serve as a role model (character) but more voters see the most important factor in evaluating political leaders is their work proposing and implementing governmental policy. Consistent with this belief, public opinion polls in the U.S. reveals that more respondents say policy is a more important determinant for their vote for president than character (Benoit, 2003). Benoit also contrasted the topics of candidates who won (primary, acceptance, general; primary and general TV spots and debates, acceptance addresses): Winners were significantly more likely to discuss policy, and less likely to discuss character, than losers. Hofstetter (1976) explains that “issue preferences are key elements in the preferences of most, if not all, voters” (p. 77). King (2002) analyzed research on the role of character in 51 elections held in 6 countries between 1960 and 2001 confirming that “It is quite unusual for leaders’ and candidates’ personality and other personal traits to determine election outcomes” (p. 216). So, most voters consider policy to be more important than character in deciding their presidential vote and election results (voting patterns) are consistent with this belief.

H2. Candidates will address policy more often than character.

Baker and Norpoth’s (1981) analysis of the 1972 West German debates found that candidates discussed issues more than ethics (character), consistent with this prediction. H7, discussed below, considers the influence of campaign phase on topic of campaign message.

Incumbency is another variable capable of influencing the functions of campaign discourse (see Dover, 2006, for a treatment of incumbency in presidential TV spots). Scholars have identified several advantages possessed by incumbents. For example, Salamore and Salamore (1995) state that incumbents have greater recognition, ability to raise campaign funds, and ability to begin campaigning early. Incumbents are also likely to receive even more attention from the press than challengers (see, e.g., Smith 2005; Smith & Mansharamani, 2002; Trent & Trent, 1974, 1995). In almost all cases the incumbent will be better known than the challenger, particularly if the incumbent party candidate is an incumbent president running for re-election. This means that knowledge of, and attitudes about, candidates are likely easier to change for challengers than incumbents. Unless an incumbent is unpopular, challengers must give voters a reason to evict the incumbent and attacks are usually the basis for that argument.



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H3. Incumbents will acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers.

This contrast should be particularly sharp when the candidates discuss past deeds or record in office. Only incumbents have a record in the office sought in an election. Challengers often have records in other offices, such as governor or senator. However, experience in other elective offices is simply not comparable to experience in the White House (e.g., presidents negotiate treaties and serve as commander in chief); the incumbent's record in the Oval Office is the best evidence of how a candidate will perform in elected. As the data in Table 5 reveal, both incumbents and challengers discuss the incumbent's record in office (past deeds) more than the challenger's record: Incumbents discuss their own record in 70% of statements about past deeds and the challenger's record in 30% of themes on record in office. Challengers discuss the incumbent's record in 75% of utterances about past deeds and their own record in 25% of their statements on this topic. Obviously, when discussing their own record incumbents acclaim; when discussing the incumbent's record, challengers attack. Statistical analysis reveals this contrast is significant with a large effect size ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 4153.33, p < .0001, \phi = .45$). Non-presidential campaigns without incumbents running for re-election are considered "open seat" elections and data on such candidates not used in the tests of H4 (or H5).

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H4. When discussing past deeds (record in office), incumbents will acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers.

So, incumbents as a group are likely to acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers – particularly when the candidates talk about past deeds.

H5. When discussing future plans, incumbents will attack more and acclaim less than challengers.

The fifth prediction anticipates that when discussing future plans (specific policy proposals), incumbents will acclaim less and attack more than challengers. Proposing a future plan implicitly indicts the incumbent, who has failed to implement a desirable change in policy. Of course, it would be unwise for an incumbent to assert that everything is perfect and no changes are needed. But every time either candidate offers a proposal for policy change, these future plans suggest something is not going well under the incumbent. This means that challengers are more likely to acclaim on future plans than incumbents. Because more future plans are likely to be proposed by the challenger, more opportunities exist for incumbents, compared to challengers, to attack future plans.

Functional Theory anticipates that messages from the primary phase of the campaign will differ in predictable ways from general election messages (see, e.g., Davis, 1997; Kendall, 2000; Mayer, 2000; Norrander, 2010; Palmer, 1997). The primary phase pits candidates against other members of the same political party. In 2016, for example, Donald Trump contested the Republican nomination with Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee,



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Ron Paul, Marco Rubio, and Scott Walter. Hillary Clinton ran against Lincoln Chafee, Martin O'Malley, Bernie Sanders, and Jim Webb. Of course, every candidate differs somewhat from other members of the same party, but greater differences are likely to exist when candidates of different parties clash in the general election. Fewer policy differences among candidates means fewer opportunities to attack; more policy differences mean more opportunities to attack. Also, in the primary campaign phase candidates have an incentive to moderate their attacks. In the primary, every candidate wants the losing opponents to support him or her in the general election. So for example, if Ted Cruz had won the 2016 Republican primary, he would have wanted Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, John Kasich, and the others to advocate for him during the general campaign. Even more importantly, every nominee in the general election wants the support of all party members, including those who preferred a different candidate during the primary. Both of these considerations (support from other candidates, support from other candidates' partisans) provide a reason to moderate attacks in the primary, so as not to offend other candidates or the other candidates' supporters. This constraint does not exist in the general election campaign.

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H6. More attacks, and fewer acclaims, will be used in general election messages than in primary messages.

Benoit (2014a) isolated presidential candidates who won their party's nomination and who therefore deployed both primary TV spots and general ads: 21 of the 22 candidates acclaimed more, and attacked less, in their primary ads than they did in their general spots.

Another difference between primary and general elections is that generally candidates are less well-known in the primary than the general election. In 2016, for example, relatively few people knew Ben Carson and his issue positions. The same can be said for other candidates such as John Kasich, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio and Bernie Sanders. The candidates' need to introduce themselves in the primary is a reason to stress character in that phase. Furthermore, as noted earlier, fewer policy differences exist between members of the same party (in the primary) than between nominees from different political parties. It is easier for candidates to differentiate themselves from candidates of the other party than candidates of the same political party.

H7. General campaign messages will discuss policy more, and character less, than primary election messages.

Data comparing TV spots from primary and general campaigns confirm this prediction. When looking exclusively at presidential candidates who ran spots in both phases of the campaign, 20 of 22 candidates' ads were consistent with this prediction (Benoit, 2014a).

Functional Theory offers predictions about the forms of policy and character (in addition to the predictions about incumbency and past deeds, incumbency and future plans). It is easier for a candidate to embrace (acclaim) general goals and ideals than to reject them (attack). For instance, what candidate would oppose reducing inflation or keeping America safe? Similarly,

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candidates are less likely to attack than acclaim when discussing ideals: It is difficult to criticize values and principles such as freedom, equal opportunity, or justice. This consideration leads to two hypotheses.

H8. When discussing general goals, candidates will acclaim more than they attack.

H9. When discussing ideals, candidates will acclaim more than they attack.

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The next prediction proposed here contrasts two forms of policy: future plans (means) and general goals (ends). It is more difficult to attack general goals than future plans. For example, candidates might agree that we should reduce taxes (a goal) but disagree about how to achieve this end (across the board tax cuts or targeted reductions, and, if the latter, which programs should be targeted for reduction?). This consideration may incline candidates to be somewhat vague: The more details a candidate provides about policy, the easier it for opponents to attack.

H10. Acclaims will be used more often to discuss general goals than future plans; attacks will be more common when candidates address future plans than when they discuss general goals.

Acclaims should be more common than attacks when discussing both of these two forms of policy; however, attacks should be more difficult to make against general goals than future plans.

An important variable in the process of communication is the source. Kaid and Johnston (2001) reported that ads that feature candidates themselves speaking used fewer attacks than spots featuring anonymous announcers or surrogate speakers. Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout (2008) found that candidate-sponsored advertisements included fewer attacks than those from interest groups and political party ads (see also Benoit, 2014b; or Sullivan & Sapir, 2012). The idea here is that attacks can create backlash from voters who detest mudslinging. Candidates do make attacks, but they prefer to have other sources produce most of the attacks. Hopefully, if a backlash from attacks occurs with some voters, it will damage the surrogate sources more than the candidate. Accordingly, Functional Theory predicts that

H11. Candidates use more acclaims, and fewer attacks, than other sources.

It is important to note that Functional Theory's predictions are not laws but reasons. For example, it does not hold that acclaims *must* outnumber attacks, just that candidates have reasons to acclaim more than they attack. Individual candidates can choose to attack more than they acclaim. The same is true of other predictions (e.g., candidates have reasons to discuss policy more than character, but Functional Theory does not assert that they *must* do so).

Functional Theory, particularly as applied to political leaders' debates, has generated criticism. Isotalus and Aarnio (2006) argue that this theory "seems to be more appropriate for a two-party system but it is of a limited value for a multi-party system" (p. 64). However, Functional Theory has been successfully applied to political leaders' debates in several multi-party



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systems: Australia 2013 (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2015); Canada 2006 (Benoit & Henson, 2007) and 2011 (Benoit, 2011); Northern Ireland 2010 (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014b); Scotland 2010 (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014b), South Korea 2002 (Lee & Benoit, 2005), 1997 (Choi & Benoit, 2009), and 2002 (Choi & Benoit, 2009); the United Kingdom (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013); and Wales 2010 (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014b). This work focuses on leaders' debates; we do not know whether analyses other messages such as TV spots would confirm these data. Some research (e.g., Dudek & Partcaz, 2009; Hrbkova & Zagrapan, 2014) provides only partial support for Functional Theory's predictions; it is possible that this inconsistency stems in part from differences in culture or from other scholars' failure to use an extensive codebook, as does Functional research. This could also mean that the inconsistent data is less reliable than the data employed here.

This analysis used the correlation coefficient r as opposed to other measures of effect size (e.g., Cohen's d ; see Hunter & Schmidt, 1990, 2004). Two corrections were made to the effect sizes. First, the effect sizes were corrected for measurement error by using the reliability for each variable for each study. After this step, sampling error was corrected by weighting the average overall effect size by the number of subjects in the study. Hunter and Schmidt (1990) noted that if the population correlation is assumed to be consistent across all studies then "the best estimate of that correlation is not the simple mean across studies but a weighted average in which each correlation is weighted by the number of persons in that study" (p. 100). All things being equal, studies with larger sample sizes provide a better estimate of the population parameter being measured and deserve to be weighted more than studies with smaller sample sizes.

Data

This meta-analysis employs data from many sources. Table 1 describes the sample. The data are taken from content analysis of many candidates, multiple campaigns (years), multiple media, different offices, and messages from the U.S. and other countries. The search for studies began with Loudon's (2016) bibliography of publications on election campaigns. An Internet search was conducted, using the search term "Functional Theory" combined with other terms: "debates," "television spots," "television advertising," "television commercials," "announcement speeches," "acceptance addresses," "acceptance speeches," "webpages," "brochures," "direct mail," and "pamphlets." Google Scholar was also employed to locate publications that cite Functional Theory publications (Benoit, 2007; Benoit et al., 1999, 2008; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007; Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006; Benoit & Sheafer, 2006; Benoit & Stein, 2005; Brazeal & Benoit, 2006). Each time a pertinent publication was located, the references were examined to locate additional studies. Studies had to report the n and the effect size (or a statistic that could be converted into an effect size) to be included in the sample. Some studies provided data for only some of the predictions (e.g., many studies reported no data on primary campaign messages). In only one case did two studies report the same data. Brazeal and Benoit (2001) analyzed

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non-presidential TV spots from 1986-2000. Brazeal and Benoit (2006) extended that study, supplementing the sample of 1986-2000 with ads broadcast in 1980, 1982, 1984, 2002, and 2004. Because the second study includes all of the data from Brazeal and Benoit (2001) along with “new” data, only data reported in Brazeal and Benoit (2006) were included in the meta-analysis.

A few studies (e.g., Dudek & Partcaz, 2009; Hrbkova & Zagrapan, 2014; Isotalus, 2011) were not included in the sample because they did not report reliability. The effect size (r) from each hypothesis was corrected for measurement error (reliability) and weighted by sample size: A weighted mean effect size was calculated for each hypothesis and a confidence interval was constructed to test the significance of this weighted mean effect size.

It is important to distinguish the three different n s reported here; one reason this is important is that significance levels are sensitive to sample size. For example, consider H1 on the functions of messages. One message form used to test H1 was primary TV spots; Table 1 reports an n of 1516, the number of different primary TV spots that were content analyzed in this sample. The n used to calculate the r for primary TV ads in H2 is the number of themes coded for these spots, 7952 (reported in Table 2). Combining all message forms, the total n of messages used to test H1 is 10,947 (10,947 primary and general TV spots, primary and general debates, etc.); the total n of themes in these studies is 184,955. These two n s provide a high degree of confidence in the r s calculated for each message form. However, the third n , used to calculate confidence intervals to testing the significance of H1, is the number of *message forms* in the sample of r s, which is 16 for this hypothesis (announcements, acceptances, primary and general brochures, primary and general spots, primary and general debates, vice presidential debates, primary and general webpages, non-presidential spots and debates, mayoral webpages, non-US debates, and Mexican spots). This means that, when a significant result is reported for a meta-analysis, that significance is not a consequence of the large sample of spots (or other messages) or the large number of themes coded in this research.

Because all the tests reported here concerned predictions, one-sided confidence intervals of .05 (calculated employing the *standard deviations* of the corrected, weighted effect sizes) were used for significance testing. Significant effect sizes were tested for homogeneity of variance: All significant effect sizes in this meta-analysis had heterogeneous variance. This is not surprising

Table 1. *Sample of Messages in the Meta-Analysis*

Message Form	Years (or countries)	Number of Messages
Announcement Speeches	1960-2012	114
Primary TV Spots	1952-2012	1516
Primary Debates	1948, 1960, 1968, 1972, 1980-2012	173



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Primary Brochures	1948-2004	270
Candidate Primary Webpages	2000, 2004, 2008	38
Acceptance Addresses	1952-2012	64
General TV Spots	1952-2012	1362
General Debates	1960, 1976-2012	29
Vice Presidential Debates	1976, 1984-2012	9
General Brochures	1948-2004	445
Candidate General Webpages	2000, 2004, 2008	6
Candidate General Facebook	2008, 2012	4
Gubernatorial Debates	1994-2004	15
Gubernatorial TV Spots	1974-2008	1347
Senate Debates	1998-2006	21
Senate TV Spots	1980-2008	1586
House TV Spots	1980-2008	782
Non-Presidential Primary Debates	2002-2004	4
Mayoral Debates	2005-2007	10
Mayoral candidate webpages	2013	13
Non-U.S. Debates	Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Ukraine, UK	18
Mexican TV Spots	2006-2015	3125
Total		10951

given Functional Theory's assumption that candidates choose the content of their messages. No obvious variable accounted for heterogeneity of variance for any hypothesis.

The data reported here are highly reliable. Inter-coder reliability in these studies was calculated using Cohen's (1960) κ , which controls for agreement by chance. For example, in Benoit et al. (2003) five co-authors had κ s of .79-1.0 for function, .76-.98 for topic, .91-1.0 for forms of policy, and .78-1.0 for forms of character. Benoit et al. (2007) with six co-authors also had high inter-coder reliability, with κ s of .82-1.0 for function, .82-.97 for topic, .75-1.0 for forms of policy,

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and .76-.92 for forms of character. Landis and Koch (1977) explain that values of *kappa* from 0.61-0.80 represent “substantial” agreement and values from 0.81 to 1.0 reflect “almost perfect” inter-coder reliability (p. 165). This high level of reliability may stem from the detailed codebook and coding rules developed to implement Functional Theory.

Validity can be difficult to establish. However, some evidence supports the validity of these data. Geer (2006) argued that his data were valid because his measure of negativity in TV spots “correlates. . . a staggering 0.97 with Benoit’s” measure of attacks (p. 36). His data, in turn, support the validity of the data reported here.

The *rs* for each message form were corrected for measurement error using the reliability coefficient (κ) for that data. Then each corrected *r* was weighted by sample size for a given study. The *sd* of the corrected, weighted *rs* were used to construct confidence intervals. If the confidence interval includes zero, the corrected weighted *r* was not significant. If the confidence interval did not include zero, the effect size was significant.

Results

The first hypothesis held that acclaims would be more common than attacks in candidate election discourse. Sixteen message forms with a combined *n* of 184,955 themes were used for this analysis. The weighted mean effect size corrected for measurement error *r* was .52, which was significant. Cohen (1992) explains that a *Pearson r* of around .1 constitutes a small effect size, around .3 is a medium effect size, and over .5 is a large effect size, so this finding represents a large effect size. See Table 2 for these data.

Table 2. *Functions of Political Campaign Messages*

Message	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Announcement Speeches	5418 (76%)	1718 (24%)	1917.4	7136	.55
Acceptance Addresses	2652 (76%)	821 (24%)	964.26	3473	.6
Primary Brochures	8207 (84%)	1526 (16%)	4586.02	9733	.73
General Brochures	8149 (71%)	3398 (29%)	1953.98	11547	.43
Primary Spots	5734 (72%)	2218 (28%)	1553.72	7952	.47
General Spots	3851 (55%)	3174 (45%)	65.04	7025	.1
Primary Debates	25428 (69%)	11231 (31%)	5497.82	36659	.43
General Debates	5519 (62%)	3332 (38%)	539.9	8851	.27
Primary Webpages	14308 (94%)	972 (6%)	11637.58	15280	.95



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General Webpages	12110 (91%)	1154 (9%)	9047.96	13264	.89
Vice Presidential Debates	2912 (58%)	2137 (42%)	118.66	5049	.16
Non-Presidential Spots	15415 (70%)	6552 (30%)	3575.14	21967	.43
Non-Presidential Debates	7361 (70%)	3121 (30%)	1715.09	10,482	.40
Mayoral Webpages	5628 (93%)	418 (7%)	4489.6	6046	.97
Non-U.S. Debates	10978 (60%)	7298 (40%)	740.6	18276	.22
Mexican TV Spots	12985 (87%)	1888 (13%)	8798.49	14873	.75
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected <i>r</i>				
185,865	.52	.27	$p < .05$		

Hypothesis 2 expected that candidates for elective office would discuss policy more often than character. This analysis employed data from 16 message forms with a combined *n* of 182,353. The weighted mean corrected effect size was .39, which was significant, a moderate effect size. These data are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. *Topics of Political Campaign Messages*

Message	Policy	Character	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Announcement Speeches	3833 (54%)	3303 (46%)	39.22	7136	.08
Acceptance Addresses	1887 (54%)	1586 (46%)	25.92	3473	.15
Primary Brochures	6020 (62%)	3626 (38%)	594.16	9646	.3
General Brochures	8848 (77%)	2699 (23%)	3273.4	11547	.6
Primary Spots	4253 (54%)	3563 (46%)	60.74	7816	.1
General Spots	4540 (61%)	2894 (39%)	364.45	7434	.23
Primary Debates	25226 (69%)	11166 (31%)	5431.38	36392	.48
General Debates	6567 (74%)	2284 (26%)	2072.58	8851	.59
Primary Webpages	9658 (73%)	3485 (37%)	2898.4	13143	.54
General Webpages	10779 (81%)	2474 (19%)	5204.33	13253	.73

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Vice Presidential Debates	3455 (68%)	1597 (32%)	682.6	5052	.41
Non-Presidential Spots	12071 (56%)	9644 (44%)	271.04	21715	.12
Non-Presidential Debates	7366 (71%)	3042 (29%)	1796.4	10408	.44
Mayoral Webpages	4277 (71%)	1769 (29%)	1039.54	6046	.45
Non-U.S. Debates	13515 (74%)	4681 (26%)	4287.86	18196	.54
Mexican TV Spots	2341 (36%)	4256 (64%)	ns	6497	-.31
Total <i>n</i>	weighted corrected <i>r</i>	<i>sd</i>			
186,605	.39	.27	<i>p</i> < .05		

The third prediction anticipated that incumbents would acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers. This analysis included nine message forms with a combined *n* of 70,160. The weighted effect size corrected for measurement error was .14, which was not statistically significant. These data are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. *Functions of Incumbents versus Challengers in Political Campaign Messages*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Acceptance Addresses					
Incumbents	1534 (83%)	317 (17%)	93.15	3473	.18
Challengers	1118 (68%)	504 (31%)			
Brochures					
Incumbents	4152 (77%)	1218 (23%)	222.82	11547	.15
Challengers	3997 (65%)	2180 (35%)			
US Presidential Spots					
Incumbents	2078 (59%)	1471 (41%)	39.36	7025	.07
Challengers	1773 (51%)	1700 (49%)			
US Presidential Debates					
Incumbents	2458 (70%)	1031 (30%)	197.79	7758	.18
Challengers	2342 (55%)	1927 (45%)			
US Vice Presidential Debates					
Incumbents	1568 (63%)	915 (37%)	24.31	4965	.07



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Challengers	1397 (56%)	1085 (44%)			
Non-Presidential Spots					
Incumbents	6464 (83%)	1289 (17%)	1472.72	18078	.31
Challengers	5831 (57%)	4404 (43%)			
US Non-Presidential Debates					
Incumbents	1982 (75%)	662 (25%)	137.15	5594	.17
Challengers	1777 (60%)	1173 (40%)			
Mayoral Webpages					
Incumbents	819 (100%)	2 (0.4%)	419.81	1777	.96
Challengers	700 (73%)	256 (27%)			
Non-US Debates					
Incumbents	2634 (67%)	1288 (33%)	158.93	9943	.14
Challengers	3279 (52%)	2742 (43%)			
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected <i>r</i>				
70,160	.14	.3	<i>ns</i>		

The next hypothesis (H4) also contrasted messages from incumbents and challengers but limited its scope to comments about the two candidates' records in office (past deeds). It is based on nine message forms with a combined *n* of 20,937. The relationship between function and incumbency here was significant: The corrected weighted mean *r* was .59, another large effect size. These data can be found in Table 5.

Table 5. *Functions of Incumbents versus Challengers on Past Deeds in Political Campaign Messages*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Acceptance Addresses					
Incumbents	321 (74%)	110 (26%)	241.98	749	.62
Challengers	54 (17%)	264 (83%)			
Brochures					

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Incumbents	1994 (76%)	613 (24%)	927.38	4615	.59
Challengers	637 (32%)	1371 (68%)			
Spots					
Incumbents	542 (49%)	568 (51%)	192.66	2257	.32
Challengers	241 (21%)	906 (79%)			
Debates					
Incumbents	799 (69%)	362 (31%)	695.43	2556	.6
Challengers	242 (17%)	1153 (83%)			
Vice Presidential Debates					
Incumbents	514 (62%)	318 (38%)	354.38	1831	.48
Challengers	188 (19%)	811 (81%)			
Non-Presidential Spots					
Incumbents	1582 (75%)	539 (25%)	703.55	3778	.48
Challengers	520 (31%)	1137 (69%)			
Non-Presidential Debates					
Incumbents	716 (76%)	229 (24%)	452.12	1836	.55
Challengers	233 (26%)	658 (74%)			
Mayoral Webpages					
Incumbents	445 (100%)	2 (0.4%)	419.81	586	.88

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Challengers	30 (22%)	109 (78%)				
Non-US Debates						
Incumbents	656 (63%)	383 (37%)	474.16	2729	.47	
Challengers	365 (22%)	1325 (78%)				
Total <i>n</i>	weighted corrected <i>r</i>	<i>sd</i>				
20,937	.59	.15	$p < .05$			

The fifth hypothesis contrasts the function of utterances from incumbents versus challengers that address future plans (specific policy proposals). When talking about their future plans, challengers are more likely to acclaim, and less likely to attack, than incumbents. Data from eight message forms with a combined *n* of 7,692 contributed to this analysis. The weighted effect size corrected for measurement error here is .09, which was not significant. See Table 6.

Table 6. *Functions of Incumbents versus Challengers on Future Plans in Political Campaign Messages*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Acceptance Addresses					
Incumbents	108 (73%)	40 (27%)	8.59	226	.22
Challengers	70 (90%)	8 (10%)			
Brochures					
Incumbents	613 (71%)	249 (29%)	8.53	1344	.1
Challengers	378 (78%)	104 (22%)			
US Presidential Spots					
Incumbents	180 (42%)	253 (58%)	10.91	911	.12
Challengers	251 (53%)	227 (47%)			
US Presidential Debates					
Incumbents	377 (61%)	239 (39%)	19.78	1293	.14
Challengers	493 (73%)	184 (27%)			

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US Vice Presidential Debates

Incumbents	70 (39%)	109 (61%)	7.29	335	.16
Challengers	84 (54%)	72 (46%)			

Non-Presidential Spots

Incumbents	187 (68%)	89 (32%)	151.29	1096	.42
Challengers	781 (81%)	39 (19%)			

Non-Presidential Debates

Incumbents	24 (55%)	20 (45%)	4.27	94	.23
Challengers	68 (72%)	26 (28%)			

Mayoral Webpages

Incumbents	37 (100%)	0	$p = .2^\dagger$		-0.1
Challengers	135 (95%)	7 (5%)			

Non-US Debates

Incumbents	646 (68%)	298 (32%)	15.6	2393	.09
Challengers	1098 (76%)	351 (24%)			

Total *n*

7,692

weighted *r*

.09

sd

.13

$p = .2^\dagger$

ns

† Fisher's Exact Probability Test.

Hypotheses six and seven contrasted the content of primary versus general campaign messages. H6 addressed the functions of these two groups of messages. Six message forms with a combined *n* of 122,567 provided data for this analysis. The corrected weighted mean effect size is .1, which is significant, but a small effect size. See Table 7 for these data.

Table 7. *Functions of Primary versus General Political Campaign Messages*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Brochures					
Primary	8207 (84%)	1526 (16%)	561.35	21280	.17
General	8149 (71%)	3398 (29%)			
Presidential Spots					



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Primary	5630 (72%)	2186 (28%)	516.12	15160	.2
General	3983 (54%)	3361 (46%)			
Presidential Debates					
Primary	21901 (66%)	9666 (29%)	161.05	39325	.07
General	4800 (57%)	2958 (35%)			
Webpages					
Primary	14308 (94%)	972 (6%)	56.35	28544	.04
General	12110 (91%)	1154 (9%)			
Non-Presidential Spots					
Primary	3024 (73%)	1115 (27%)	27.28	8476	.06
General	2944 (69%)	1393 (31%)			
Non-Presidential Debates					
Primary	699 (71%)	211 (22%)	98.63	9871	.11
General	5377 (58%)	3584 (37%)			
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected <i>r</i>				
122,567	.1	.06	$p < .05$		

Hypothesis seven concerned the topics of primary versus general campaign message. The analysis was based on data from six message forms with an *n* of 124,308. The weighted mean effect size corrected for measurement error was .16, a significant but small relationship. These data are reported in Table 8.

Table 8. *Topics of Primary versus General Political Campaign Messages*

	Policy	Character	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Brochures					
Primary	6020 (62%)	3626 (38%)	507.33	21193	.16
General	8848 (77%)	2699 (23%)			
Presidential Spots					

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Primary	4253 (54%)	3563 (46%)	69.16	15259	.08
General	4540 (61%)	2894 (39%)			
Presidential Debates					
Primary	25226 (69%)	11166 (31%)	81.08	45243	.04
General	6567 (74%)	2284 (26%)			
Webpages					
Primary	9658 (73%)	3485 (27%)	233.31	26394	.1
General	10779 (81%)	2472 (19%)			
Non-Presidential Spots					
Primary	1840 (48%)	1979 (52%)	73.09	7422	.11
General	2093 (58%)	1510 (42%)			
Non-Presidential Debates					
Primary	531 (60%)	349 (40%)	52.45	8797	.09
General	5703 (72%)	2214 (28%)			
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected <i>r</i>				
124,308	.16	.04	<i>p</i> < .05		

H8 limited its analysis to candidates' utterances on general goals. Data were obtained from 16 studies which had a sample size of 58,607. The corrected weighted mean *r* was .87 and this result was statistically significant. According to Cohen (1992) this represents a large effect. See Table 9 for these data.

Table 9. *Functions of General Goals in Political Campaign Messages*

Message	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Announcement Speeches	1829 (92%)	153 (8%)	1417.24	1982	.92
Acceptance Addresses	649 (92%)	56 (8%)	498.79	705	.91
Primary Brochures	2886 (95%)	147 (5%)	2473.5	3033	.99
General Brochures	2903 (88%)	399 (12%)	1898.85	3302	.9
Primary TV Spots	1776 (90%)	199 (10%)	1259.2	1975	.91



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General TV Spots	1129 (82%)	243 (18%)	572.15	1372	.71
Primary Debates	14867 (91%)	1468 (9%)	10981.03	16325	.96
General Debates	2041 (85%)	360 (15%)	1176.91	2401	.8
Primary Webpages	4902 (98%)	103 (2%)	4599.56	5005	.99
General Webpages	3559 (96%)	1154 (4%)	1226.22	4713	.57
VP Debates	1042 (81%)	247 (19%)	490.32	1289	.68
Non-Presidential Spots	1922 (88%)	264 (12%)	1257.53	2186	.85
Non-Presidential Debates	3172 (88%)	427 (12%)	2093.64	3599	.84
Mayoral Webpages	1914 (98%)	36 (2%)	1808.66	1950	.99
Non-U.S. Debates	2674 (84%)	504 (16%)	1481.72	3178	.81
Mexican TV Spots	3736 (83%)	790 (17%)	1917.57	4526	.73
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected <i>r</i>				
58,607	.87	.12	$p < .05$		

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The next prediction (H9) limited its analysis to statements about ideals. Sixteen message forms with a combined *n* of 17,843 produced a weighted corrected mean effect size of .77, another large effect. This was significant. These data are displayed in Table 10.

Table 10. *Functions of Ideals in Political Campaign Messages*

Message	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Announcement Speeches	1415 (91%)	134 (9%)	1059.37	1549	.95
Acceptance Addresses	646 (85%)	114 (15%)	512.82	695	.99
Primary Brochures	528 (92%)	49 (8%)	397.64	577	.99
General Brochures	446 (81%)	106 (19%)	209.42	552	.7
Primary TV Spots	652 (89%)	81 (11%)	444.8	733	.84
General TV Spots	386 (78%)	108 (22%)	156.45	494	.63
Primary Debates	3370 (88%)	443 (12%)	1230.35	2713	.78
General Debates	534 (82%)	120 (18%)	262.07	654	.67
Primary Webpages	1819 (95%)	86 (5%)	1574.72	1905	.99

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General Webpages	922 (97%)	32 (3%)	828.42	954	.94
Vice Presidential Debates	169 (78%)	49 (22%)	66.06	218	.62
Non-Presidential Spots	573 (83%)	114 (17%)	306.67	687	.74
Non-Presidential Debates	351 (85%)	62 (15%)	202.23	413	.81
Mayoral Webpages	630 (97%)	19 (3%)	575.22	649	.96
Non-U.S. Debates	544 (84%)	102 (16%)	302.42	646	.77
Mexican TV Spots	3305 (95%)	164 (5%)	2844.1	3469	.99
Total <i>n</i>	weighted corrected <i>r</i>	<i>sd</i>			
17,843	.77	.14	<i>p</i> < .05		

The eighth prediction contrasted the functions of candidate utterances on future plans (specific plans, means) versus general goals (ends). Sixteen messages forms contributed data representing an *n* of 72,770. The corrected weighted mean effect size obtained was .16, which was significant but small. Table 11 displays these data.

Table 11. *Functions of Future Plans versus General Goals in Political Campaign Messages*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
Announcement Speeches					
Future Plans	392 (89%)	48 (11%)	4.81	2422	.04
General Goals	1829 (92%)	153 (8%)			
Acceptance Addresses					
Future Plans	178 (79%)	48 (21%)	30.49	931	.2
General Goals	649 (92%)	56 (8%)			
Primary Brochures					
Future Plans	505 (89%)	64 (11%)	35.6	3602	.11
General Goals	2886 (95%)	147 (5%)			
General Brochures					
Future Plans	755 (81%)	176 (19%)	28.78	4233	.1
General Goals	2903 (88%)	399 (12%)			



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Presidential Primary Spots

Future Plans	404 (72%)	154 (28%)	111.38	2533	.24
General Goals	1776 (90%)	199 (10%)			

Presidential Spots

Future Plans	431 (47%)	480 (53%)	309.53	2283	.4
General Goals	1129 (82%)	243 (18%)			

Presidential Primary Debates

Future Plans	2581 (72%)	1016 (28%)	1002.25	1993 2	.26
General Goals	14867 (91%)	1468 (9%)			

US Presidential Debates

Future Plans	870 (67%)	423 (33%)	158	3694	.24
General Goals	2041 (85%)	360 (15%)			

Primary Webpages

Future Plans	3049 (95%)	144 (5%)	40.11	8198	.08
General Goals	4902 (98%)	103 (2%)			

General Webpages

Future Plans	2334 (96%)	94 (4%)	.34	6142	-.01
General Goals	3559 (96%)	155 (4%)			

VP Debates

Future Plans	154 (46%)	181 (54%)	166.55	1624	.32
General Goals	1042 (81%)	247 (19%)			

Non-Presidential Debates

Future Plans	444 (74%)	158 (26%)	88.99	4201	.16
General Goals	3172 (88%)	427 (12%)			

Non-Presidential Spots

Future Plans	642 (72%)	245 (28%)	134.99	3684	.21
General Goals	2476 (89%)	321 (11%)			

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Mayoral Webpages					
Future Plans	1094 (99%)	9 (1%)	5.15	3053	-0.04
General Goals	1914 (98%)	36 (2%)			
Non-US Debates					
Future Plans	1037 (72%)	399 (28%)	89.38	4614	.16
General Goals	2674 (84%)	504 (16%)			
Mexican TV Spots					
Future Plans	178 (91%)	17 (9%)	10.7	4721	.06
General Goals	3736 (83%)	790 (17%)			
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected	<i>r</i>			
72,770	.16	.12	$p < .05$		

The final hypothesis anticipated that campaign messages from candidates have more acclaims and fewer attacks than those from other sources (e.g., surrogates, outside groups). Eleven unique datasets with a combined *n* of 21,632 yielded a weighted corrected effect size of .19, which was significant but small.

Table 12. *Functions and Source of Campaign Message*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2	<i>n</i>	corrected <i>r</i>
2000 Presidential					
Candidate	221 (73%)	79 (26%)	63.3	4195	$\phi = .35$
Party	107 (40%)	157 (59%)			
2004 President					
Candidate	86 (50%)	86 (50%)	57.8	282	$\phi = .52$
Third-Party	7 (6%)	103 (94%)			
2012 Presidential					
Candidates	223 (31%)	492 (69%)	40.04	1325	$\phi = .17$
Parties	99 (16%)	511 (84%)			
2016 Presidential Primary					



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Candidates	1016 (77%)	295 (23%)	28.79	2181	$\phi = .12$
PACs	584 (67%)	286 (33%)			
2016 Presidential General					
Candidates	136 (46%)	160 (54%)	45.58	456	$\phi = .32$
PACs	23 (14%)	137 (86%)			
1960-1996 Convention Speeches					
Acceptances	1359 (74%)	480 (26%)	150.39	2776	$\phi = .23$
Keynotes	474 (51%)	463 (49%)			
2000 Senate					
Candidate	927 (78%)	255 (22%)	196.12	1414	$\phi = .38$
Party	76 (32%)	156 (67%)			
2000 House					
Candidate	318 (70%)	135 (30%)	46.65	530	$\phi = .31$
Party	23 (30%)	54 (70%)			
2004 Non-President					
Candidate	4076 (74%)	1648 (26%)	152.04	6080	$\phi = .17$
Party + PAC	143 (40%)	213 (60%)			
2008 Senate + Governor					
Candidate	883 (66%)	450 (34%)	19.49	1456	$\phi = .13$
Party	57 (46%)	66 (54%)			
2006-2015 Mexican TV Spots					
Candidate	12985 (87%)	1888 (13%)	221.88	17284	$\phi = .13$
Party	1829 (76%)	582 (24%)			
Total <i>n</i>	weighted	<i>sd</i>			
	corrected <i>r</i>				
21,632	.19	.13	$p < .05$		

Discussion and Conclusion

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The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse was developed to help understand certain elements (functions, topics) of candidate election messages. It has been employed to analyze election campaign messages from many candidates, many years, multiple offices, in the U.S. and other countries.

This meta-analysis investigated 11 of Functional Theory's predictions, 9 of which were confirmed. Acclaims are more common than attacks (this finding has a moderate effect size). Attacks are risky because many voters report that they do not like mudslinging; a backlash against a candidate can ensue after that candidate attacks an opponent. Candidates for elective office discuss policy more than character (another moderate effect size). Some voters view political leaders (such as presidents, prime ministers, chancellors, senators, governors, mayors) as personal role models; however, it seems that more voters see these leaders as policy makers. Perhaps responding to voter preferences, most candidates discuss policy more than character. Candidates' record in office (past deeds) is an important variable in campaigns: Both incumbents and challengers discussed the incumbent's record more than they talked about the challenger's record (this result was a moderate effect size). Of course, incumbents acclaim when talking about their record whereas challengers attack when discussing the incumbent's record. Messages from candidates feature fewer attacks than those from others.

Election messages employed in the primary phase of a campaign differ from those crafted for the general campaign. Primary messages acclaim more and attack less than general messages; general campaign messages discuss policy more, and character less, than primary elections (these are both small effect sizes). For example, in general, more policy differences (opportunities to attack) occur more between candidates of different political parties (general campaigns) than between candidates from the same party. Furthermore, candidates are less well-known in the primary than the general campaign, encouraging more character discussion in the primary than the general campaign. Both general goals (e.g., creating more jobs) and ideals (freedom) are easier to acclaim than to attack (these values represent large effect sizes). It is important to note that bias could influence interpretation of these results.

The data show that messages from candidates use more acclaims and fewer attacks than messages from other kinds of sources (political action committees and political parties; acceptance addresses and convention keynotes). The weighted corrected effect size was small.

Two predictions were not confirmed: that incumbents emphasize different functions than challengers (H3), that challengers acclaim more and attack less than incumbents when discussing future plans (H5). In the case of H3, the χ^2 for every message form was significant but the effect sizes varied dramatically (from $r = .07$ to $r = .96$). This means that the *standard deviation* (used to construct the confidence interval) was very large. It is worth noting that the data from mayoral webpages can be considered an outlier: The effect size for these messages, .97, was substantially higher than the effect sizes for the other messages (.07-.31), which contributed to the large



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standard deviation. Functional Theory's prediction about incumbency and use of future plans was not upheld, perhaps because incumbents acclaimed more on future plans than expected by the theory (58% of incumbents' remarks on future plans were acclaims). As noted above, Functional Theory does not make assertions about what candidates *must* say in their messages: Candidates and their advisors decide what to discuss in their messages; these hypotheses embody reasons rather than causes. It is also possible that bias influenced interpretation of the data.

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A further possible explanation for the failure to confirm prediction H3 can be found in cross pressures acting on these candidates.. H4 (incumbency and past deeds) and H5 (incumbency and future plans) show that incumbents and challengers are subject to cross pressures. Compared with challengers, incumbents *acclaim more* (71% to 23%) and *attack less* (29% to 73%) on past deeds; incumbents *attack more* (42% to 23%) and *acclaim less* (58% to 77%) on future plans. Even though the latter relationship was not significant, it reflects a cross pressure on candidates. These two factors incline candidates in opposite ways when it comes to the functions of their campaign messages.

A focus on corrected, weighted effect sizes provides greater insight than relying just on statistical significance. Relying just on significance testing, we know that nine predictions were confirmed and two were not. However, considering effect size, we can see that four predictions had small effect sizes (functions of primary vs. general, topics of primary vs. general, functions of future plans vs. general goals, and source of utterance), one relationship had a moderate effect size (topics), and four findings had large effect sizes (functions, functions of past deeds for incumbents vs. challengers, functions of general goals, and functions of ideals).

The information provided by effect sizes allows greater understanding of these relationships than just reporting significance.

Political communication scholars should continue to investigate other theories: Functional Theory does not pretend to answer every question about election messages: For example, it does not analyze metaphors or visual elements of election messages. It does discuss such ideas as functions and topics, incumbency, and campaign phase. This theory has strong predictive value for some elements of election campaign messages; further research here would be useful. Campaign messages using other message forms (e.g., candidate Facebook pages or tweets), other elective offices (e.g., U.S. House of Representatives debates), and other countries could prove useful. Some research has investigated television spots from other countries (see, e.g., Benoit, 2014a) but only political leaders' debates outside the U.S. have received sustained attention from Functional Theory. Further research can also provide additional data on trends over time because the content of election messages could shift over time. For example, Benoit and Compton (2016) report that presidential TV spots had a sharp uptick in attacks in 2008 and 2012, compared with earlier campaigns. Only longitudinal research can determine whether shifts in functions or topics have occurred over time. Research into the audience effects of functions and topics (e.g.,

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Reinemann & Maurer, 2005) would be very helpful. This theory deserves further attention from scholars.



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*Designates a study contributing data to the meta-analysis.



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Figure 1. A Schematic Outline of Functional Theory

	Acclaim Self	Defend Self	Attack Opponent
Message Content			
Policy			
Past Deeds	I created jobs	Unemployment was caused by my predecessor	Opponent failed to fight crime
Future Plans	My proposal will destroy ISIS	My plan does not cut taxes on the rich	Opponent's tax plan will help the rich and hurt the middle class
General Goals	I want to keep America safe	I want to stop illegal immigration	Opponent wants to discriminate against Muslims
Character			
Personal Qualities	I can be trusted	I am not a liar	Opponent is immoral
Leadership Ability	I have served as Governor of a large state	As Vice President I had important responsibilities	Opponent lacks experience in running a government
Ideals	Everyone has a right to justice	I do not think people are entitled to government handouts	Opponent thinks everyone should fend for themselves