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Speaker & Gavel

Volume 51, Issue 1, 2014

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William L. Benoit, Corey Davis, Mark Glantz, Jayne R. Goode,
Leslie Rill, & Anji Phillips

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of Centrist Appeals in 2012 U.S. Senate Debates**

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A New Path to Assessing Forensic Learning Outcomes**

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Nomination Acceptance Addresses**

William L. Benoit

Speaker & Gavel

**Delta Sigma Rho—Tau Kappa Alpha
National Honorary Forensic Society**

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Editor's Note:

S&G went to an entire online format with volume 41/2004 of the journal. The journal will be available online at: www.dsr-tka.org/ The layout and design of the journal will *not* change in the online format. The journal will be available online as a pdf document. A pdf document is identical to a traditional hardcopy journal. We hope enjoy and utilize the new format.

Speaker & Gavel

<http://www.dsr-tka.org/>
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Table of Contents

News Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Primaries	1
William L. Benoit, Corey Davis, Mark Glantz, Jayne R. Goode, Leslie Rill, & Anji Phillips	
Survival Strategies in Solidly Partisan States An Analysis of Centrist Appeals in 2012 U.S. Senate Debates	17
Matthew L. Spialek & Stevie M. Munz	
Experiential Learning and the Basic Communication Course A New Path to Assessing Forensic Learning Outcomes	32
Benjamin Walker	
A Functional Analysis of 2008 and 2012 Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses	50
William L. Benoit	

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News Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Primaries

William L. Benoit, Corey Davis, Mark Glantz, Jayne R. Goode,
Leslie Rill, & Anji Phillips

Abstract

President George W. Bush was completing his second (and final) term in office and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run for president. Thus, the 2008 American presidential primary is the first “open” campaign (with no sitting president or vice president competing) since 1952 with highly competitive primaries for both major political parties. This study uses content analysis to investigate news coverage (national newspapers, network television news, and local newspapers) of the 2008 American presidential primary campaign. Most themes in the news concerned the horse race (66%) with somewhat more emphasis on the candidates’ character (18%) than their policy proposals (15%). The most common topics of horse race comments were campaign strategy (24%), campaign events (19%), polls (17%), and predictions (12%). More news comments were positive (62%) than negative (32%) with few comments about the candidate’s defenses (7%). Most comments were unattributed (statements by journalists: 66%); candidates were quoted or paraphrased in about one in five comments; the remaining comments were from supporters (8%) or others (7%).

Key Words: 2008, presidential, primary, news coverage, topics, sources

Introduction

The 2008 American presidential campaign was fairly unusual for three reasons. First, the 2008 was the only “open” campaign in recent history. In every election since 1952 the American presidential campaign has included either a sitting president or vice president as a candidate. However, in 2008, President George W. Bush was completing his second and final term as president and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run for the top slot. Although some recent campaigns have seen challenges to renomination of the incumbent (e.g., in 1992 Pat Buchanan challenged President George Bush for the Republican nomination; in 2000 Bill Bradley ran against Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic nomination), the lack of an incumbent in 2008 made the primary races in both political parties highly competitive. This meant that messages from and about the candidates were particularly important for voters in this election. Second, even though the primary campaign commenced earlier than ever before, the Democratic nominee was not decided until much later than usual, with Senator Barack Obama finally winning the nomination over Senator Hillary Clinton in June. Third, 2008 was first time a nominee for one of the two major political parties in America was not a white male. When Senator John McCain selected Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, it assured that for the first time in our

history the elected President or Vice President would not be a white male. Thus, the campaign that led to this historic election merits scholarly attention.

News coverage of political campaigns is important for several reasons. First, the news is another channel for information about the candidates and the campaign to reach voters. Second, the news media selects which information to pass along to voters – it does not merely retransmit messages from the candidates. Third, the news can evaluate or assess the campaign information it supplies to voters. Research indicates that the amount of coverage received by candidates, the tone of the coverage, and the amount of horse race coverage focusing on a particular candidate can affect voters' perceptions of candidates (Ross, 1992). Jamieson (1992, p. 167) argued that covering campaigns as strategy “encourages voters to ask not who is better able to serve as president but who is going to win.” Thus, it is important to study news coverage of campaigns as well as messages from candidates (e.g., TV spots, debates). Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) content analyzed news coverage of American primary campaigns in the *New York Times* from 1952-2004. This study updates that study to include the 2008 presidential primary and extends the sample to include other national newspapers, national network news, and local newspapers. First, the literature on primary campaign news coverage will be reviewed. This will lead to a statement of purpose for this study (research questions and hypotheses). Then the sample and method will be described. Results will be reported and implications discussed.

Literature Review: Presidential Primary Campaign News Coverage

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding news coverage of election campaigns. Some research investigates campaign coverage in television news (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Lichter et al. 1999). Coverage of nominating conventions (e.g., Adams, 1985; Patterson, 1980) and of the general election campaign phase (e.g., Benoit et al. 2005; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991) have been studied. Other research has investigated press coverage of non-presidential contests (e.g., Graber, 1989; Kahn & Kenney, 1999).

Patterson (1980) found that the election game (horse race; winning, losing, polls, events) accounted for almost two-thirds of the primary coverage in network news, newspapers, and news magazines in 1976. Substance, including both policy and candidate character, comprised about one-quarter of the stories. Graber (1988, p. 79) reported that news coverage “during the [1976] primaries concentrated very heavily on fleeting campaign activities and vote tallies in state contests, slighting a discussion of the policy stands taken by the candidates.” Robinson and Sheehan (1983), examining coverage in the 1980 primary and general campaign, found an emphasis on horse race coverage. Brady (1989) studied UPI coverage of the 1984 presidential primary campaign: 16% of the lines in these stories addressed the candidates' policy and 23% concerned the candidate's character and leadership ability; 21% addressed the potential success of the candidates, 20% related to campaign events, 11% concerned attacks on

opponents, and 9% were about their supporters. Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) reported that network news coverage of horse race in the primary campaign increased from 49% in 1988 to 78% in 2000.

King (1990) investigated *USA Today* and *New York Times* coverage of the presidential primaries in 1988. Horse race coverage dominated both papers' news (88.8% for *USA Today*, 73.7% for *New York Times*). Campaign issues (e.g., controversies and gaffes) were the second most common topic at (7.5% and 11.2%). Policy concerns (2.1%, 7.5%) and the candidates' character (1.6%, 7.5%) were less common topics. Johnson (1993) found in the 1988 primaries that polls accounted for 23% of newspaper and 29% of TV coverage; expectations 22% and 20%, momentum 18%, 15%, organization/finances 14%, 7%, endorsements 8%, 13%, and outcome/delegates were 16% in each medium (this study did not quantify the frequency of policy or character). Just et al. (1996) investigated newspaper and TV coverage of the primary and general campaign of 1992; inspection of their line graphs indicates that about 60% of stories mentioned the horse race and the candidates' character; in contrast, only about 40% of stories addressed issues. During the 1992 campaign, Buchanan (1996) found that candidates devoted 68% of their messages to issues whereas the media addressed issues in only 21% of coverage. He also found that the tone of media coverage "was substantially more negative than the tone of. . . the candidate discussions of themselves and other candidates" (1996, p. 149). Steger (1999) looked at *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* coverage in 1996 primaries, finding that negative coverage was most common, followed by mixed coverage and, least frequently, positive coverage. Horse race coverage was most common, followed next by policy and then by character. Lichter and Smith (1996) analyzed network news coverage of the 1996 presidential primaries. Horse race accounted for 51% of statements, policy 20%, and character 19%. The Project for Excellence in Journalism investigated news coverage of the early primary campaign in 2000:

Roughly 80% of the early election campaign coverage discussed tactics of the candidates and parties, fundraising by the campaigns, and internal organizational problems. Only 13% of the stories were about the candidates' ideas, their honesty, or what they had done for their constituents in previous elected offices (Skewes, 2007, p. 13).

Again, the news offers comparatively little emphasis on policy and character. Vinson and Moore (2007) investigated candidate messages and news coverage of the 2000 presidential primary in South Carolina. They report that the media stressed horse race more than candidate messages whereas candidates discussed policy issues and character more than the media. They also found that when issues were discussed, the media mainly talked about the Confederate flag at the statehouse but the candidates tended to stress Social Security, military policy, and education. Benoit et al. (2007) studied coverage of the 2004 presidential primary campaign in local newspapers, national newspapers, and nation-

al television news. The coverage privileged horse race (65%) over character (22%) or policy (13% topics). The tone of the news was more positive than negative (53% to 47%). The most common types of horse race coverage were strategy, polls, and events. Finally, more statements were from reporters than attributed to candidates, and candidates were quoted more often than others. Farnsworth and Lichter (2012) reported that the three major television networks in the 2008 primaries discussed horse race (71%) more than policy (14%); the tone of coverage for Democrats was more positive than for Republicans (66% to 48%).

So, extant research on primary campaign news reports that horse race was the most common topic, more common than policy or character. Usually the news devoted more time and space to character than policy. The tone of coverage was more likely to be negative than positive. Unfortunately, few studies examine policy and character as separate topics; rarely does research report the kinds of horse race coverage. Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) analyzed *New York Times*' coverage of presidential primary campaigns from 1952-2004. Overall, horse race coverage was the most common topic (66%), followed by character (16%) and then policy positions (12%). Horse race coverage was comprised mainly of campaign strategy (45%), polls (11%), campaign events (9%), predictions (8%), endorsements (7%), and outcomes. News coverage stressed character more, and policy less, than candidate messages. These stories were more positive than negative but were more negative than candidates' messages from the same time period.. Reporters (remarks for which no source was identified) were the most common source of statements (55%), followed by candidates (25%), supporters (11%), and others (9%). It would be useful to apply this approach (especially distinguishing policy and character and identifying the forms of horse race coverage) to the 2008 presidential primary campaign.

News Coverage of Political Campaigns

Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) posit a theory of election campaign coverage. Journalists seek a large audience of readers and/or viewers. Probably the main reason for this desire is the profit motive (see, e.g., McManus, 1994; Schudson, 1995). Second, it is personally gratifying to have a large audience. This desire for a large audience means that journalists look for news that is novel and interesting. Campaign events, such as rallies or speeches, change every day. Buchanan (1996, p. 154) observes that "the media . . . is obsessed with the process, the inside political story" (see also Hamilton, 2004; Marcus et al. 2000; McChesney, 2004; Patterson, 1994; Petrocik, 2004). Political polls are taken frequently during important races and the relative positions of the candidates can shift from poll to poll – in contrast, although candidates occasionally articulate new policy positions (or change their policy positions; although that risks the charge of "flip-flopping") – there can be no doubt that the horse race changes more often than policy positions. Similarly, new information sometimes arises about a candidates' character, but that too occurs less frequently than changes in the horse race. Furthermore, the horse race, by nature is about competition,

which can add suspense and interest to stories. So, to keep the news interesting—and to attract a larger audience—news coverage is prone to stress horse race more than policy or character. Unfortunately, the substantive importance of a story is a less important consideration in the news. Graber (1989, p. 86) reported that newspaper and television editors indicated that the three most important factors in choosing a story are conflict, proximity, and timeliness; “Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story’s overall significance.”

Second, it is simply not possible for a reporter to have expertise on every possible policy topic: jobs, immigration, terrorism and national defense, taxes, education, the environment, health care, Social Security, commerce, and so forth. It is far easier for reporters to become experts on the horse race or the election as a game: “The prevalence of strategic coverage can be partly explained by the fact that most political reporters, particularly those who cover campaigns, are greater experts in politics than they are in policy” (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 168; see also Schudson, 1995; Skewes, 2007). Some reporters believe horse race coverage is what prevents a campaign from being “a mighty dry and colorless affair” (Floyd, 2004, p. 1B).

Robinson and Sheehan offered an additional explanation for the news media’s emphasis on horse race aspects of the campaign:

Objective journalism has, for a century and a half, defined news as *events*, as happenings. “Horse races” happen; “horse races” are themselves filled with specific actions. Policy issues, on the other hand, do not happen; they merely exist. Substance has no events; issues generally remain static. So policy issues, or substance, have been traditionally defined as outside the orbit of real news. (1983, p. 148)

Tradition is yet another reason for the news to emphasize horse race over substance. For these reasons, Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) predict:

H1. News on the 2008 presidential primary campaigns will emphasize horse race coverage more than policy or character.

Furthermore, the desire to attract a large audience can influence the tone as well as the topic of campaign coverage. An emphasis on attacks in news coverage (negative tone) can be assumed to attract a large audience because conflict is interesting (Patterson, 1994). The idea that the press is a watchdog that polices our government seems to have encouraged the press to be more cynical (Patterson, 1994). Additionally, some journalists believe that if they criticize all candidates, that will foster the impression that they (journalists) are fair. Although coverage of general campaign messages is mostly negative (see Benoit et al. 2005), research on candidate messages shows that messages in the primary tend to be more positive than general election messages (Benoit, 2007). Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) found that the tone of *New York Times*’ coverage of

the presidential primaries from 1952-2004 was more positive than negative. So, we predict in 2008 that:

H2. The tone of news coverage of the 2008 primary campaigns will be more positive than negative.

However, Benoit, Hemmer, and Stein (2010) also predict that primary news coverage is more negative than the messages from candidates.

H3: The tone of news coverage of political campaigns will be more negative than that of candidate messages.

Research shows that news coverage of presidential primary and general debates has more attacks than the debates themselves (Benoit et al. 2004; Benoit et al. 2004). *New York Times'* coverage of primary (Benoit et al. 2010) and general (Benoit et al. 2005) is also more negative than the messages of the candidates.

Many journalists seem to believe that the candidates' character, or personality, to be more interesting than policy, which leads them to emphasize character so as to attract readers or viewers. Clarke and Evans (1983, p. 39-42) surveyed reporters who covered U.S. House of Representative races in 1978 (and analyzed the newspaper stories in these papers), concluding that:

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

So, candidates focus more on issues than personal characteristics in their campaign messages, whereas journalists tend to stress character. Skewes (2007, p. 57) 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." For example, Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* explained that stories about policy issue are the ones "we suspect are to most readers the least accessible, the first ignored, and in many ways the least satisfactory" (Skewes 2007, p. 57). For these reasons we predict that:

H4. News coverage of political campaigns will emphasize character more than policy.

H5. News coverage of political campaigns will emphasize character more, and policy less, than candidate messages.

We also posed two research questions, following the previous study of *New York Times'* presidential campaign coverage:

RQ1. What is the relative proportion of the forms of horse race coverage?

RQ2. What is the relative proportion of the themes from reporters, candidates, supporters, and others?

Testing these predictions, and answering these research questions, should provide insight into news coverage of presidential primary campaigns.

Method

This study investigates the nature of news coverage of the 2008 presidential primary election campaign. Then we discuss the samples and procedures employed here.

Sample

This study examined news texts in three separate samples. First, stories in four local newspapers for the 28 days preceding the caucus or primary in that state were sampled (IA: *Des Moines Register* 12/6-1/2, NH: *Union Leader* 12/11-1/7, MI: *Detroit Free Press* 12/18-1/14, SC: *Post and Courier* 12/22-1/18). Second, three national newspapers (*USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*) and five television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX) were sampled from December 6, 2007 (the earliest date of the local newspaper sample) through February 6, 2008 (the day after February 5, a day which saw several primaries and caucuses). The following search string was employed to find one story per outlet per day: Biden or Clinton or Dodd or Edwards or Gravel or Kucinich or Obama or Richardson or Brownback or Giuliani Huckabee or Hunter or McCain or Paul or Romney or Tancredo or Thompson.

Procedures

This study replicates the methods used in the study of *New York Times* coverage of presidential primary campaign news (Benoit et al. 2010). Categorical content analysis was employed; a codebook was developed with definitions and examples of all categories (see Benoit et al. 2005). Coders unitized the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Holsti (1969, p. 116) explained that a theme is “a single assertion about some subject.” Then they coded each theme for source, topic, subject, and tone.

Cohen’s (1960) κ was calculated on a subset 10% of the texts to determine inter-coder reliability because it controls for agreement by chance. Reliability for topic of utterance ranged from .74-.97, for tone was .88-.97, for identifying the source of a statement was .81-.93, for target of utterance it was .81-.93. Landis and Koch (1977) explained that values of κ over .81 represents almost perfect reliability and .61-.80 to reflect substantial agreement, so these data should be considered reliable.

Chi-square was employed to test for significant differences. This statistic is appropriate for investigating differences with frequency data. When possible, effect size is provided (effect size requires two variables so it is not meaningful with a *goodness-of-fit* test).

Results

Overall (and in each of the three sub-samples), the first hypothesis was confirmed. News coverage of the 2008 presidential primary stressed the horse race (66%) far more than character (18%) or policy (15%). A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test confirms that these frequencies are significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 2] = 5172.46, p < .0001$). See Table 1 for these data.

Table 1
Topics of 2008 Campaign News Coverage

	Horse Race	Character	Policy
<i>USA Today</i>	499	206	109
<i>New York Times</i>	969	414	200
<i>Washington Post</i>	332	127	50
National Newspapers	1800 (62%)	747 (26%)	359 (12%)
NH Union Leader	356	149	145
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	273	183	168
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	424	77	60
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	711	202	189
Local Newspapers	1764 (60%)	611 (21%)	562 (19%)
ABC	279	39	125
CBS	92	10	9
NBC	426	36	42
CNN	919	179	216
FOX	1352	108	159
National Television News	3068 (77%)	372 (9%)	542 (14%)
Grand Total 2008	6632 (66%)	1730 (18%)	1463 (15%)
<i>NYT</i> 1952-2004	3231 (70%)	799 (17%)	590 (13%)

Note. 1952-2004 data from Benoit, Hemmer, & Stein (2010).

The second hypothesis concerned tone of coverage. As predicted, evaluative comments (some comments were simple descriptions and not coded for tone) were most often positive (62%) than negative (32%) with 7% of comments reporting on candidates' defenses against attacks. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test found a significant difference between positive and negative comments (defenses excluded) ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 525.26, p < .0001$). See Table 2 for these data.

Table 2
Functions of 2008 Campaign News Coverage

	Positive	Negative	Defense
<i>USA Today</i>	201	113	12
<i>New York Times</i>	377	236	27
<i>Washington Post</i>	136	247	137
National Newspapers	714 (48%)	596 (40%)	176 (12%)
NH Union Leader	446	185	21

<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	436	155	33
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	422	177	31
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	691	343	68
Local Newspapers	1995 (66%)	860 (29%)	153 (5%)
ABC	103	65	12
CBS	10	0	6
NBC	20	37	8
CNN	309	82	1
FOX	190	71	0
National Television News	632 (69%)	255 (28%)	27 (3%)
Grand Total 2008	3341 (62%)	1711 (32%)	356 (7%)
<i>NYT</i> 1952-2004	1230 (54%)	960 (42%)	77 (3%)

The third prediction anticipated that the tone of news coverage would be more negative than the tone of the candidates' messages. Data are available on the tone of two message forms from the 2008 presidential primary: debates and TV spots. This prediction was confirmed in both cases. Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock (2011) found that acclaims were 68%, attacks 26%, and defenses 6% of primary debate utterances. Statistical analysis reveals that attacks were more frequent in the news than in the candidates' messages ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 64.22, p < .0001, \phi = .06$; defenses excluded). Benoit and Rill (in press) analyzed 2008 presidential primary TV spots, finding that 80% of statements were acclaims and 20% attacks (no defenses occurred in their sample). A *chi-square cross-contingency test* found that attacks were significantly more common in news coverage of the campaign than in the candidates' TV spots ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 115.82, p < .0001, \phi = .13$). So, although the tone of news coverage of the 2008 presidential primaries was more positive than negative, that coverage was more negative than the candidates' messages.

The next hypothesis predicted that news coverage of the 2008 presidential primary would stress character over policy. Excluding horse race comments, 54% of comments were about policy and 46% about character. Statistical analysis revealed that ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 22.16, p < .0001$). H5 contrasted news coverage with candidate messages during the campaign. Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock's (2011) analysis of primary debates found that 70% of comments were about policy and 30% were on character. A *chi-square* confirmed that news coverage stressed character more, and policy less, than the candidates' messages ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 274.19, p < .0001, \phi = .13$). Benoit and Rill's (in press) analysis of 2008 presidential primary ads indicated that policy was more common than character (58% to 42%) and a *chi-square* test confirmed that the news stressed character more, and policy less, than the candidates ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 6.14, p < .05, \phi = .04$). So, this hypothesis was confirmed.

The first research question investigated the frequency with which the news addressed the forms of horse race coverage. In the 2008 presidential primaries, the four most common forms of horse race coverage were strategy (24%), cam-

paigned events (19%), polls (17%), and predictions (12%). These data are displayed in Table 3.1 and 3.2.

Table 3.1
Topics of 2008 Horse Race Campaign News Coverage

	Strategy	Event	Polls	Predict
<i>USA Today</i>	101	43	84	23
<i>New York Times</i>	250	176	156	36
<i>Washington Post</i>	5	128	24	35
National Newspapers	356	347	264	94
	(21%)	(21%)	(16%)	(6%)
<i>NH Union Leader</i>	116	50	58	33
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	104	51	32	34
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	123	85	51	76
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	150	104	83	101
Local	493	290	224	244
Newspapers	(30%)	(18%)	(14%)	(15%)
ABC	73	39	28	18
CBS	5	0	6	7
NBC	52	26	26	55
CNN	93	165	132	77
FOX	302	209	223	190
National Television News	525	439	506	347
	(22%)	(18%)	(21%)	(15%)
Grand Total 2008	1374	1076	994	685
	(24%)	(19%)	(17%)	(12%)
<i>NYT 1952-2004</i>	1459	305	347	249
	(48%)	(10%)	(11%)	(8%)

Table 3.2
Topics of 2008 Horse Race Campaign News Coverage

	Outcome	Funds	Endorse	Vote Choice
<i>USA Today</i>	48	51	46	4
<i>New York Times</i>	95	164	72	19
<i>Washington Post</i>	9	59	4	26
National Newspapers	152	274	122	49
	(9%)	(17%)	(7%)	(3%)
<i>NH Union Leader</i>	12	13	11	61
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	0	12	13	9
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	51	5	21	32
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	68	23	9	53
Local	131	53	54	165
Newspapers	(8%)	(3%)	(3%)	(10%)

ABC	19	15	21	9
CBS	13	11	14	16
NBC	46	16	27	33
CNN	93	44	58	0
FOX	1	39	100	0
National Television News	172	125	220	58
	(7%)	(5%)	(9%)	(2%)
Grand Total 2008	455	452	396	272
	(8%)	(8%)	(7%)	(5%)
<i>NYT</i> 1952-2004	218	175	236	57
	(7%)	(6%)	(8%)	(2%)

The second research question concerned the source of statements in the news. The most common source was the reporter or journalism (remarks not attributed to any source) at 66%. Candidates accounted for 19% of the statements in this sample, supporters were 8% and others 7%. See Table 4 for these data.

Table 4
Sources of 2008 Campaign News Coverage

	Reporter	Candidate	Supporter	Other
<i>USA Today</i>	549	148	44	78
<i>New York Times</i>	1282	311	123	98
<i>Washington Post</i>	42	42	162	55
National Newspapers	1873	501	329	231
	(64%)	(17%)	(11%)	(8%)
<i>NH Union Leader</i>	343	165	105	39
<i>IA Des Moines Register</i>	259	233	63	70
<i>SC Post and Courier</i>	315	72	122	110
<i>MI Detroit Free Press</i>	584	276	97	145
Local Newspapers	1501	746	387	364
	(50%)	(25%)	(13%)	(12%)
ABC	281	126	15	20
CBS	20	3	4	11
NBC	425	52	2	33
CNN	1053	236	25	8
FOX	1382	172	0	65
National Television News	3161	589	46 (1%)	137
	(80%)	(15%)		(3%)
Grand Total 2008	6535	1836	762 (8%)	722
	(66%)	(19%)		(7%)
<i>NYT</i> 1952-2004	2719	1204	551	159
	(55%)	(25%)	(16%)	(5%)

Discussion

As most previous research has indicated, the 2008 presidential primary campaign stressed horse race coverage more than character or policy. Although this result is not surprising, this study provides additional data – and data from multiple sources in three media: national newspapers (*USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*), local newspapers (*Union Leader*, *Des Moines Register*, *Post and Courier*, *Detroit Free Press*), and national television (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, FOX). In all three media horse race was more common than character or policy. Clearly, these data provide strong support for the claim that news coverage of campaigns stresses the horse race. This means voters have less opportunity to learn about the candidates' character or policy positions.

In coverage of the 2008 presidential primary the tone was more positive than negative. Again, this relationship held in all three subsamples. This news coverage was more positive than in past years (*New York Times*' coverage of the presidential primary from 1952-2004 also tended to be positive, with 54% of evaluative comments positive in tone and 42% negative). Defenses, which are the least common function in political campaign messages (see, e.g., Benoit, 2007) were less common in these samples than comments with a positive or negative tone. Although news tends to be more negative than candidate messages (see the next paragraph), political candidates tend to be more positive in the primary phase of the campaign than the general election phase. Accordingly, coverage of the primary campaign tends to be positive because the primary campaign is, comparatively, quite positive.

However, as has been demonstrated previously (Benoit et al. 2010), news coverage of presidential primaries reports attacks more frequently than attacks occur in the candidates' messages – and acclaims are under-reported when news coverage is compared with candidate messages. Thus, even though a positive tone was more common than a negative tone in 2008, the news was significantly more negative than the candidates themselves.

Newspapers, both national and local, devoted more themes to character than policy. Surprisingly, in this sample of national television news policy was more common than character. Although we would not argue that character is unimportant – the president must lead the nation and voters must trust the president to try to implement campaign promises and, perhaps more importantly, to deal appropriately with unexpected crises that were not addressed in the campaign. Still, the president and the executive branch of government implements policy, domestic and foreign, which makes policy very important. Benoit (2003) presented evidence that presidential candidates who discuss policy more, and character less, than opponents are more likely to win elections. For this reason it might be a positive sign that television news – like the presidential candidates themselves – stressed policy more than character. However, data shows that candidates in this campaign stressed policy more than television news in the debates and TV spots.

Although the existing literature consistently shows that horse race coverage is more common than discussion of policy or character, we know relatively little

about what horse race coverage looks like. Overall, campaign strategy, campaign events, polls, and predictions are the four most common topics of horse race. One exception is national newspapers, in which funds (fund-raising and spending) is one of the most common topics. We must keep in mind the nature of the samples employed here: The Iowa newspaper had no themes about outcome, which makes sense because that sample ended with the Iowa caucuses – and no voting results from any other state had happened at that point.

It is not surprising to learn that most statements in news coverage of presidential primaries have no source – are simply reporters and journalists talking. Candidates are quoted in about one-fifth of the statements in this sample. The data show that in these samples in 2008, quotations from candidates were least common on national news (with journalists providing no source for 80% of statements) to local newspapers, in which candidates were quoted in one-quarter of all statements.

Conclusion

This study investigated news coverage of the 2008 American presidential primary campaign. The sample is noteworthy, including multiple outlets from three kinds of news outlets: national newspapers, local newspapers, and national television news. Although some variations can be expected, the results were remarkably consistent. News coverage stressed the horse race over character and policy. Particularly in national newspapers the stories discussed character more often than policy. The tone of coverage was mostly positive, but less positive than the candidates' primary messages (debates and TV spots) from the campaign. The most common horse race topics were campaign strategy, campaign events, public opinion polls, and predictions. Most statements in this sample were unattributed (assertions by reporters or journalists); candidates were quoted in about 20% of themes, with supporters and others occasionally quoted. These data add to our understanding of news coverage of presidential primary campaigns generally (topic and tone). They also extend our understanding of the topics of horse race coverage and sources of statements in the stories.

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Survival Strategies in Solidly Partisan States An Analysis of Centrist Appeals in 2012 U.S. Senate Debates

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Abstract

With the growing number of centrist senators diminishing on Capitol Hill, the next few election cycles will be crucial to the survival of this moderate group of lawmakers. Campaign debate scholars should investigate how vulnerable incumbents construct a centrist issue agenda and image to *connect* with voters in states ideologically incongruent with the incumbents' parties. In doing so, debate scholars will also fill the lack of lower-level debate research. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, this analysis examined the debate appeals of Sens. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Scott Brown (R-MA). Findings suggest McCaskill's issue agenda was congruent with a centrist image in contrast to Brown's contradictory issue and image messaging. Additionally, centrist incumbents were more likely to acclaim a centrist image than attack their opponents' partisanship.

Keywords: Campaign Debates, Centrist, Issue Ownership

Introduction

The centrist decline became apparent in May 2010. After voting for the Toxic Asset Relief Program (TARP), Senate veteran Bob Bennett lost his party's nomination because he was not conservative enough (Johnson, 2010). Just weeks later, the *New York Times* headline, "In the Middle in Arkansas, and Hit from Both Sides," encapsulated the struggle of Sen. Blanche Lincoln (McKinley, 2010). Less than two years after the 2010 elections, moderate Sens. Ben Nelson, Joe Lieberman, and Olympia Snowe announced their retirements. These retirements and electoral repudiations of moderate legislators from both major parties prompted *Politico* to claim, "The center won't hold in Washington—in fact, it's fleeting," (Allen, 2012, n.p.).

This recent centrist exodus merits the attention of communication scholars for two primary reasons. First, from a normative democratic perspective, the decline of moderate legislators from both major political parties poses a threat to the policymaking process. Even as Democrats occupied the White House and held majorities in both legislative chambers, the successes and failures of Barack Obama's first term remained dependent on the cooperation of the centrist wings within both the Democratic and Republican parties. For instance, centrist Republicans assisted in the passage of a stimulus bill (Herszenhorn, 2009) and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (Toeplitz, 2010), while centrist Democrats stymied their party's attempts to enact immigration legislation (Herszenhorn, 2010). The 2013 government shutdown, an exemplar of the current era of divid-

ed government, further compounds the necessity for Republicans and Democrats to work cooperatively in order to maintain government operations.

Second, from a scholarly perspective, political communication research has explored how residential balkanization (e.g., Mutz & Martin, 2001) and selective exposure possibly lead to a polarized citizenry (e.g., Sunstein, 2007; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). However, communication scholars have neglected to understand how non-polarized individuals, particularly lawmakers, respond and communicatively navigate themselves in a polarized electorate that has greater choice to exclude heterogeneous political views. Research should understand how candidates strategically employ centrism to create openings for a less regionally dominant political party to remain electorally viable.

The 2012 elections offered an opportunity to investigate centrist campaign strategies. Two of the marquee U.S. Senate races featured embattled centrist incumbents, Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Scott Brown (R-MA). Both McCaskill and Brown faced an uphill battle in states that have traditionally or recently been ideologically incongruent with these senators' party affiliations. While entire campaigns are debates over issues and image, campaign debates provide an extended period of time for candidates to articulate the images and policy positions discussed along the campaign trail (Carlin, 1992). In doing so, campaign debates become focal points through which to analyze the central arguments of the overall campaign. Campaign debates are particularly useful in exploring candidates' construction of centrist appeals given candidates' debate discourse tends to offer more evidence and reasoned arguments to delineate themselves from their opponents (Ellsworth, 1965). Thus, the McCaskill and Brown debates gave the incumbents an unfiltered vehicle to reinforce the centrist image being projected in ads and interviews.

Although debates provide a framework to explore political campaigns' persuasive messages, a paucity of debate research exists on lower-level races such as Senate debates (McKinney & Carlin, 2004). Through the theoretical frameworks of issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) and the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998), this content analysis of the Scott Brown and Claire McCaskill debate performances addresses the lack of U.S. Senate debate scholarship while also examining the important issue of centrists' communicative attempts to adapt to a more partisan electorate. Specifically, a coding scheme for centrist debate cues was inductively derived and then joined with the existing functional coding scheme of attacks and acclaims (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998).

Review of Literature

The limited research on senatorial and gubernatorial debates suggests these debates influence voters' perceptions of candidates' policy positions and image. Considering more coverage is given to presidential campaigns (Stempel, 1994), Senate debates may provide an opportunity for voters to gain more information about lesser-known candidates (Benoit, Brazeal, Airne, 2007). For instance, Philport and Balon (1975) determined John Glenn's image was affected by a

Democratic primary debate. More recently, results from a case study during the 2004 South Dakota Senate race indicated the debates influenced not only voter perceptions of the candidates' character and issue stances but also vote choice (Robertson, 2005).

By acknowledging Senate debates' influence in shaping both image and issue perceptions, it is critical to understand how Senate candidates use the verbal dimensions of debate content to appeal to voters. Issue ownership theory (1996) and the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998) provide a framework for analyzing Senate debate content.

Petrocik (1996) developed issue ownership theory, which asserts the major parties have distinct issue handling reputations. In order to develop a strategic advantage, candidates should frame their messages around owned issues. Simply put, Democrats will reference Democratic issues more and Republicans will speak more often about Republican issues. Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003-2004) found Democratic issues include jobs, poverty, healthcare, education and the environment. Republican issues consist of the deficit, taxes, defense, and foreign policy. Trespassing into the opposing party's issue territory is perceived as a high risk (Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992). However, challengers can poach an issue from an incumbent if that person has handled their party's issue inadequately (Petrocik, 1996).

At the Senate level, there are conflicting findings regarding issue ownership. Benoit, Airne, and Brazeal (2011) found Democrats discussed Democratic issues more and Republicans spoke about Republican issues more. In contrast, Kaufmann (2004) concluded Senate candidates trespassed onto an opposing party's issue if their own legislative record provided evidence of owning that issue.

However, centrism does not suggest ideological purity with the respective party's platform. Consequently, research should examine whether promoting a centrist image also results in a violation of the assumptions underlying issue ownership theory regarding the specific policy issues mentioned. To determine the issue agenda of the centrist incumbents, the following question is posited:

RQ₁: Do centrist candidates discuss their own party's issues more than the opposing party's issues?

In addition to parties' reputations of handling issues, Doherty (2008) and Hayes (2005) argued political parties have established a specific reputation for values and traits. Specifically, Republicans speak more often of limited government while Democrats address egalitarianism. However, there are variations in which party mentions morality more often. (Doherty, 2008). Unlike issue ownership theory, candidates will not completely avoid values and traits championed by the opposing party.

Additionally, in the minds of voters, Democratic presidential candidates are perceived as more compassionate and empathetic; Republican presidential candidates are typically viewed as more moral (Hayes, 2005). These voter respons-

es have suggested that candidates not only discuss certain values more (Doherty, 2008), but past analysis has shown that candidates are perceived to have a distinct image reputation. Thus, it is important to consider if centrists can also have a distinct image reputation consisting of certain values and traits.

Considering centrism is sometimes conceptualized as a middle-of-the-road or even unprincipled approach (Hill, 2009) but is employed for strategic purposes (de Velasco, 2010), centrist candidates must thoughtfully determine how they frame centrism. Thus, the following question is examined:

RQ₂: How do moderate senate candidates describe themselves as centrists in their debate performances?

Political candidates communicate their issue stances and image in a variety of ways. Benoit, Blaney, and Pier (1998) developed the functional theory of campaign discourse to describe how candidates can distinguish themselves from their opponents. Specifically, candidates can acclaim policies and character traits that are desirable or candidates can attack their opponent's policies and character traits that are undesirable. One additional function includes defenses; however, for the purpose of this analysis, defenses will not be considered because research consistently shows defenses comprise the smallest frequency of debate functions (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007). Through an analysis of over 20 U.S. Senate debates, acclaims were found to be the most common function, followed by attacks, and then defenses (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007). With limited research on functions of Senate debates, the following question will be asked:

RQ₃: What is the frequency of acclaims and attacks in centrist candidates' debate discourse?

Benoit, Blaney, & Pier (1998) outlined six topics for acclaiming and attacking. Policy considerations include past deeds, future plans, and general goals. Topics centered on character include personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. By providing a framework for the content of acclaim and attack messages, debate scholars should now specifically consider how centrism is woven into the debate functions of acclaiming and attacking. Therefore, the following questions will be asked:

RQ_{3a}: What frequency of centrist candidate acclaims is devoted to presenting a centrist

RQ_{3b}: What frequency of centrist candidate attacks is devoted to portraying opponents as extreme or too partisan?

Method

Procedure

This analysis examined the verbal content of two high profile Senate races where two criteria were met. First, the incumbent candidates portrayed themselves as centrists. Second, the incumbents were running in states seen as more ideologically opposite than the incumbents' parties. Under these criteria, the Massachusetts Senate race between Sen. Scott Brown (R) and Elizabeth Warren (D) and the Missouri Senate race between Sen. Claire McCaskill (D) and Rep. Todd Akin (R) were selected for analysis. Specifically, we prepared a verbatim transcript of the first two Massachusetts debates and the only two Missouri debates from YouTube.

Coder Training and Reliability

Training took place over a four-week period, with each weekly session lasting approximately one to two hours. These sessions consisted of the researchers reviewing and practicing the coding scheme on several of the centrist candidates' debate responses. Following the training, the researchers separately coded a random 20% of all the centrist candidate debate responses to determine inter-coder reliability.

Krippendorff's alpha was used to calculate reliability. For RQ₁, $\alpha=.93$. For RQ₃, $\alpha=.90$. An alpha coefficient of .80 or higher is considered sufficient (Krippendorff, 2004); thus, the coding between the two researchers reached consistency. To ascertain the overall results, the primary researcher coded all of the centrist candidates' debate responses.

Data Analysis

This analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research questions. RQ₁ asked whether centrist candidates discuss their own party's issues more than the opposing party's issues. In addressing RQ₁, we simply counted the number of issues in each response and placed them in their respective category based on a twenty-two category presidential campaign issue typology used in previous campaign debate research (e.g. Banwart & McKinney, 2005). Issues were only counted once per response even if the issue was mentioned multiple times within each response. Recognizing Senate campaigns may be more localized than presidential campaigns, categories were inductively created during the training phase that did not fit the already pre-determined categories.

RQ₂ asked how Senate candidates describe themselves as centrists. To address RQ₂, the candidates' statements were first unitized into utterances. Benoit and Harthcock (1999) explained in their functional analysis of the 1960 presidential debates, "discourse is inherently enthymematic" (p. 346). Thus, utterances varied in length from phrases to multiple sentences. For example, in the first Missouri debate, Claire McCaskill said:

In the United States Senate where I have worked with many Republicans to do important things like cutting spending, putting a cap on federal spending, like banning earmarks, like cutting taxes over a trillion dollars for small businesses and working families, cleaning up war contracting and promoting American jobs.

We identified seven utterances in this statement: work with Republicans, cut spending, cap federal spending, ban earmarks, cut taxes, fix war contracting, and promote jobs. Essentially, responses were broken into separate utterances if that portion of the statement would have been considered a coherent utterance if it had appeared alone.

Although previous research has considered issues and images associated with the Republican and Democratic parties, debate scholars have not developed a centrist image typology. Therefore, to answer RQ₂, elements of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were employed in order to create a centrist image construct. We inductively derived categories emerging from the transcripts of the four debates, which allowed the typology to be firmly rooted in the debate texts. After close readings of the texts, we created categories based on related units. Codes were then created to link the textual units to the specific categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), units were continually reevaluated to ensure the data were assigned to the appropriate category. Categorical codes were adjusted as necessary.

Finally, we utilized the coding scheme for the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998) to complete a quantitative content analysis for RQ₃, RQ_{3a}, RQ_{3b}:

Utterances that portrayed the candidate favorably in regard to policy considerations or character were coded as acclaims. Policy considerations included past deeds, future plans, or general goals. Character consisted of personal qualities, leadership ability, or ideals.

Utterances that portrayed the opposing candidate or political party unfavorably in regard to policy considerations or character were coded as attacks.

Each utterance classified as either an acclaim or an attack was then further analyzed to explore the functional approach focused on centrism. Acclaims were coded into either acclaims highlighting a moderate record or acclaims not highlighting a moderate record. Attacks were categorized into attacks portraying opponents as extreme and/or highly partisan or attacks not portraying opponents as extreme and/or highly partisan.

Results

Issue Agendas

RQ₁ asked what issues centrist candidates mention. Using a coding scheme developed by Banwart and McKinney (2005), we counted the issues mentioned during the debates and placed the issues into pre-determined categories. The centrist candidates differed in the issues that were most salient in their debate dialogue (See Table 1). Claire McCaskill spoke most often of the deficit and debt, followed by senior issues such as Medicare and Social Security, education, and dissatisfaction with government. Taxes topped Scott Brown's issue agenda, followed by lack of jobs, the deficit and debt, and energy.

Table 1

Centrist Candidates' Issue Agenda/Top Four Issues

<u>Issue Rank</u>	<u>McCaskill</u>	<u>Brown</u>
1 Deficit/Debt		
2 Senior Issues		
	Lack of Jobs	
3 Education		
	Deficit/Debt	
4	Dissatisfaction with Government	
		Energy

Image

RQ₂ asked how centrist candidates describe themselves. Inductive analysis produced three categories of the centrist image—the Atypical Politician, the Compromiser, and the Challenger. The centrist candidates drew upon these descriptions most often when acclaiming their past deeds and future goals.

The Atypical Politician. One category that emerged from the data was the Atypical Politician. Both Scott Brown and Claire McCaskill described themselves as the antithesis of the typical D.C. politician. Centrist candidates distance themselves from Washington culture by emphasizing their politically inconvenient positions, their reliance on depth rather than talking points, and their connection to their state.

After being asked a question regarding what best prepares her to be a senator, Claire McCaskill responded, "It's not about me and a fancy job or a big title. It's about Missourians and who's protecting them and the programs that matter to them." McCaskill suggested her role as a senator is other-oriented in contrast to the self-oriented perception of politicians. In that same debate, McCaskill continued to shred the typical political image by discussing an issue considered taboo. "One, we need to do some more aggressive means testing. I know it's political season and I know I'm not supposed to say we're going to do anything like that but I believe in it."

Compromiser. A second category to emerge was the Compromiser. As a compromiser, the centrist listens to ideas, works with people from the opposing party, and eventually compromises. This category runs on a dimension of specific to general.

General examples mostly mentioned bipartisanship as when Scott Brown acclaimed in the first Massachusetts debate, “I am the second most bipartisan senator in the U.S. Senate.”

General examples of compromise were also prescriptive. Centrist candidates would suggest actions to take in the next Congress. For example, Brown stressed in the second Massachusetts debate, “The key is in order to get these initiatives passed you have to work together to do it.”

Specific examples referred to either legislation or colleagues from the opposing party the centrist has worked with to adopt new policy. For example, Claire McCaskill highlighted, “I have worked with a long list of Republican senators. Sen. Thune. Sen. DeMint. Sen. McCain. Sen. Blunt. Sen. Ayotte. Sen. Sessions.” In the second Massachusetts debate, Scott Brown explained, “I was honored to stand by the President and the White House when we passed the insider trading bill to prohibit members of Congress from doing insider trading. I was also proud to stand with him when we did the Hire a Hero veterans bill. Of course I’m going to be proud to stand with the president. He is our president and when he does something well I praise him.”

The Challenger. The final category to emerge was the Challenger. As a challenger, the centrist is independent and challenges their party’s expectation to be a reliable vote. The centrist is willing to stand up to leaders in their own party and risk being seen as unpopular for those decisions. Scott Brown described his independence provided a sense of freedom. In the second Massachusetts debate, Brown said:

When it comes to dealing with the majority or minority leader, I’ve already let it be very clearly known to Mitch McConnell that I’m completely disgusted with what’s going on down there. And he has a lot of work to do to earn my vote because I don’t work for him or Harry Reid. That’s the beauty of being independent. When I walk in I can vote however I want.

Claire McCaskill not only expressed a similar sentiment in the second Missouri debate, but she also explained how her centrism was not well received. McCaskill explained, “I don’t worry whether the leader of the Democratic Party is mad at me. I’ve had time out in my caucus many times.”

Functions of Centrist Debate Discourse

RQ₃ examined the frequency of acclaims and attacks in centrist candidates’ debate discourse (See Table 2). Defenses were not considered. Consistent with previous functional literature (Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007; Airne & Benoit, 2005), centrist candidates acclaimed more than attacked. Overall, 64% of cen-

trist candidates' total attack and acclaim utterances consisted of acclaiming with 36% devoted to attacking. Of Claire McCaskill's total attack and acclaim utterances, the Missouri senator devoted 66.6% to acclaiming and 33.3% to attacking. Scott Brown's percentage of acclaims was slightly less at 61.5% with attacks at 38.5%.

Table 2
Acclaims and Attacks in Centrist Senate Candidate Discourse

	N		
	%	McCaskill	Brown
Acclaims	64	148	121
Attacks	36	74	76

RQ_{3a} asked what frequency of centrist candidate acclaims were focused on projecting a centrist image (See Table 3). Of all of the incumbents' acclaims, 41% related to one's centrist image as an Atypical Politician, Compromiser, or Challenger. The remaining 59.5% of acclaims referenced other issues and images intended to enhance the candidates' reputations.

Table 3
Acclaims in Centrist Senate Candidate Debate Discourse

	N		
	%	McCaskill	Brown
Centrist Image Acclaims	40.5	72	37
Other Acclaims	59.5	76	84

RQ_{3b}: asked what percentage of centrist candidate attacks were devoted to portraying opponents as too partisan (See Table 4). Centrists devoted 20% of attacks to portraying their opponent as highly partisan. 80% of attacks suggested other images meant to damage their opponents' reputation.

Table 4
Attacks in Centrist Senate Candidate Debate Discourse

	<i>N</i>		
	%	McCaskill	Brown
Partisan Image Attacks	20	22	8
Other Attacks	80	52	68

Discussion

Limited Senate debate research exists (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), and this research has not considered Senate candidates' ideological positioning in debate content. By addressing a lack of Senate debate research, this analysis has three main implications for the continued study of centrist debate appeals. Theoretically, the findings suggest that as centrists embrace certain aspects of the opposing party and distance themselves in some ways from their party, the centrist issue agenda challenges the assumptions of issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996). This centrist issue agenda helps reinforce the centrist image. Thus, the combination of an issue and image agenda provides a foundation to build a centrist typology in future studies. Finally, the findings indicate the issues and images associated with centrism are perceived as strengths that should be acclaimed. The three main implications are discussed in the context of the 2012 Missouri and Massachusetts Senate debates.

Centrist Issue Agendas

First, the issue agenda can reinforce a candidate's image. Issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) argues candidates will speak more often about issues owned by their party and their party's constituents. However, Kaufmann (2004) noted Senate candidates may trespass into opposing party issues if their own legislative record suggests a strong reputation. Consequently, candidates could speak about their reputation regarding issues commonly owned by the opposing party to provide evidence for the claim they are "moderate" or "in the middle."

In this analysis, Claire McCaskill used her issue agenda to perpetuate her centrist image. McCaskill's issue agenda included both Republican and Democratic issues. Specifically, McCaskill's top issue, the debt and deficit, was traditionally viewed as a Republican issue (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Although McCaskill's top issue was owned by Republicans, the Missouri Senator demonstrated her moderate legislative approach by frequently referring to her reputation and vision for Democratically-owned issues like Medicare, Social Security, and education (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Finally, McCaskill's fourth most referenced issue, dissatisfaction with government, is a

uniquely centrist issue because both major parties could own frustration with the current political climate.

In contrast, Scott Brown's frequent references to taxes and the debt and deficit portrayed a Republican issue agenda (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). When speaking about other top issues (e.g., lack of jobs), Brown attempted to address the performance issues plaguing the incumbent Democratic president. Thus, Brown's partisan issue emphasis was contradictory to his centrist image emphasis. This contradiction may have prevented the Massachusetts Republican from making a strong case as a centrist.

There are two potential explanations as to why McCaskill conveyed a more centrist issue agenda while Brown reiterated mostly Republican-owned issues. First, Republican issues tend to be more national in scope than Democratic issues (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Thus, it may be easier for a Democrat running for federal office to shift their issue agenda to Republican issues. We speculate another potential argument regarding Brown's failure to craft a centrist issue agenda rests with the current state of the Republican Party. As former Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE), who lost in a Senate primary to Tea Party-backed conservative Christine O'Donnell, noted, control by an ideological faction "is a more extensive problem right now in the Republican Party than in the Democratic Party," (Dionne, 2010, n.p.). While we argue both political parties have moved away from the center, perhaps, the presence of an identifiable ideological wing like the Tea Party creates a looming litmus test for which Republicans must maintain constant vigilance.

Centrist Image

Inductive analysis of centrist image acclaims has provided more depth to an amorphous term like centrism. As Hill (2009) noted, this inability to define centrism has often led to unflattering characterizations of moderate politicians being unprincipled. However, Claire McCaskill and Scott Brown framed centrism beyond serving as a swing voter on legislation. While it is correct, centrists act as compromisers who work across the aisle; centrists are also challengers who prevent groupthink among party members. Finally, centrists also distance themselves from D.C. culture—even if the sheer fact of incumbency indicated they belong to that culture.

Centrist Functions

Finally, centrist candidates chose to highlight their own centrism rather than attack their opponents as too partisan. Specifically, centrists devoted 40.5% of all acclaims to highlighting their centrist image. As incumbents, both Claire McCaskill and Scott Brown often acclaimed legislation they championed with colleagues from across the aisle. When discussing the Simpson-Bowles Commission, McCaskill explained, "We are working on a bipartisan basis in the Senate every day to try to cobble together a plan that would require \$4-\$5 trillion in debt and I'm part of that group." Brown highlighted his centrism through his

voting record by saying, “My 3rd vote was voting for Harry Reid and the president’s jobs package. I have a history of working across the aisle.”

In contrast, centrists devoted only 20% of all attacks to portraying their opponents as extreme or too partisan. For example, McCaskill attacked her opponent for being part of an extreme minority regarding Middle East foreign aid. During the second debate, McCaskill said:

Cong. Akin has joined a very small group in the Senate on this position. Not one member of the Armed Services Committee supported this extreme amendment. Every single Republican said this would make our country in danger. This would not make us safer. This will not make the Middle East safer. There were only 10 senators that voted for this amendment. This is the position he wants to take to the U.S. Senate. Once again, being on the extreme edge. Not being thoughtful. Not being reasonable.

Throughout both debates Brown frequently referenced his opponent being “lockstep” and voting “100 percent” with her party. In the second debate, Brown seized upon his opponent’s response earlier in the debate. Brown argued, “With regard to working with any person on the opposite side of the aisle, she couldn’t reference one person except someone who’s retiring, a true bipartisan gentleman, Sen. Lugar.”

Ultimately, for nearly every four acclaims of centrism, there was one attack against partisanship. There are several potential explanations for this finding. First, centrists can define their image by suggesting they are not as partisan or extreme as their opponent. However, debates allow for imminent rebuttal or the notion opponents can directly respond to accusations made during the debate (Ellsworth, 1965). Therefore, in attacking their opponent as highly partisan, centrists risk providing an opportunity for their opponent to offer evidence that argues the partisan characterization is inaccurate. Instead, centrists may choose to direct that attack through other forms of campaign communication, such as television ads or campaign surrogate interviews, where opponents cannot defend themselves immediately. Additionally, the centrist incumbents under investigation in this analysis were running in states that were ideologically opposite of the incumbents’ parties. Connecting with the voters was critical to an electoral victory. Suggesting their opponents were highly partisan may have reinforced the opponents’ shared values with a solidly partisan electorate. Additionally, the electorate may be turned away from mudslinging (Stewart, 1975). Thus, acclaiming centrism fulfills two objectives. First, for a candidate whose party affiliation is ideologically incongruent with a majority of the electorate, the centrist acclaim function highlights policy and character topics where the candidate and the voters can find common ground. Second, the centrist acclaim function is a safer alternative than the potential negative effects when candidates attack their opponents.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The researchers recognize the current analysis has limitations. First, due to a limited number of centrist Senate incumbents in the 2012 election cycle, only

four debates were analyzed. Second, this analysis only considered centrist incumbents and excluded centrist challengers. Finally, debates are only one of several channels through which to communicate a campaign's message.

Despite these limitations, our initial findings suggest centrists are not only aware of their ideological position but also view their centrist record as a strength to highlight in their debate messages. Although only four debates were analyzed, these initial findings offer a foundation for debate scholars to expand upon as more centrist incumbents like Sen. Kay Hagan (D-NC), Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), and Sen. Mark Begich (D-AK) seek re-election in ideologically opposite states in 2014. Additionally, this analysis focused on the debate messages from centrist U.S. Senate incumbents. Future research should expand upon ideological positioning in debates by considering the messages of centrist challengers, highly partisan Senate candidates, and centrist candidates in other western democracies beyond the U.S. In addition to the analysis of debate content, future studies should also examine the effects of centrist messages on debate viewers.

Conclusion

On Election Night, Claire McCaskill defied the defeat that awaited many centrist senators, while Scott Brown joined the growing list of defeated moderates. Although the center may be fading away on Capitol Hill, future elections will decide whether this voting bloc goes from endangered to extinct. An analysis of centrist incumbent debate performances has provided a glimpse of how moderates attempt to survive in increasingly partisan states. While McCaskill and Brown utilized the debates both to project a centrist image and to cautiously attack their opponents' partisanship, the two incumbents differed in their issue agendas. McCaskill constructed a centrist issue agenda consisting of Republican, Democratic, and uniquely centrist issues. In contrast, Brown's issue agenda contained predominately Republican-owned issues. Now the election is over, there will be numerous reasons given for McCaskill's victory and Brown's loss. However, one point is certain. Both centrist incumbents saw their debates as one more opportunity to say the ideological middle still matters.

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Experiential Learning and the Basic Communication Course: A New Path to Assessing Forensic Learning Outcomes

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Introduction

Scholars have often touted the educational benefits of forensics (e.g.: Bar-tanen, 1998; Beasley, 1979; Brownlee, 1979; Ehninger, 1952; Gartell, 1973; Jensen, 2008; McBath, 1975; Millsap, 1998; Schroeder & Schroeder, 1995; Stenger, 1999; Yaremchuk, 1979). Critics, most notably Burnett, Brand, and Meister (2003), have argued forensics is only a competitive game with the idea of education used as a crutch to uphold the activity in the eyes of schools. While attempting to counter critics, many forensic educators have scrambled to find proof of student learning. Besides theoretical approaches to potential learning methods (e.g., Dreibelbis & Gullifor, 1992; Friedley, 1992; Sellnow, Littlefield, & Sellnow, 1992; Swanson, 1992; Zeuschner, 1992), the evidence of student learning in collegiate forensics has been scarce.

Kelly and Richardson (2010) and the 2010 NFA Pedagogy Report represented a new era of forensic assessment by trying to nail down learning objectives for the activity. Kelly (2010) argued, “Higher education is being reshaped by standardized assessment practices, and collegiate forensics must reshape practice accordingly” (p. 131). As the debate rages on about appropriate learning objectives in the community, assessment practices to measure any form of learning still remain missing. Many scholars have called for a better understanding of forensic learning outcomes but have never applied genuine academic learning objectives to forensics (e.g., Church, 1975; Holloway, Keefe, & Cowles, 1989; McMillan & Todd-Mancillas, 1991).

Beyond identifying learning objectives, forensic scholars have had difficulty accurately measuring learning outcomes of the activity. These struggles are reflected in communication studies assessment; Morreale et al., (2011) noted communication educators have trouble providing accurate assessment data due the performative nature of the field. To help answer the call most recently initiated by Kelly and Richardson (2010) and Kelly (2010), this article will identify and explore an appropriate assessment method for forensic learning outcomes, and provide data for use by future forensic educators and scholars.

Literature Review

Assessment

Finding ways to properly assess student learning in forensics is not easy. Morreale et al., (2011) outlined three distinctions that make assessment difficult for communication educators, which also define the struggle of forensic educa-

tors. First, achievement tests or tests of objective or subjective content work well in other disciplines, but not communication. Since communication is generally assessed through performance measures, only communication knowledge is measured through traditional methods such as paper tests and essays. Second, communication assessment is often culturally subjective because of its performative and interactive nature. In determining communication competency, there may be more than one right answer or approach making objective evaluation of student outcomes more difficult. Third, any skills students learn can only be measured in the moment. Educators cannot fully know if students will be competent in the future because of the permeating aspect of communication. As Morreale et al., noted, “The determination of competence in communication will be affected by numerous factors impinging on any interaction at any given time” (p. 260). Labeling students as competent in a communicative skill acts as a temporary assessment under certain conditions that are sure to change in a student’s daily interactions.

Forensic scholars have attempted to implement some sort of formal learning assessment to determine what students are learning (Bartanen, 1994b; Kelly & Richardson, 2010; Richardson & Kelly, 2008). This is a difficult endeavor due to the hurdles Morreale et al., (2011) pointed out, but formal assessment in forensics is something greatly discussed by forensic scholars (e.g., Cronn-Mills & Croucher, 2001; Edwards & Thompson, 2001; Gaskill, 1998; Klosa & DuBois, 2001; Kuster, 1998; Morris, 2005; Paine, 2005; Pelias, 1984; Pratt, 1998).

Without formal assessment tools forensic educators have found no way to properly assess what forensic students have learned through their experience in the activity. Sellnow (1994) and Walker (2011) proposed viewing forensics through the lens of experiential learning, which uses student self-assessment as the primary assessment tool. Citing the work of experiential education scholars, Sellnow argued forensic students learn experientially and pointed out forensics values and fosters a diverse way of knowing.

Mallard and Quintanilla (2007) noted, “As the push in higher education for accountability of what is taught at the university level increases, there has been more focus on student self-assessment as an integral part of learning and critical thinking” (p. 3). Reflective, collaborative self-assessment is where education seems to be moving in colleges and universities as a growing body of evidence suggests self-assessment reflection to have a positive influence on student learning (Agne, 2010; Andrade & Boulay, 2003; Petkov & Petkova, 2006; Reitmeier, Svendsen, & Vrchota, 2004; Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, & Rolheiser, 2002).

Practicing reflective self-assessment in forensics addresses the previously mentioned assessment concerns from Morreale et al. (2011). In forensics, with students subjectively examining their experiences, all inappropriate assessment is eliminated because students can select a reflective method that works best for their learning. Further, while learning assessment is culturally subjective, for an activity such as forensics, this is actually ideal. Forensics itself is its own culture and teams are subcultures inside of that (Kuyper, 2009). What a student finds important to focus on learning in forensics culture can vary from each team and

student. The final unique communication assessment concern is the lack of the instructors knowing if the learning remains long term. In forensics, the assessment happens from the student and for the student, which means the assessor can then accurately measure the long term learning of the experience.

Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) both wrote about the importance of self-assessment in determining what a student thinks they've learned. Kolb argued that students experience something, reflect upon it, and then determine how to best go about their lives afterwards. As Wurdinger (2005) noted, "It seems reasonable to include students in the assessment process, for who better knows what they have learned than the students themselves" (p.70)?

Dochy, Segers, and Sluljmsans (1999) revealed student self-assessment to be an effective way to measure student learning outcomes. Kostons, van Gog, and Pass (2012) found self-assessment can significantly increase the amount of knowledge students can gain. Taras (2010) encouraged more educators to try self-assessment with students, explaining how self-assessment is an important factor in supporting and engaging students with learning.

While prevalent in education studies, reflecting on experiences is something that forensic scholars have rarely asked students to do, even though Bartanen (1998) suggested forensics teaches students how to critically reflect effectively. In one of the rare studies that did focus on asking what the students felt like they were learning, Quenette, Larson-Casstelton and Littlefield (2007) had students self-report on the top advantages of forensics, shying away from true assessment of learning.

Klein (1998) argued, "self reflection and self criticism are important for change and growth" (p. 24). Boud (1995) stated a list that defined the parameters for which student self-assessment can be a valid form of measurement of course outcomes in the class. Self-assessment should be in a high-trust situation, have the goal of assessment and not skill building, and be guided by clear criteria. Criteria-referenced self-assessment has been shown to promote achievement (Andrade & Valcheva, 2009). Without stated learning outcomes as criteria, self-assessment in forensics can never be achieved.

Learning Outcomes

The educational benefits of forensics are many and can be debated, however Bartanen (1994a) highlighted four important benefits that forensics provides for students: forensics gives students unique insights into public policy and civic concerns; forensics builds courage and a sense of personal growth and satisfaction; forensics is important for career preparation; forensics is a valuable educational supplement. Bartanen's benefits can act as a framework for understanding the general academic discussion surrounding student education in collegiate forensics.

Initially, Bartanen (1994a) mentioned forensics gives students unique insights into public policy and civic concerns. What forensics does is develop critical thinking in our students' minds which is often applied to civil discourse (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1997; Carroll, 2007; Colbert & Biggers,

1987). Forensics helps create citizen-leaders (Bartanen, 1998). McMillan and Todd-Mancillas (1991) found forensic students to have increased their critical thinking skills and broadened their understanding of subjects and people. Crawford (2003) argued “competitive speech, far from being expendable, is central to ... preparing students to be functional participants in a democratic society” (p. 19). Students learn how to be civically engaged when they research to speak on current events and advocate for changes in the world. Re (2002) noted forensics makes “young people aware that they are empowered members of a community that extends ... into the real world” (p 4).

Bartanen (1994a) also mentioned forensics builds courage and a sense of individual development. Through experience in forensics, students learn about themselves. Students like awards, but also define success in forensics through personal growth and satisfaction (Brennan, 2011). Forensic students find ways to deal with anxiety that are hard to learn in the traditional classroom (Thompson, 2003) and increase their self-assurance through experience (Hunt & Inch, 1993). When students participate in forensics they grow beyond what they were before. Klopff (1990) noted the value of this in forensics, pointing out how many former forensic students cited their experience as the most valuable and satisfactory in the undergraduate career. Students can take this new found personal satisfaction and use it to help them succeed in all aspects of their life.

Bartanen (1994a) further argued forensics is important for career preparation. Being active on a speech team provides excellent pre-professional development (Colbert & Biggers, 1987; Nadolski, 2005). Minch (2006) pointed out how forensics can help in future occupations: “today’s marketplace values a well-rounded education, critical thinking skills, communication skills and the ability to interact with people effectively” (p. 12), which are all things forensics can teach students. McCrady (2004) argued students who probe deeply into literature are developing higher order thinking skills and extemporaneous and persuasive speaking help understand logic. Employers want students with good communication and critical thinking skills and forensics can help students build those skills. Stenger (1999) even noted forensics serves to prepare students for a career in academics, which many students pursue.

The last benefit Bartanen (1994a) highlighted is forensics is a valuable educational supplement. Bartanen explained students can learn a great deal in forensics and most of it stems from the communication studies curriculum. As Ehninger (1952) pointed out, forensics is a co-curricular activity which has been shown to help students do better on standardized tests (Peters, 2009). Forensic students may learn about interpersonal communication (Friedley, 1992; Schnoor & Green, 1989) as well as small group communication (Zeuschner, 1992) and organizational communication (Swanson, 1992). Furgerson (2012) also argued students can learn advanced research skills from forensics. Further, Millsap (1998) found the skills forensics teaches (oral presentation and debate) are used across the curriculum, enhancing overall student learning. As Klopff (1990) noted, forensics “should be a counterpart of curricular instruction in speech; it is not a mere adjunct to formal speech-class instruction. The [forensic] program should

seek the same general goals that guide class instruction in public speaking, debate, and discussion courses” (p. 5).

Despite these attempts at demonstrating forensic learning outcomes, there is no research in this area that stems directly from the communication curriculum. Furgerson (2012) suggested forensic scholars need to establish learning outcomes “to articulate the connection between forensics and the educational expectations of the institutions which house” forensic programs (p. 92). Without a direct link to specific curriculum-based learning outcomes, any learning that takes place in forensics can only be supported on the theoretical level, thus making it difficult to claim that forensics is co-curricular.

To address this concern, this study will use the Basic Communication Course (BCC) to model learning objectives. The BCC is an umbrella title that encompasses introductory, lower level communication or public speaking courses which instruct students on the essentials of communication studies. The BCC is required or recommended for a large portion of undergraduate students at many universities and colleges; it acts as a primary way of educating students about Communication Studies (Morreale, et al., 1999). The BCC tends to focus on one of two areas: public speaking content or a mix of public speaking and a variety of communication studies areas such as interpersonal and small group communication (Morreale, et al., 2010). Forensics has its roots in the communication studies field and covers many different areas of the discipline, most notably public speaking, making the BCC ideal from which to pull learning outcomes in a study about forensics. Despite this strong link, very little crossover has occurred in forensic and BCC literature, with Dean and Lavasseur (1989) and Zizik (1993) being a few of the rare exceptions.

In order to assess student learning in forensics through BCC learning objectives, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ 1: Do students perceive the experience gained on an intercollegiate forensic team can meet Basic Communication Course learning objectives?

RQ2: How do students learn from the experience gained on an intercollegiate forensic team?

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were recruited through the use of the Individual Events-Listserv (IE-L), which reaches a large portion of the individual events forensic community. Those on the IE-L were requested to pass along the online survey link to interested students currently competing in forensics. The online survey requested active forensic competitors to participate and if they were not active competitors to ignore the survey. All responses were anonymous and completed through an online survey provider.

A total of 58 participants completed the survey. The number of years of previous experience of the participants in collegiate forensics was evenly dis-

tributed: half the participants had one or less years of experience in collegiate forensics, while the other half had two to three years of experience.

Measures

This study was conducted using a survey created from BCC learning objectives collected from a variety of programs across the country. After placing a call for learning objectives/syllabi on the national BCC listserv, which garnered seventeen responses, a content analysis was performed on the input received. Learning objectives were collected from the syllabi and placed into categories to determine which types of objectives were most common. Based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) coding, sixteen learning objective categories appeared more frequently, thus making them statistically more significant than any of the remaining learning objectives.

The 16 learning objectives were then crafted into Likert scale prompts (see Appendix A) to help answer RQ1. The prompts were divided into sets of 5, 5, and 6. Each prompt in a set was written in the same formula, with each set having a new format so as to keep the respondents engaged in the survey. The Likert scale was created from the traditional five-point scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree). The survey was created for this study so no reliability tests were available prior to the start of the study. Each Likert scale prompt was followed by another prompt that asked the respondents to elaborate on how their experience in college forensics related to the response. These add-ons (see Appendix A) to each Likert scale prompt were designed to help answer RQ2.

Analysis

To analyze the data and answer RQ1, the Likert scale prompts were organized into categories of frequency and the analysis consisted of frequency, mean, and standard deviation. Tests were performed to determine the reliability of the survey. Grounded theory coding techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used to address RQ2, where responses were categorized into similar themes. Each response warranted a unique analysis resulting in a variety of themes for every prompt.

Results

The majority of the respondents found that forensics did indeed offer the opportunities to have the same learning outcomes as the BCC. In delving into the frequency data (see Table 1), the responses indicate that forensic students see the activity as a place where they can learn a variety of communication concepts.

Table 1
Opportunities for BCC Learning Objectives in Collegiate Forensics: Frequency

Prompts	SA	A	N	D	SD
Oral communication	38	14	2	0	4
Research a speech topic	37	11	4	2	4
Outline/organize a speech	37	11	2	4	2
Write a speech	34	11	7	2	4
Deliver a speech	41	9	3	1	4
Small Group Communication	16	10	23	6	3
Interpersonal Communication	25	16	4	8	5
Basic Comm./Public Speaking theory	31	16	4	3	4
Persuasive techniques	30	13	9	0	4
Ethical communication	22	14	12	5	5
Critical thinking	31	15	7	1	4
Listening skills	29	17	6	3	3
Evaluate other speeches	38	11	6	0	3
Audience analysis	26	11	9	7	5
Variety of speeches	35	9	5	3	5
Communication tendencies in self	30	16	8	1	3

Note: The scale used about is a standard Likert Scale with SA= strongly agree, A=agree, N=neutral, D=disagree, SD=strongly disagree.

Standard deviation analysis was within acceptable parameters (Table 2), and the survey itself tested with a strong reliability score of a = .97. The BCC learning outcomes presented in the survey were positively linked to the students' forensic experience. These results pertaining to RQ1 suggest students do perceive the experience gained on an intercollegiate forensic team can meet Basic Communication Course learning objectives.

Table 2
Opportunities for BCC Learning Objectives in Collegiate Forensics: Mean and Standard Deviation

Prompts	Mean	SD
Oral communication	4.41	1.08
Research a speech topic	4.29	1.18
Outline/organize a speech	4.29	1.18
Write a speech	4.19	1.21
Deliver a speech	4.41	1.14
Small Group Communication	3.52	1.16
Interpersonal Communication	3.83	1.35
Basic Comm./Public Speaking theory	4.16	1.20

Persuasive techniques	4.16	1.16
Ethical communication	3.74	1.29
Critical thinking	4.17	1.16
Listening skills	4.14	1.13
Evaluate other speeches	4.40	1.04
Audience analysis	3.79	1.36
Variety of speeches	4.16	1.31
Communication tendencies in self	4.19	1.08

Beyond the numerical data, the open ended question yielded incredibly useful data regarding how forensics offers more advanced or better opportunities to learn than the traditional BCC. Advantages beyond the classroom were highlighted by the participants. Responses indicated collegiate forensics gives students “the opportunity to perform multiple types of speeches.” Compared to what a student can learn in a semester-long course, “There are alot [sic] more speech types then in general [sic] coms [sic] 101 class.” One student further expressed the difference between the classroom and forensics: “A Communications class teaches students within a controlled setting in a classroom, but speech not only does that, it also gives real-world experience in communication before large audiences.” Another student elaborated on the impact of learning in forensics:

Forensics really helps teach a speaker how to deliver a speech. In most other public speaking venues, immediacy with the audience is not very important. However, forensics really pushes a student to do this, which is hugely important to being a good speaker. Students also learn how to use appropriate gestures and facial expressions to get their point across.

Plenty of opportunities were important to the respondents, but so too was the time to work on those opportunities. As one student noted:

Forensics teaches you not only how to research but to research the topics that go unnoticed or missed. Particularly in informative and persuasive speaking you have to dig for analysis, stats, and information that is well above the considered levels of most undergraduate courses. Further, your research is continually revised and inspected by anywhere from 4-10 reviewers from multiple institutions each weekend. No other course on any college campus in any University across this country can promise the same thing.

Students explained that forensics offers significant time to explore ideas and “to think critically about the world around them”; something the traditional classroom does not offer. One student noted: “Practice makes perfect. Repeatedly putting yourself [sic] in front of an audience gives us, as competitors, the opportunity to deal with the nerves associated with performing in front of peers. I

have no fear when presenting in class anymore!” Another response echoed that sentiment: “I have learned more by applying [sic] speech skills in a competitive [sic] setting, then I ever did sitting in a classroom. Also you countinue [sic] to practice these skills, and work on professionalism much longer then [sic] in the classroom.”

The responses to the open-ended question reveal students share some learning experiences, but process them differently. It is important to remember when answering RQ2 that every student’s experience is different in forensics, and the way each student learns varies. These results to RQ2 were expected; experiential learning theory predicts student learning processing to be distinct to each student. Students elaborated on unique experiences for similar learning areas, demonstrating that different experiences can help varying students learn about similar communicative concepts.

Observation and reflection was a main theme found in the results. Student comments often declared listening and observing others to be an important learning technique to determine how to be successful in forensics. “Watching opponents was 80% of how I learned to be an effective national competitor,” one student wrote. “Speech is far more about listening and learning than just talking”, wrote another student. Another student explained that observational learning was just as important as direct experience: “You learn through not only experiencing speeches yourself, but also through hearing those around you for examples of what to do, as well as what not to do.” “Whether you mean to or not, you are always watching your fellow forensicators to see what techniques you like and which you don’t”, one student explained. Another student elaborated on assessment through comparison:

There's nothing like watching other people to improve your own skills. Watching good people allows me to adopt certain things while watching bad people allows me to avoid certain things. It took a little time to realize though what was simply neutral. Now everywhere I look I seem to be able to find issues in presentation.

Self-reflection and assessment was also a main theme in student responses. One student commented, “Through coaching and referencing of judges’ critiques I have done plenty of evaluation” of personal communication tendencies. Another student noted that “By performing in collegiate forensics, I have discovered what my weaknesses are when speaking publicly and have been able to work on those ideosyncrasies [sic].” Respondents explained that by evaluating their experiences and observations of others they could apply what was learned to future competitions and communicative relationships.

Discussion

Students rely on forensics being an experiential learning opportunity to have a deeper learning experience than in the classroom. Results from this study showed how many students learned through additional practice and applied ex-

perience in forensics. Looking at the results we can conclude forensics can offer the same learning objectives as the Basic Communication Course. Based on the results, self-assessment in forensics may be a viable assessment tool for forensic educators.

Nevertheless, these results act as a potentially defining argument as to how forensics is indeed educational. Due to the experiential component of the activity, forensic students can learn and grow just as in a traditional classroom setting. Forensic educators should turn to experiential literature to pick up tips on how to best teach their students during the forensic experience. Taking the lead from Sellnow (1994) and Walker (2011), forensic scholars need to research experiential learning in forensics more, and coaches need to integrate self-assessment of learning into their pedagogy to better assist students' in processing a unique forensic experience.

With these results it is also important to note that self-reflection can be an effective form of assessment not just in forensics, but for the classroom as well. Experiential education scholars have heralded this (Dewey, 1938; Jarvis, 2001; Wurdinger, 2005) but further evidence such as this study increase the legitimacy and use of experiential learning techniques. Further, this study can potentially provide a strong tool for the forensic community that is searching for assessment strategies that work (Kelly, 2010; Kelly & Richardson, 2010). Through the use of self-assessment forensic educators can assess student learning and provide assessment data for the activity. Ideally, forensic students would engage in more critical reflections (aided by their coaches) to assess learning. More than van rides or casually talking about the weekend in a coaching appointment, critical reflection needs to be happening in separate sessions as individuals and as groups. These self-reflections can help students navigate their experiences in forensics and demonstrate to researchers what they have learned through their experience.

Further analysis of the results found many forensic students are missing out on key parts of BCC learning. Student responses indicated a higher level of comfort with aspects of public speaking than with other forms of communication, but also noted they were familiar and engaged in other aspects of communication. Students taking the survey seemed to be unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of Small Group Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Listening, Ethics, and general public speaking. Even though many of them acknowledged the application of these things, most of them admitted to not having any formal training and being unaware of the "why" or "how" behind their communicative acts. Future research should explore the depth of knowledge students can acquire through forensic experience. Forensic educators should be wary; if forensic students do not learn the rationale behind forensic practices, than any skill they learn runs the risk of becoming non-transferable to other activities and aspects of their life. While the experience students' have in forensics provides plenty of learning opportunities, it must be paired with guided discussion to help students prepare for and process and learn from those experiences.

However, this presumes that coaches are teaching students about communication theory and the “why” behind forensic practices. Coaches often try to provide rationale for behaviors but because of the strain on time and resources, quality of coaching to novices tends to be about “getting them up to speed” instead of about teaching them about the building blocks of forensics. Until forensic professionals emphasize learning the basics in areas such as Small Group Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Listening, Ethics, and general public speaking theory, making the claim that forensics is pedagogically on par with the BCC can only be done conditionally. All we can say for certain is that forensics offers the opportunity to achieve the same learning outcomes as the BCC due to the experiential nature of the activity. Future researchers should continue to explore self-assessment and other forms of alternative assessment in order to discover the best way to evaluate our students’ learning.

There are some limitations to this study. The call for the syllabi used to create the survey prompts was listed only on the BCC listserv, which may not have reached all BCC instructors. The amount of syllabi received (17) could be expanded to reflect greater diversity among BCC programs. As a result, the learning objectives pulled from these syllabi may be an inaccurate representation of what is taught across the United States.

Fifty-eight (58) students participated in the study, making the total a small sample size. Results may be skewed because of the relatively small participation. Some teams and students may not have been reached when the survey was sent out using a listserv for forensic teams, to which not all teams subscribe. A larger sample size of syllabi and students would be acquired for future research.

Conclusion

As Outzen, Youngvorst, and Cronn-Mills (2013) noted, the future of collegiate forensics “is fraught with potential, both positive and negative” (p. 42). In order to capitalize on the positive potential, the forensic community must embrace educational ideas which can contribute to the benefit of students. Viewing forensics through the lens of experiential learning may offer forensic educators a pedagogical perspective to guide their students and the activity to a better future.

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Appendix A

ONLINE SURVEY

How many years of collegiate forensics have you competed in before this year? (select 0-3) _____

Please respond to the prompts in a way that most accurately reflects your experience in collegiate forensics. The numbers are based on a five-point Likert item scale:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

“My experience in collegiate forensics has provided opportunities to...”

“...apply effective oral communication.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...research a topic for a speech.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...outline and organize a speech.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...write a speech.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...deliver a speech.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“Collegiate forensics has provided opportunities to...”

“...apply knowledge about Small Group Communication (e.g.; group roles, conflict resolution, teamwork, group think).”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...apply knowledge about Interpersonal Communication (e.g.; self-concept, self-esteem, relationship maintenance, managing self-disclosure, effective listening, managing conflict).”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...apply knowledge about basic Communication and Public Speaking theory (e.g.; verbal and nonverbal communication, process of communication).”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...apply effective persuasive techniques.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...learn about ethical responsibility in communication.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“By participating in collegiate forensics I have...”

“...had the chance to improve my critical thinking about the communication process.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...had the chance to improve my listening skills.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...had the chance to evaluate other’s speeches.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...had the chance to analyze an audience for a speech.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...had the chance to prepare and deliver a variety of different types of speeches.”

1 2 3 4 5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

“...had the chance to evaluate verbal and nonverbal communication tendencies in myself.”

1

2

3

4

5

Please elaborate on how your experience in college forensics relates to your response.

Benjamin Walker, Southwest Minnesota State University.

A Functional Analysis of 2008 and 2012 Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses

William L. Benoit

Abstract

This study investigates the presidential candidates' nomination acceptance addresses in 2008 and 2012. This study applied Benoit's (2007) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to the four Acceptances (one from McCain, two from Obama, and one from Romney). Traditionally the conventions kick off the general election campaign and the nominees' acceptance addresses are highlights of these events. This work extends previous research on acceptance addresses speeches from 1952-2004. The speeches in 2008 and 2012 used acclaims (73%) more than attacks (27%) or defenses (0.5%). Incumbents acclaimed more, and attacked less, than challengers, particularly when they discussed their records in office (past deeds). They discussed policy at about the same rate as character (52% to 48%). General goals and ideals were used more often as the basis of acclaims than attacks in these speeches.

Key Terms: Presidential Acceptances, Functions, Topics, 2008, 2012, Incumbents, Challengers

Introduction

The political party nominating conventions no longer select the nominees – today delegates selected in primary and caucus elections determine the nominee before the conventions and sometimes months before – but the party conventions are still important symbolic events. Designed for television, the candidates' acceptance addresses address millions of voters. These speeches are the highlight of the convention, when the candidate formally becomes the party's nominee for president. The candidates have a chance to re-introduce themselves, to spark supporters, sway some undecided voters to their side, and appeal to voters with weak ties to the opponent. Holbrook estimated that about a quarter of the electorate decides how to vote during the party nominating conventions (1996). Clearly, these speeches merit scholarly attention.

Recent work has updated Functional Theory research on presidential TV spots and debates (Benoit, 2014a, 2014b). Past research has investigated the content of these speeches from 1952 to 2004; this study extends that work by investigating the content of nominees acceptance addresses from the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. The 2008 election was unusual in that it was the first contest since 1952 that did not feature a “real” incumbent (neither President Bush nor Vice President Cheney ran). These elections also deserve study because they featured the first African-American president, Barack Obama. Next, we review the pertinent literature in this area. Then, the theory driving this research, the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, will be explicat-

ed and hypotheses and research questions for this study will be advanced. This is followed by a description of the method and presentation of the results.

Literature Review

Benoit (2007) reports data on Acceptance Addresses from 1952-2000 (see also Benoit, Wells, Pier, & Blaney, 1999, and Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, & Price, 2007). In those elections acclaims (positive statements about the candidate speaking) accounted for 77% of the statements in acceptances; attacks (criticisms of the opponent) constituted 23% of utterances, and defenses were 0.7% of the statements in these speeches. Although all candidates were inclined to acclaim; incumbent party candidates acclaimed even more and attacked less than challengers. These contrasts were heightened when the candidates discussed their records in office or past deeds: Incumbent party candidates acclaimed far more (74% to 17%) and attacked much less (26% to 83%) than challengers. Acceptance addresses leaned toward policy (55%), with fewer utterances on character (45%). General goals and ideals were used more often as the basis of acclaims than attacks. This study investigates acceptance addresses from 2008 and 2012 to determine whether these relationships continue.

Theoretical Foundations

This study is based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2007). Functional Theory argues that political candidates use campaign messages to distinguish themselves from opponents. A candidate need not disagree with opponents on every issue; however, a candidate must be perceived as preferable to opponents on some points and doing so requires establishing some distinctions between opponents. Candidates use three functions (acclaims: positive statements about the candidate; attacks: criticisms of an opponent; defenses: refutations of attacks) and these functions occur on two topics (policy: governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action; character: the candidates' personality).

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that acclaims (although not necessarily accepted by the audience) have no inherent drawbacks. Attacks should be less common than acclaims because voters say they dislike mudslinging (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). Defenses should be the least frequent function because they have three potential drawbacks. Defenses must identify an attack to refute it, which could remind or inform the audience of a potential weakness. Second, defenses are likely to target a candidate's weaknesses, which means that responding to it could take a candidate off-message. Third, using defenses could create the undesirable impression that a candidate is reactive rather than proactive.

H1. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will use acclaims more than attacks and attacks more than defenses.

Functional Theory argues that the best evidence of how one will perform in an elected office is how one has performed in that office in the past. Both incumbent party candidates and challengers are therefore likely to discuss the incumbent's record more often than the challenger's record. Of course, when incumbents discuss their own records they acclaim; when challengers discuss the incumbents' record they attack. In 2008 there was no true incumbent: President George Bush was term-limited and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run. John McCain was the incumbent party candidate.

H2. Incumbent party candidates from 2008 and 2012 will use acclaims more and attacks less than challengers in Acceptance Addresses.

H3. Incumbent party candidates from 2008 and 2012 will use acclaims more and attacks less than challengers when discussing past deeds (record in office) in Acceptance Addresses.

Functional Theory predicts that, in general, candidates will discuss policy more than character. Presidents implement governmental policy; some may view them as a role model (which would make character important) but they are probably not in the majority. Furthermore, research has established that more voters report that policy is the most important determinant of their vote for president and that candidates who stress policy more than their opponents – and character less – are more likely to win elections (Benoit, 2003). These considerations lead us to predict:

H4. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will discuss policy more than character.

Functional Theory divides policy utterances into three forms. Past deeds concern a candidate's successes (acclaims) or an opponent's failures (attacks) in office – record in office. Future plans are specific proposals for governmental action (means) whereas general goals are the ends sought. Some goals, such as creating jobs or keeping American safe, cannot readily be criticized. This means that general goals will be used more frequently as the basis for acclaims than attacks. So, we predict:

H5. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will use general goals as the basis for acclaims more often than attacks.

Functional theory divides character comments into those concerned with personal qualities (character traits), leadership ability (executive or administration ability), and ideals, which represent values such as freedom or equality. As with general goals, some ideals are simply difficult or impossible to attack. Who could attack an opponent who seeks equality or justice? Therefore, we predict:

H6. Acceptance Addresses from 2008 and 2012 will use ideals as the basis for acclaims more often than attacks.

As just explained, Functional Theory divides policy utterances and character utterances into subforms (see, e.g., Benoit, 2007 for illustrative examples). We also answer two research questions about the distribution of these forms of policy and character:

RQ1. What are the proportions of the three forms of policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses?

RQ2. What are the proportions of the three forms of character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses?

Together, the tests of these hypotheses and the answers to these research questions will extend our knowledge of these important convention speeches.

In 2008, Barack Obama secured the Democratic nomination in 2008, giving his Acceptance Address in Denver, Colorado, on August 28, 2008. John McCain obtained the GOP nomination, presenting his Acceptance Address in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 5, 2008 (the challenging party has its convention first). The Republican nominee in 2012 was Mitt Romney. His Acceptance Address was given on August 30, 2012 in Tampa, Florida. Only rarely is a sitting president challenged for his party's nomination; consistent with most past history, Obama was not challenged in 2012. On September 6, 2012, Obama delivered his Acceptance Address in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Method

To ensure comparability of data between this study and previous research, we followed the same procedures used for other Functional analyses generally and the previous research on Acceptance Addresses from 1952 to 2004 specifically (Benoit, 2007; Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, & Price, 2007, and Benoit, Wells, Pier, & Blaney, 1999). Functional Theory unitizes the texts of campaign messages into themes, which are complete ideas, claims, or arguments; a single theme can vary in length from one phrase to an entire paragraph (see, e.g., Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969). The coders first identified themes present in these speeches. Then each theme was categorized by function: acclaim, attack or defense. Next, coders categorized the topic of each theme as policy or character. Then coders identified the form of policy or character for each theme.

Two coders analyzed the speeches. Inter-coder reliability was calculated with Cohen's (1960) *kappa*. 10% of each speech were analyzed by two coders to calculate inter-coder reliability. *Kappa* was .89 for functions, .86 for topics, .93 for forms of policy, and .86 for forms of character. Landis and Koch (1977) indicate that *kappas* of .81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders, so these data have acceptable reliability.

Results

This section presents the results of this analysis of 2008 and 2012 acceptance addresses. Tests of each hypothesis and answers to the two research questions will be presented next. Texts of these speeches were obtained from the Internet (McCain, 2008; Obama, 2008, 2012; Romney, 2012).

Functions of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

Overall, acclaims were most common function (73%) in these speeches. For instance, Obama in 2012 declared that “I’ve cut taxes for those who need it, middle-class families, small businesses.” Reducing taxes is likely to be perceived as a laudatory accomplishment. Attacks were the second most common function in these acceptances (27%). Governor Romney attacked President Obama in 2012 when he said “his promises gave way to disappointment and division.” These accusations clearly criticize his opponent. Defenses were very rare in these speeches (0.5%). Only one of these four speeches (Obama in 2012) used defenses. The President offered excuses for the travails of his first term: “That hope has been tested by the cost of war, by one of the worst economic crises in history, by political gridlock.” These three factors are used to excuse disappointing performances over the previous years. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit test* reveals that these three functions occurred with different frequencies ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 506.48, p < .0001$). The first hypothesis was confirmed; see Table 1 for these data.

Table 1
Functions of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Obama 2008	118	61	0
McCain 2008	136	12	0
Obama 2012	125	46	3
Romney 2012	80	50	0
2008-2012 Total	459 (73%)	169 (27%)	3 (0.5%)
1952-2004	2193 (77%)	652 (23%)	20 (0.7%)

Incumbency and Functions of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

In these four speeches, incumbent party candidates acclaimed more and attacked less than challengers. A *chi-square* analysis reveals that these two functions occurred with different frequencies for incumbents and challengers ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 25.02, \phi = .2, p < .0001$; defenses excluded from this analysis). All four candidates acclaimed more than they attacked but the two incumbent party candidates were even more positive than challengers: Incumbents acclaimed more than challengers (81%, 64%) and attacked less than challengers (18%, 36%). These data confirm H2. This relationship is even stronger when the analysis focuses on past deeds or record in office ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 38.90, \phi = .61, p < .0001$). Incumbent party candidates primarily acclaimed on past deeds (77% acclaims, 23% attacks) whereas challengers mainly attacked (84% attacks, 16% acclaims)

when the candidates discussed their records in office. See Table 2 for these data. So, H3 was confirmed with these data.

Table 2
Incumbents versus Challengers in Acceptance Addresses

	Ac-claims	Attacks	Defenses	Acclaim PD	Attack PD
2008-2012					
Incumbents	261 (81%)	58 (18%)	3 (1%)	34 (77%)	10 (23%)
Challengers	198 (64%)	111 (36%)	0	10 (16%)	51 (84%)
1952-2004					
Incumbents	1273 (82%)	259 (17%)	16 (1%)	387 (74%)	100 (26%)
Challengers	920 (70%)	383 (30%)	4 (0.3%)	44 (17%)	213 (83%)

Topics of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

Overall, policy utterances (52%) occurred at virtually the same rate as character utterances (48%) in these acceptances. An example of a policy utterance can be found in this statement in Romney's 2012 Acceptance: "This Obama economy has crushed the middle class. Family income has fallen by \$4,000, but health insurance premiums are higher, food prices are higher, utility prices are higher, and gasoline prices have doubled. Today more Americans wake up in poverty than ever before." Income, health insurance, inflation, and poverty are clear examples of policy. In contrast, Obama in 2012 offered this example of a discussion of his character: "You elected me to tell the truth." Honesty is a clear example of a character topic. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test establishes that there is no significant difference in the frequency of these two topics ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 1.43, p > .2$). The fourth hypothesis was not confirmed here; Table 3 reports these data.

Table 3
Topic of 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Policy	Character
Obama 2008	96	83
McCain 2008	75	73
Obama 2012	99	72
Romney 2012	59	71
2008-2012	329 (52%)	299 (48%)
1952-2004	1558 (55%)	1287 (45%)

Forms of Policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

The first research question concerned the distribution of the three forms of policy in these nomination acceptance speeches (examples of acclaims and attacks on the forms of policy and character are provided in Benoit, 2007). In this sample general goals (63%) were the most common form of policy, followed by past deeds (41%), and then future plans (13%).

H5 expected that general goals would be used more often as the basis for acclaims than attacks. In these data, candidates were significantly more likely to use utterances about general goals to praise themselves (78%) than to attack their opponent (22%). Statistical analysis using a *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test confirmed that this difference was significant ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 66.13, p < .0001$). See Table 4.1 and 4.2 for these data.

Table 4.1
Forms of Policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	Past Deeds		Future Plans	
	Ac-claims	Attacks	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	44	61	10	7
	105 (32%)		17 (5%)	
1952-2004	331	313	168	41
	644 (41%)		209 (13%)	

Table 4.2
Forms of Policy in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

	General Goals	
	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	162	45
	207 (63%)	
1952-2004	649	56
	705 (45%)	

Forms of Character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses

On character, these campaign messages most often discussed ideals (59%), followed by personal qualities (32%) and then leadership ability (9%). H6 expected that candidates would use ideals, like general goals, more to acclaim than to attack. This hypothesis was confirmed in these data: 86% of ideals were acclaims and 14% were attacks. A *chi-square goodness-of-fit* test confirmed that these frequencies were significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 65.32, p < .0001$). These data are displayed in Table 5.1 and 5.2.

Table 5.1***Forms of Character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses***

	Personal Qualities		Leadership Abilities	
	Ac-claims	Attacks	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	111	22	25	17
	133 (44%)		42 (14%)	
1952-2004	313	94	86	34
	407 (32%)		120 (9%)	

Table 5.2***Forms of Character in 2008 and 2012 Acceptance Addresses***

	Ideals	
	Ac-claims	Attacks
2008-2012	107	17
	124 (41%)	
1952-2004	646	114
	760 (59%)	

Discussion

The presidential candidates' acceptance addresses used acclaims most often, followed by attacks, and least often defenses. This is consistent with Functional Theory's predictions (Benoit, 2007) and the data from 1952-2004 acceptances (Table 1). Acclaims may not always persuade voters, but they have no inherent drawbacks. Attacks risk alienating voters who dislike mudslinging. Defenses are the least common function for three reasons: Defending usually takes a candidate off-message, may remind or inform voters of potential drawbacks, and can create the impression that the candidate is reactive rather than proactive. Incumbents are even more positive than challengers (in 2008 and 2012 as well as from 1952-2004); this relationship is especially pronounced when they discuss past deeds or record in office. Past deeds are arguably the best evidence of how a candidate will perform if elected so both incumbents and challengers discuss the incumbent's record more than the challenger's record – and incumbents acclaim when they talk about their own record whereas challengers attack when addressing the incumbent's record. These candidates discussed policy and character at about the same rate; in the past policy had an edge. Benoit (2007) reports that debates, TV spots, and direct mail brochures discuss policy more than acceptances; these convention speeches are designed to celebrate the candidate which explains why acceptances discuss character more than other message forms. In fact, only Romney in 2012 discussed character more than policy; he focused more on character than most acceptances (including McCain's speech in 2008). In these speeches, general goals were the most common form of policy, followed by past deeds and then future plans. This distribution is consistent with

past speeches. On character, candidates discussed personal qualities and ideals at about the same level; leadership ability was discussed less often. In previous elections, leadership were also the least frequent form of character. Both general goals and ideals were used more often to acclaim than attack. It is easier to praise than attack such goals as creating jobs and keeping America safe or such ideals as justice or equality.

Conclusion

This study extends previous scholarship on the functions and topics of presidential nomination acceptance addresses. Past research has used Functional Theory (see Benoit, 2007) to analyze acceptances from 1952-2004; this study adds the four acceptances from 2008 and 2012. The basic situation present for these speeches – candidates trying to persuade voters that they are preferable to opponents – results in similar content on certain dimensions: functions, functions and incumbency, functions for general goals and ideals. The results reported here were in the main consistent with past speeches. The only prediction not confirmed was that policy would be discussed more frequently than character: No significant difference occurred in these speeches. The emphasis on character was strongest in Mitt Romney's 2012 Acceptance Address. It must be noted that traditionally policy is more common in TV spots and debates than Acceptances, so it is not altogether surprising that this hypothesis was not confirmed in the data reported here. In general, these speeches, the culmination of the two political parties' celebration of their nominees, reach more voters than other speeches and merit scholarly attention.

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