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A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF TELEVISED U.S. SENATE AND GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN DEBATES

William L. Benoit, LeAnn M. Brazeal, and David Airne

*This study extended previous research on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to investigate the nature of 21 U.S. Senate campaign debates and 15 gubernatorial debates from 1994 to 2006. Acclaims were more common than attacks or defenses in Senate (56%, 30%, 14%) and gubernatorial (68%, 30%, 2%) debates. Challengers attacked more and acclaimed less than incumbents in both groups of debates. Senate and gubernatorial incumbents used past deeds much more to acclaim than attack; challengers were prone to use past deeds to attack more than acclaim. There was no consistent effect of political party on functions of debates. The candidates focused more attention on policy than character in Senate (70%, 30%) and gubernatorial debates (73%, 27%). There was no difference in topics stressed by Democrats and Republicans, or incumbents and challengers, in either set of debates. These results are generally consistent with the findings from prior analyses of presidential debates. **Key Words:** Senate, gubernatorial, debates, functions, topics, incumbency, political party*

Introduction

Televised political debates have emerged as an important part of our system of democracy. The first presidential primary debate, broadcast on radio, featured Dewey and Stassen in a primary campaign (see Benoit et al., 2002). The first presidential debate in a U.S. general campaign occurred in 1960 when Nixon and Kennedy participated in four nationally televised debates. Although general campaign debates in presidential elections were not held again until 1976, they have since become an accepted part of the American presidential campaign. Debates in campaigns for other, non-presidential, offices are becoming increasingly common as candidates for the U.S. Congress and for state governors (and other offices as well) use this message form to communicate with voters. In 2006, *Meet the Press* hosted six debates between candidates for the U.S. Senate, another indication of the importance of this campaign message form. Furthermore, broadcasts of debates within the state and the practice of digitizing non-presidential debates so they can be viewed or listened to on-line combine to increase their reach (see Minnesota Public Radio, 2002).

The fact that debates are typically organized around questions means that one can argue that political campaign debates function more like press conferences than debates (Auer, 1962; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Zarefsky, 1992). Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that these messages are important for several reasons. First, debates feature the leading candidates discussing the same topics at the same time, helping citizens to compare the candidates as they make their vote choice. Second, non-presidential debates range from 30 to 90 minutes in length providing voters an extended opportunity to learn about the candidates, particularly compared with television spots (most of which are 30 seconds long). Candidates usually prepare for debates; however, the fact that candidates can be asked unexpected questions or be the target of unanticipated attacks from opponents, could mean that debates

may provide a more candid view of the candidates than other message forms. Fourth, the direct confrontation affords candidates an opportunity to correct misstatements, accidental or otherwise, from their opponents. Such clash may give voters deeper insights into the issue at hand.

The Racine Group (2002) concluded that research supports the claim that watching political debates leads to voter learning. Meta-analysis reveals that presidential debates have important effects on voters, creating issue knowledge, influencing perceptions of the candidates' character, and at times altering vote choice (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). These encounters provide an opportunity for interested voters to learn about the candidates (both directly and via press reports); they also provide a chance for candidates to present and clarify their platforms—as well as to alter the direction of their campaign if needed. Unquestionably, political debates merit scholarly attention.

Most political communication research focuses on presidential campaigns, particularly debates (for example, books on presidential debates include Benoit et al., 2002; Benoit & Wells, 1996; Bishop, Meadow, & Jackson-Beeck, 1980; Bitzer & Rueter, 1980; Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Friedenberg, 1994, 1997; Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992; Hinck, 1993; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Kraus, 1962, 1979, 2000; Lanoue & Schrott, 1991; Martel, 1983; Schroeder, 2000; or Swerdlow, 1987). Some scholars have investigated non-presidential political campaigns (e.g., Herrnson, 1998; Jacobson, 2001; Kahn & Kenney, 1999). However, Senate and gubernatorial political campaign discourse generally and campaign debates for these offices in particular deserve scholarly attention. Next to the president and vice-president, Senators should be considered the most powerful elected federal officials; governors are arguably the most powerful state officials. Campaign communication for these offices deserves scholarly attention.

Several studies suggest that non-presidential debates can influence viewers. Philport and Balon (1975) investigated the Democratic primary contest between John Glenn and Howard Metzenbaum for Ohio Senate in 1974, reporting that Glenn's image had been influenced by the debate. Lichtenstein (1982) reported that non-presidential debates were viewed as more useful than presidential debates. Just, Crigler, and Wallach (1990) indicated that viewers learned about the issue positions in a Connecticut House debate in 1984. A study by Bystrom, Roper, Gobetz, Massey, and Veal (1991) concluded that viewing an Oklahoma gubernatorial debate in 1990 influenced perceptions of the candidates' images and issue positions and, particularly for undecided viewers, assisted in the decision-making process. Hullett and Loudon (1998) reported that viewers of a 1994 Congressional debate tended to recall more statements from their preferred candidate. Robertson, studying the 2004 South Dakota Senate race, found that these debates influenced viewer vote choice, perceptions of the candidates' character, and preferences for candidate policy positions. So, non-presidential debates have the potential to influence viewers.

Of course, fewer people watch non-presidential than presidential debates. However, far fewer votes are at stake in a given Senate or gubernatorial election than in a presidential election. Furthermore, as Graber (1989) explained non-presidential candidates are often overlooked. Similarly, Stempel (1994) observed that there is greater coverage of presidential than state or local campaigns. This could mean that non-presidential debates have a greater potential to inform and influence those who do view them because voters know less about non-presidential than presidential candidates (see also Bystrom, Roper, Gobetz, Massey, & Beall, 1991). It is possible that those who watch debates have greater interest in the election

than non-viewers, which means debates have to potential to inform and influence those citizens who are most likely to vote.

For the most part research on non-presidential campaign discourse tends to focus on television advertising, so non-presidential debates have yet to receive much scholarly attention. McKinney and Carlin (2004) lament the paucity of scholarship on non-presidential debates. Pfau (1983), in a very early study of non-presidential debates, investigated format in debates. Ornstein (1987) presents a conceptual discussion of non-presidential debates instead of research on debate content or effects. A rhetorical analysis of narrative form in the 1984 Helms-Hunt Senate debate was offered by Conrad (1993). Johnson (1996) investigated intertextuality in a gubernatorial and a senate debate. Airne and Benoit (2005) content analyzed the 2004 Senate debates between Obama and Keyes: 59% of the statements were acclaims, 37% were attacks, and 4% were defenses; policy was discussed more often than character (65% to 35%). Banwart and McKinney (2005) analyzed two U.S. senate and two gubernatorial debates from 2000 and 2002, reporting that positive comments (79%) and policy discussion (82%) dominated these encounters. These studies are a useful beginning, but the sample of debates, candidates, and years is still very small.

This project will content analyze U.S. Senate and gubernatorial debates using Functional Theory in order to extend our understanding of the nature of U.S. Senate political campaign debates. Functional Theory investigates both the functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses) and topics (policy, character) of political campaign messages. The functions are important because they give voters reasons to prefer one candidate over another (e.g., acclaims can increase a candidate's apparent preferability, attacks may reduce an opponent's apparent preferability, and defenses may reduce the apparent drawbacks of a candidate). The topics are important as well, because voters need to have information about both what the candidates will do (and have done) in office as well as what kind of person or leader they are. Thus, Functional Theory investigates important aspects of the content of political campaign messages, such as debates.

Theoretical Underpinning

Benoit's (1999, 2007; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit et al., 2003) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse will provide the theoretical underpinning for this study. Political campaign messages have three functions: acclaims, which praise the candidate; attacks, which attack the opponent; and defenses, which refute attacks. Of course, third party candidates and some candidates in primary campaigns may run merely to champion a cause; Functional Theory focuses on candidates whose primary goal is to seek elective office. Such candidates must try to persuade voters that they are preferable to opponents and preferability can only be established by suggesting that one is desirable (acclaims), that an opponent is undesirable (attacks), or that alleged weaknesses are incorrect (defenses).

Campaign discourse can occur on two topics: policy (governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action) and character (the qualities and abilities of the candidates). Benoit and Wells (1996) argue that a candidate's position on an issue could influence perceptions of that candidate's character and a candidate's character could suggest that the candidate favors certain policy positions. For example, a candidate's statement advocating proposals (policies) to help the homeless may foster the impression that the candidate is a caring person (character); similarly, a candidate who stresses (non-governmental) service in the armed forces (character) could create the impression that he or she will support a strong

Forms of Policy	
<i>Past Deeds</i>	<p>Acclaim: We passed Learning Results here in Maine and I think that is a good way to achieve accountability in schools (Lawrence) Attack: In the twelve years that he as served in the state legislature . . . education as a share of the state budget has declined from 35% to 25% (Snowe)</p>
<i>Future Plans</i>	<p>Acclaim: I designed an amendment . . . that said we should define health as a grievous physical injury to the health of the mother (Snowe) Attack: I think the [prescription drug] plan, which Senator Snowe backs . . . will not work (Lawrence)</p>
<i>General Goals</i>	<p>Acclaim: I strongly support guaranteeing equal rights to everyone regardless of sexual orientation (Lawrence) Attack: We can do something now. It's not like the commissions like Mark is suggesting, proposing a commission down the road (Snowe)</p>
Forms of Character	
<i>Personal Qualities</i>	<p>Acclaim: I have walked door-to-door to many homes in Maine . . . and listened to people trying to face this crisis in heating oil is very difficult. (Lawrence) Attack: As U.S. attorney for Colorado, he had to recuse himself from more special interests than we'd ever had in the history of Colorado (Allard)*</p>
<i>Leadership Ability</i>	<p>Acclaim: We can go further if we have the bi-partisan leadership . . . and that is the kind of leadership I will provide in the United States Senate (Snowe) Attack: Mark is president of Maine Senate and . . . there hasn't been any direction in leadership with respect to how we spend our money here in the state (Snowe)</p>
<i>Ideals</i>	<p>Acclaim: I think it is a fundamental right that people be secure in their place of employment (Lawrence) Attack: The <i>Congressional Quarterly</i> rated him the most partisan Republican in the Senate (Strickland)*</p>

Excerpts from the 10/15/00 Snowe-Lawrence debate in Maine except * from the 9/22/02 Allard-Strickland debate in Colorado.

Figure 1: Examples of Acclaims and Attacks on the Forms of Policy and Character

defense (policy). Despite the fact that some voters could draw other inferences (i.e., forming impressions about a candidate's character from policy statements or vice versa), Functional Theory codes for the explicit topic of a statement rather than speculating about inferences some viewers might make from it (see also Hacker et al., 2000). There is no question that the candidate who proposes policies to help the homeless is discussing policy; it is not clear how many voters will draw inferences about this candidate's character.

Both of these two topics—policy, character—is divided further. Policy statements can occur as discussions of past deeds (governmental action), future plans (specific proposals for governmental action), and general goals (policy outcomes sought by the candidates). Character utterances can discuss personal qualities (personality traits), leadership ability (experience in government), or ideals (values and principles). The Figure provides an example of an attack and an acclaim on each of these forms of policy and character taken from Senate debates.

It is unclear whether Senate debates will conform to the pattern found in presidential debates (e.g., acclaims are more common than attacks, defenses are least common; policy is more common than character; Benoit, 2007). Senate, gubernatorial, and presidential debates occur in political campaigns, so to some extent they face the same basic situation: Each

candidate is trying to persuade a majority of voters that he or she is preferable to his or her opponent. All candidates have the same three functions and the same two topics available for their messages. On the other hand, there are differences between the two levels of offices. As the head of the executive branch of government, the president implements policy. As a member of the legislature, a senator passes legislation (and confirms treaties and appointments). Governors are the head of the executive branch of their government, but have far fewer foreign policy responsibilities than presidents. Although the president relies on a huge bureaucracy to implement federal policy, it is easier for the president to take credit—or receive the blame—for actions of the federal government. In contrast, as one of 100 senators (and 435 representatives in Congress), it is more difficult for a Senator to take personal credit for legislation enacted (and, of course, the president must sign legislation as well). So, the findings from presidential debates gives us an idea of what we might expect in non-presidential debates, but we should not be surprised if some predictions are not confirmed with debates for other offices. Based on the existing research on presidential debates, we advance several predictions.

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that in principle acclaims have no drawbacks whereas attacks have one drawback and defenses have three. Of course, particular ill-advised or poorly conceived acclaims could damage the candidate (the modesty ethic, which can limit bragging, may not apply to political candidates). However, voters report that they dislike mudslinging in general (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975), which means that there could be backlash against the attacker (and of course ill-advised or poorly conceived attacks could prove more disastrous than other attacks). Defenses (1) could remind viewers of a potential weakness, (2) could create the impression that the defending candidate was reactive rather than proactive, (3) could take a candidate off-message, discussing weaknesses rather than strengths. For this reason, Functional Theory posits that the functions should be ordered in this way:

H1. Acclaims are the most frequent function, and defenses the least frequent, in Senate and gubernatorial debates.

Brasher (2003) observes that “A familiar assumption in the scholarly community is that issues are important in presidential elections, but that they are much less important at the congressional level” (p. 454). Similarly, Petrocik (1991) argues that:

Senators and representatives are substantially policy-neutral figures, rather like secretaries of state, county clerks, and city attorneys, with little connection to the debates that are centerpieces of the society’s policy decisions and its understandings of what the parties represent programmatically. (p. 28)

However, voters at both the presidential (Benoit, 2003) and Congressional level (Brazeal & Benoit, 2001) report that policy is a more important determinant of their vote than character. For this reason, we predict that:

H2. Policy is discussed more than character in Senate and gubernatorial debates.

Incumbents have numerous advantages over challengers (usually greater name recognition, fund-raising ability, experience in the Senate, as well as some ability to obtain federal funding for their state; see Trent & Friedenberg, 2008; Trent & Trent, 1995). Accordingly, challengers usually need to provide voters a reason to oust the incumbent and the way to reduce a candidate’s apparent desirability is through attacks.

H3. Incumbents acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers (or open seat candidates) in Senate and gubernatorial debates.

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that an important element of incumbency is that only incumbents have a record in the office sought; challengers may have experience in other kinds of offices, but that is less relevant to being a Senator than experience in the Senate. The interesting thing about an incumbent's record is that it surely contains both successes and failures. This means the incumbent's record serves as a resource for incumbents to acclaim and for challengers to attack. Of course, incumbents sometimes attack the challenger's record and sometimes challengers acclaim their own record—but these two kinds of remarks occur less frequently than discussions of the incumbent's record by incumbent and challenger alike.

H4. Incumbents use past deeds more to acclaim—and less to attack—than challengers in Senate and gubernatorial debates.

Past research at the presidential level indicates that Democrats have a small but significant tendency to attack more than Republicans (Benoit, 2007); however, this effect is neither consistent across message type nor a large effect when it occurs. Accordingly, we posit a research question:

RQ1. Do Democrats attack more than Republicans in Senate and gubernatorial debates?

Past research has also discovered that Democrats emphasize policy more, and character less, than Republicans (Benoit, 2004). Functional Theory argues that this may be due to the fact that Democrats are more likely to espouse governmental, rather than private, solutions to problems, compared with Republicans.

H5. Democrats emphasize policy more than Republicans in Senate debates.

Functional Theory (e.g., Benoit, 2007) argues that acclaims are more common than attacks in both general goals and ideals. General goals are ends (e.g., create jobs, fight terrorism) rather than means and ideals are principles or values (e.g., justice, fairness). It is much easier to agree with (acclaim) than to disagree with (attack) many goals and ideals, such as creating more jobs or the importance of equality.

H6. General goals are used more frequently to acclaim than attack in Senate and gubernatorial debates.

H7. Ideals are used more frequently to acclaim than attack in Senate and gubernatorial debates.

Sample

No archive makes available transcripts of all non-presidential debates; this means it is impossible to obtain a random sample of transcripts for these political campaign messages. Furthermore, because some hypotheses contrast incumbents, challengers, and open-seat candidates, and some contrast Democrats with Republicans, we wanted to obtain an equal number of each type of candidate represented in the sample to strengthen the contrasts. Therefore, this analysis employed a purposive sample of U.S. Senate debate transcripts obtained mainly from the Internet (PBS, newspaper, and other webpages were consulted).¹ The sample of senate texts consisted of 21 debates (1998-2006) featuring 41 different

¹ We want to thank Mitchell McKinney for sharing transcripts of non-presidential debates.

TABLE 1.
SAMPLE OF U.S. SENATE DEBATES

Year	State	Candidates	Incumbent	Challenger	Open Seat
2006	MD	Cardin-Steele	0	0	2
2006	MN	Klobuchar-Kennedy	0	0	2
2006	MO	McCaskill-Talent	1	1	0
2006	OH	Brown-DeWine	1	1	0
2006	VA	Webb-Allen	1	1	0
2006	PA	Casey-Santorum	1	1	0
2004	SD	Daschle-Thune	1	1	0
2004	UT	VanDam-Bennett	1	1	0
2004	OK	Carson-Coburn	0	0	2
2004	IL	Obama-Keyes	0	0	2
2002	CO	Strickland-Allard	1	1	0
2002	MO	Carnahan-Talent	1	1	0
2002	TN	Alexander-Clement	0	0	2
2002	IA	Harkin-Ganske	1	1	0
2002	SC	Sanders-Graham	0	0	2
2000	WA	Cantwell-Gorton	1	1	0
2000	ME	Lawrence-Snowe	1	1	0
2000	NY	Clinton-Lazio	0	0	2
2000	CA	Feinstein-Campbell	1	1	0
2000	MI	Stabenow-Abraham	1	1	0
1998	FL	Graham-Crist	1	1	0
Total			14	14	14

The first candidate listed is a Democrat; the second candidate is a Republican.

candidates and held in 20 different states. Fourteen candidates were incumbent senators seeking re-election; 14 were challengers, and 14 contested open seats; 21 candidates were Democrats and 21 were Republicans. For the analysis of gubernatorial debates, 15 texts (1994-2004) with 20 different candidates in 15 states; 10 were incumbents, 10 challengers, and 10 open seat candidates; 15 candidates represented the Democratic Party and 15 the Republican Party. Only debates from the general election phase of the campaign were included in the sample. This sample is relative large and quite diverse and should provide a strong test of the hypotheses. Tables 1 and 2 describe the sample employed in this study.

TABLE 2.
SAMPLE OF GUBERNATORIAL DEBATES

Year	State	Candidates	Incumbent	Challenger	Open Seat
2004	UT	Matheson-Huntsman			2
2004	NC	Easley-Balentine	1	1	
2004	MT	O'Keefe-Martz	1	1	
2002	KS	Sebelius-Shallenburg			2
2002	IA	Vilsack-Gross	1	1	
2002	CO	Owens-Heath	1	1	
2002	NY	McCall-Pataki	1	1	
2002	PA	Rendell-Fisher			2
2002	CA	Davis-Simon	1	1	
2001	VA	Warner-Earley			2
2000	NH	Shaheen-Humphrey	1	1	
2000	ND	Heitkamp-Hoeven			2
2000	VT	Dean-Swyer	1	1	
1998	FL	MacKay-Bush	1	1	
1994	TX	Bush-Richards	1	1	
Total			10	10	10

The first candidate listed is a Democrat; the second candidate is a Republican.

Method

Each candidate utterance in these debates were unitized into themes, which are claims, statements, or arguments (a sentence may contain one or more themes; a theme could also span more than one sentence). Berelson (1952) indicated that a theme is "an assertion about a subject" (p. 18). Similarly, Holsti (1969) defines a theme as "a single assertion about some subject" (p. 116). For example, in the September 13, 2000 New York Senate debate, Hillary Clinton said "I will fight very hard with specific ideas about how to provide quality affordable health care, modernize our schools, create good jobs in every corner of the state, including and especially Upstate – and get our fair share from Washington." This statement contains four themes: health care, schools, jobs, getting money from Washington. Each theme was then classified by function (acclaim, attack, or defense) and topic (policy or character) and then by form of policy (past deed, future plan, or general goal) or by form of character (personal quality, leadership ability, or ideal). Clinton's statement illustrates acclaims because most voters would consider it desirable to "provide affordable health care," "modernize our schools," "create good jobs," and "get our fair share from Washington." These statements illustrate policy (health care, schools, jobs, federal subsidies). We also noted the political party (Democrat or Republican) and incumbency status (incumbent, challenger, open seat).

Three coders content analyzed these texts. Each coder had been trained using the Functional approach (provided with a codebook, samples of previous research using this method, and texts to practice coding with feedback) and each had participated in past research using this method (the codebook will be provided upon request to the first author). Each coder analyzed a subset of debates independently (some overlap was necessary to calculate inter-coder reliability). Intercoder reliability for these debates, calculated on a random 10% of the texts, was measured with Cohen's (1960) *kappa*. The values of *kappa* were .94 for functions, .86 for topics, .93 for forms of policy, and .86 for forms of character. Landis and Koch (1977) explain that *kappas* of .81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders, so these values represent acceptable reliability. These hypotheses and the research question investigate differences between groups (e.g., incumbents versus challengers) using nominal or categorical data; *chi-square* is the appropriate statistic for these data.

Results

The first hypothesis on the distribution of functions was supported here in Senate debates. As Table 2 indicates, acclaims were the most common function (56%), followed by attacks (30%), and defenses were the least common function (14%). Brad Carson provided an example of an acclaim in a Senate debate when he noted that "I've also proposed eliminating unnecessary and outdated governmental agencies" (OK, 10/3/04). Surely the savings from cutting "unnecessary" and "outdated" programs would appear desirable to many voters. In contrast, John Thune attacked his opponent Tom Daschle for delaying judicial confirmations in the Senate: "The filibuster has never been used in the history of this country to deny appellate court nominees an opportunity for an up-and-down vote in the United States Senate. Under Tom Daschle, that is the first time that has happened" (SD, 9/19/04). This statement clearly blames Daschle for this delay and the assumption that nominees deserve a chance for a yes or no vote would probably sound plausible to many citizens. Daschle responded with a very straightforward defense against this accusation: "That's not true" (SD, 9/19/04). A *one-way chi-square* goodness of fit test reveals that these differences are statistically

TABLE 3.
FUNCTIONS OF U.S. SENATE AND GUBERNATORIAL DEBATES

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Senate			
Incumbency			
Incumbents	844 (61%)	286 (21%)	251 (18%)
Challengers	771 (51%)	584 (39%)	160 (11%)
Open Seat	775 (57%)	405 (30%)	182 (13%)
Political Party			
Democrats	1210 (57%)	711 (33%)	217 (10%)
Republicans	1160 (56%)	564 (27%)	346 (17%)
Total Senate	2370 (56%)	1275 (30%)	593 (14%)
Gubernatorial			
Incumbency			
Incumbents	820 (68%)	348 (29%)	41 (3%)
Challengers	672 (57%)	466 (40%)	38 (3%)
Open Seat	1515 (75%)	495 (24%)	15 (1%)
Political Party			
Democrats	1590 (70%)	636 (28%)	50 (2%)
Republicans	1417 (66%)	673 (32%)	44 (2%)
Total Gubernatorial	3007 (68%)	1309 (30%)	94 (2%)
Presidential	4050 (57%)	2501 (35%)	604 (8%)

Note: Presidential debate data from Benoit (2007).

significant ($\chi^2 [2, n = 4238] = 1137.77, p < .0001$). The same distribution of functions occurred in gubernatorial debates: 68% acclaims, 30% attacks, and 2% defenses ($\chi^2 [2, n = 4410] = 2912.7, p < .0001$). Table 3 displays these data.

The second prediction held that these candidates would discuss policy more than character. This prediction was upheld: In Senate debates, policy was discussed more frequently than character, 70% to 30%. For example, Paul Van Dam discussed Congressional spending during his opponent's tenure in the Senate: "The senator voted to desert what they had in the '90's, which was called pay as you go" (UT, 10/20/04). Fiscal responsibility is a clear example of an utterance that concerns policy. In contrast, Tom Coburn illustrated a character utterance when he criticized his opponent Brad Carson's veracity, declaring that "Brad's very good at creating a half-truth" (OK, 10/3/04). A *chi-square* goodness of fit test confirms that this is a significant difference ($\chi^2 [1, n = 3601] = 601.72, p < .0001$). This hypothesis was confirmed with data from the gubernatorial debates as well: policy 73%, character 27% ($\chi^2 [1, n = 4316] = 941.67, p < .0001$). Table 3 reports these data.

H3 indicated that incumbents would acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers. Excluding defenses, Senate incumbents indeed acclaimed more often (75%) than challengers (57%). On the other hand, challengers attacked more than incumbents in these debates (43% to 25%). Statistical analysis confirms that these differences are significant ($\chi^2 [1, n = 2485] = 85.7, p < .0001, \phi = .2$). In gubernatorial debates (also excluding defenses), incumbents again acclaimed more (70% to 59%) and attacked less (30% to 41%) than challengers. These differences are also significant ($\chi^2 [1, n = 2306] = 31.4, p < .0001, \phi = .12$).

The fourth prediction held that incumbents would employ past deeds more as a basis for acclaims, and less to develop attacks, than challengers. As expected, when Senate incumbents discussed past deeds, they acclaimed more than they attacked (69% to 31%); in contrast, challengers (30% to 70%) acclaimed less than they attacked with past deeds. For example, incumbent Senator Jim Talent argued in the Missouri *Meet the Press* debate that "I've made the system work for Missouri. Passed a Renewable Fuels Act to encourage

TABLE 4.
TOPICS OF U.S. SENATE AND GUBERNATORIAL DEBATES

	Policy	Character
	Senate	
Incumbency		
Incumbents	765 (70%)	321 (30%)
Challengers	964 (71%)	391 (29%)
Open Seat	808 (70%)	352 (30%)
Political Party		
Democrats	1319 (70%)	558 (30%)
Republicans	1218 (71%)	506 (29%)
Total Senate	2537 (70%)	1064 (30%)
	Gubernatorial	
Incumbency		
Incumbents	894 (77%)	274 (23%)
Challengers	802 (70%)	336 (30%)
Open Seat	1470 (73%)	540 (27%)
Political Party		
Democrats	1634 (73%)	592 (27%)
Republicans	1532 (73%)	558 (27%)
Total Gubernatorial	3166 (73%)	1150 (27%)
Presidential	4885 (75%)	1666 (25%)

Note: Presidential debate data from Benoit (2007).

ethanol and biodiesel, the Combat Meth law, reduced meth labs by 70 percent, other legislation" (MO, 10/8/06). He used accomplishments from his first term in office to acclaim his candidacy. In contrast, Sherrod Brown attacked incumbent Senator Mike DeWine in the Ohio debate:

We've lost so many small businesses in Ohio, machine shops, tool and dye makers in Akron and Dayton and Zanesville, as these big companies outsource. And Mike DeWine has supported every time these trade agreements, these tax bills that give incentives to the big corporations rather than to the small companies that stay in Lima, in Toledo, and manufacture here. (OH, 10/1/06)

This passage criticizes the incumbent's record in office, linking his votes to lost small businesses in the state. These differences between incumbents' and challengers' use of past deeds were statistically significant with a large effect size ($\chi^2 [1, n = 707] = 104.53, p < .0001, \phi = .38$). The data from gubernatorial debates are consistent: when discussing past deeds, incumbents acclaimed more than they attacked (75% to 25%) whereas challengers acclaimed less than they attacked (21%, 79%) ($\chi^2 [1, n = 929] = 267.45, p < .0001, \phi = .54$). These data are derived from Table 4.

The research question investigated differences in function by political party; no definitive answer emerged. In Senate debates, Democrats attacked more, and acclaimed less (defenses were excluded from this analysis), than Republicans ($\chi^2 [1, n = 3645] = 7.38, p < .01, \phi = .04$). However, in gubernatorial debates, Republicans attacked more and acclaimed less than Democrats ($\chi^2 [1, n = 4316] = 67.72, p < .01, \phi = .04$). These data are reported in Table 2.

The fifth hypothesis held that Democrats would discuss policy more, and character less, than candidates from the GOP. This prediction was not supported in Senate ($\chi^2 [1, n = 3601] = 0.06, p > .8$) or gubernatorial ($\chi^2 [1, n = 4316] = 0.01, p > .9$) debates. Cohen (1988) indicates that this is a very powerful test: The power of a *chi-square* with $df = 1$ and $n = 1000$ to detect small, medium, and large effects is .82, .99 .99 respectively.

H6 held that these candidates would use general goals more to acclaim than attack in political debates. This prediction was confirmed in the Senate data as 85% of general goals were acclaims and only 15% were attacks ($\chi^2 [1, n = 1514] = 761.87, p < .0001$). This was the case in gubernatorial debates as well, with general goals used more often to acclaim than attack (87% to 13%) ($\chi^2 [1, n = 1452] = 800.72, p < .0001$). See Table 4 for these data.

The final prediction was that ideals would more often serve as the basis for acclaims than attacks. This prediction was supported in Senate debates: 79% of ideals were used to acclaim and 21% were attacks ($\chi^2 [1, n = 226] = 77.1, p < .0001$). The hypothesis was also supported in gubernatorial debates (92% to 8%) ($\chi^2 [1, n = 111] = 77.92, p < .0001$). These data are also displayed in Table 4.

Implications

This study replicates existing research on the functions and topics of U.S. presidential debates by extending Functional analysis to U.S. Senate and gubernatorial debates. The candidates in these debates used acclaims more often than attacks; defenses were the least common function. This distribution of functions is consistent with earlier research on Senate debates (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Banwart & McKinney, 2005) and mirrors the results from U.S. general presidential debates (Benoit, 2007), suggesting that political campaign discourse has features which transcend level of office. Functional Theory (e.g., Benoit, 1999, 2007; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit et al., 2003) explains why the three functions should occur in this distribution. Acclaims have no drawbacks. Attacks have one potential disadvantage: They may evoke a backlash from voters who dislike mudslinging (e.g., Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). Defenses, in contrast, have three potential problems. First, a candidate must identify an attack to refute it. It is possible that mentioning the attack, in preparation to refute it, could remind or inform voters of a potential drawback. Second, attacks are most likely to occur where a candidate is weakest. This means responding to an attack is likely to take a candidate "off-message." Third, defenses may foster the impression that the candidates is reactive rather than proactive. Thus, it makes sense for acclaims to be the most common function and defenses the least common. Each function has the potential to improve a candidate's apparent preferability, but the three functions do not occur with equal frequency.

Some argue that campaigns are highly negative. Bartels (2000) observes that the "ordinary citizen's perception of the electoral process is marked by cynicism and dissatisfaction with the nature and tone of the contemporary campaign discourse" (p. 1). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) argue that negative campaigns (advertising in particular) alienate voters and reduce turnout. However, political campaigns are not as negative as many seem to assume. In fact, in this sample of U.S. Senate debates, fewer than one statement in three was an attack. The impression we tend to have of campaigns as negative may be due in large part to media coverage. Benoit and Davis (2007) reported that almost every other statement from a candidate (quoted or paraphrased) in newspaper stories about Senate debates (48%) was negative, far more negative than the candidates' statements in debates.

Although Brasher (2003) and Petrocik (1991) have suggested that policy may be a less important factor in congressional elections, this analysis found that policy was a much more common topic of discussion in Senate (and gubernatorial) debates than character. This finding of an emphasis on policy is consistent with earlier work on Congressional debates (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Banwart & McKinney, 2005) and with presidential debates (Benoit, 2007). Once again, certain patterns of political campaign discourse cross level of office.

TABLE 5.
FORMS OF POLICY AND CHARACTER IN U.S. SENATE DEBATES

	Policy						Character					
	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals		Personal Qualities		Leadership Ability		Ideals	
Incumbency												
Incumbents	206	91	11	16	408	77	97	75	56	18	66	9
	297 (37%)		27 (3%)		485 (60%)		172 (54%)		74 (23%)		75 (23%)	
Challengers	125	285	20	17	438	79	102	150	31	35	55	18
	410 (43%)		37 (4%)		517 (54%)		252 (64%)		66 (17%)		73 (19%)	
Open Seat	74	129	58	35	448	64	79	144	38	13	58	20
	203 (25%)		93 (12%)		512 (63%)		223 (63%)		51 (14%)		78 (22%)	
Political Party												
Democrats	176	314	47	34	634	100	161	192	63	30	76	23
	490 (38%)		81 (6%)		734 (56%)		353 (65%)		93 (17%)		99 (18%)	
Republicans	229	191	42	34	660	120	117	177	62	36	103	24
											127	
Total	420 (31%)		76 (6%)		880 (64%)		294 (57%)		98 (19%)		179	47
	405	505	89	68	1294	220	278	369	125	66	226	
											226	
Presidential	910 (35%)		157 (6%)		1514 (59%)		647 (61%)		191 (18%)		413	91
	962	1330	722	292	1349	230	321	393	283	165	413	91
	47%		21%		32%		43%		27%		30%	

Note: Presidential debate data from Benoit (2007). Some percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Brazeal and Benoit (2001) present public opinion poll data showing that state and local issues are the largest determinant of votes for Congress, so it is reasonable for Senate candidate to stress policy more than character in their debate statements. People may have the impression that campaigns are not about substance; however, in these Senate and gubernatorial debates there were more than twice as many statements about policy as character.

Although candidates generally acclaim more than they attack, incumbent candidates acclaim even more, and attack less, than challengers (they also defend more than challeng-

TABLE 6.
FORMS OF POLICY AND CHARACTER IN GUBERNATORIAL DEBATES

	Policy						Character					
	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals		Personal Qualities		Leadership Ability		Ideals	
Incumbency												
Incumbents	403	131	18	6	241	95	59	80	74	34	25	2
	534 (60%)		24 (3%)		336 (38%)		139 (51%)		108 (39%)		27 (10%)	
Challengers	84	311	28	1	353	25	102	95	80	29	25	5
	395 (49%)		29 (4%)		378 (47%)		197 (59%)		109 (32%)		30 (9%)	
Open Seat	221	244	196	69	673	67	185	95	188	18	52	2
	465 (32%)		265 (18%)		740 (50%)		280 (52%)		206 (38%)		54 (1%)	
Political Party												
Democrats	453	338	108	16	618	101	178	129	183	49	50	3
	791 (48%)		124 (8%)		719 (44%)		307 (52%)		232 (39%)		53 (9%)	
Republicans	255	348	134	60	649	86	168	141	159	32	52	6
	603 (39%)		194 (13%)		735 (48%)		309 (55%)		191 (34%)		58 (10%)	
Total	708	686	242	76	1267	187	346	270	342	81	102	9
	1394 (44%)		318 (10%)		1454 (46%)		616 (54%)		423 (37%)		111 (10%)	
Presidential	962	1330	722	292	1349	230	321	393	283	165	413	91
	47%		21%		32%		43%		27%		30%	

Note: Presidential debate data from Benoit (2005). Some percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

ers). This relationship between incumbency and function occurs in presidential debates (Benoit, 2007). This is another aspect of the content of political campaign messages that transcends office. Functional Theory (e.g., Benoit, 2007) explains that incumbents are the candidates with the most relevant experience: experience in the office sought in the election. Challengers often have experience in other offices, but arguably the best indication of how one will do *in the Senate* is how one has performed *in the Senate* (and the strongest evidence of how one would perform as *governor* comes from experience as *governor*). Thus, in Senate debates, incumbents have a strong proclivity use their own past deeds to acclaim their own records in office more than they use their opponents' record in other offices as a basis for attacks. In contrast, challengers tend to use incumbents' past deeds to attack than more than they use their own record in other offices as the basis for acclaims.

As the literature review reveals, there is no consistent or strong relationship between political party affiliation and function of discourse at the presidential level (Benoit, 2007). It is not therefore surprising to learn that Democrats attack more, and acclaim less, than Republicans in Senate debates but the reverse is true in gubernatorial debates (where Democrats attack less and acclaim more than GOP candidates). These two analyses find no consistent relationship between political party and function of campaign discourse.

No difference occurred in topics of Senate or gubernatorial debates by political party. This is inconsistent with presidential debates, in which Democrats stress policy more and character less than Republicans. One important feature of debates is that the candidates' statements in debates are constrained to some extent by the questions asked of them—and the quality of the questions surely influences the responses provided by candidates (see Benoit & Hansen, 2001; Eveland, McLeod, & Nathanson, 1994). Of course, candidates can ignore the questions but that can provoke criticism from questioners or their opponents. For example, in the 1998 Florida Senate debate, Bob Graham offered this gentle rebuke after his opponent spoke on a different topic than the question posed to him: "Mr. Russert, I would be pleased to yield to Mr. Crist 30 seconds of my time to answer the question that was asked." Thus, it is possible that the questions asked of candidates in these debates influenced the topics discussed. It is also possible that political party affiliation exerts less influence on topic of campaign discourse at the Senate and gubernatorial levels than the presidential level of government.

General goals were used more often to acclaim than attack in these Senate and gubernatorial debates. Similarly, ideals more often formed the basis for acclaims than attacks in both groups of campaign messages. These results are consistent with presidential debates (Benoit, 2007). Functional Theory (e.g., Benoit, 1999; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit et al., 2003) argues that the goals (e.g., more jobs, fighting terrorism) and ideals (e.g., equal opportunity, justice) discussed in political campaign messages lend themselves more readily to acclaims than attacks. The different forms of policy and character should not be assumed to lend themselves equally well to acclaims and attacks.

Conclusion

This analysis has added to our understanding of non-presidential campaign messages by replicating past research on presidential debates with new studies of U.S. Senate and gubernatorial debates. In general, the results reported in these two sets of data mirrored findings of earlier research for presidential debates. Across level of office acclaims are more common than attacks and defenses are least common; policy is more common than char-

acter; incumbents acclaim and defend more and attack less than challengers; incumbents use past deeds more to acclaim than attack, compared with challengers; general goals and ideals are used more for acclaims than attacks. No consistent relationship emerged between political party of the candidates and the functions of their utterances in these debates. Unexpectedly, Democrats did not discuss policy more (and character less) than Republicans.

Voters who ignore senate and gubernatorial debates may do themselves a disservice because the news tends to slight non-presidential campaigns. Furthermore, journalists are well-known for their tendency to slight both issues and character in favor of coverage of the horse race: Who is ahead or gaining, what campaign strategy is being pursued, which issues or portions of the electorate are being contested (see, e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). Our citizens ought to pay more attention to political debates and their content as an important means of informing their vote choice.

Further research should investigate the nature of campaign messages for other non-presidential debates. Numerous debates have been held for U.S. House races. Political campaign debates for mayor and other elective offices are proliferating. Furthermore, debates are being held in both the general election campaign and the primary campaign; primary campaign debates for non-presidential offices is another useful area for future research. Further work could investigate the relationship of the content of debates with election outcome or post-debate polls. These data provide students and teachers of argumentation information about select aspects of the content of debates for non-presidential offices.

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