

2020 GENERAL PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: THE CORONAVIRUS CLASH

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Proper APA citation for this article is:

Benoit, W. L., Stein, K. (2022). 2020 General Presidential Debates: The Coronavirus Clash. *Speaker & Gavel*, 58(1), 8-31.

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Abstract

In the run up to the 2020 election on November 3, 2020, two presidential and one vice presidential debate were held (another planned presidential debate was cancelled because of coronavirus). The presidential debates used attacks more than acclaims – and more than previous debates (the vice presidential debate was fairly similar to previous VP debates). Biden and Trump discussed policy more than character (as did the VP debate and previous presidential and vice presidential debates). Unlike most previous encounters, conflicting with the theoretical prediction and in contrast to the vice presidential debate, the two Biden Trump debates in 2020 attacked more than they acclaimed. All three debates emphasized policy more than character, in line with theory and past research.

KEY TERMS: 2020 presidential debates, functional theory, acclaims, attacks, defenses, policy, character

The first general election presidential debate in American history consisted of four encounters between Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy in the Fall of 1960. General presidential debates experienced a hiatus from 1964 to 1972 and resumed in 1976, and have occurred in every presidential election since (Lyndon Johnson refused to debate in 1964; after his loss in 1960 Richard Nixon refused to debate in 1968 and 1972; Gerald Ford debated Jimmy Carter because the Republican president trailed his Democratic challenger in the polls in 1976; Benoit, 2014b). Presidential primary debates had occurred as early as 1948: A radio debate between Governor Thomas Dewey and Governor Harold Stassen was held in the Oregon Republican presidential primary (Benoit, Pier, Brazeal, McHale, Klyukovski, & Airne, 2002). Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debated seven times in the race for Senate in 1958 (they also contested the Oval Office in 1860 but did not debate in their presidential campaign; Benoit & Delbert, 2009). A vice presidential debate was held in 1976; after a gap in 1980, one VP debate has been held in each subsequent election. Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, and Mike Pence joined this select group in 2020 (debates have also occurred in campaigns for other US offices, such as Senate, governor, and mayor – Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007; Benoit, Henson, & Maltos, 2007 – and leaders' debates have been held in other countries, Benoit 2014b).

Initially, three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate were scheduled for the 2020 race; however, the coronavirus pandemic disrupted these plans. The first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden occurred on September 29. The vice presidential debate

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for Mike Pence and Kamala Harris was held on October 7. The second presidential debate had been planned for October 15, but was cancelled after President Trump's bout with Covid-19 (ironically, Biden and Trump held "dueling" town hall events that night at the same time but on different networks). The final presidential debate was held on October 22

(2020 United States presidential debates). Because both presidential candidates repeatedly interrupted their opponent in the first debate – Trump interrupted more than three times as often as Biden (Blake, 2020) – the Commission on Presidential Debates employed a mute button. Each candidate spoke for two minutes uninterrupted during their opening statements for each topic in the last debate (Associated Press, 2020). In the history of political campaign debates, a mute button was never required.

Importance of Election Debates

Debates are very significant events in political election campaigns for several reasons. First, these events offer important benefits for citizens. Debates allow viewers to see the leading candidates in the campaign addressing (more or less) the same topics at the same time. Although candidates have shown considerable creativity in tying in what topics they address, usually they discuss the same topics (unlike, for example, television spots, social media, or speeches).

Debate rules prohibit candidates from bringing notes or scripts to a debate. Although most presidential candidates prepare extensively for debates, an unexpected question or comment from an opponent may present a more candid view of the candidates than other message forms such as carefully scripted speeches or highly edited TV spots. Accordingly, viewers may develop a more accurate impression of the candidates in debates than in other kinds of messages.

Debates are longer than other messages, such as TV spots, which are most often 30 seconds long. Candidate tweets, of course, are limited to 280 characters. Every American presidential debate in the general campaign after 1960 has been 90 minutes (the four debates in 1960 were 60 minutes each). Even subtracting introductory remarks by the moderator and questions asked, voters have a chance to hear the leading candidates speak for 30 minutes or more.

Debates also have important benefits for candidates. First, election debates provide the leading candidates free access to television audiences. Currently, the bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates decides who will participate in American general election debates and only once in recent campaigns (Ross Perot in 1992) has a third party candidate been invited to attend (CPD, 2020). Free media exposure became a very important factor in at the end of the 2020 presidential campaign; Biden's campaign had raised over \$260 million more than Trump's

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campaign as of September 30 and Sherman noted that President Trump’s campaign “might run out of money before election day” (2020). Debates in 2020 were important to both candidates.

Second, the reach of debates is extended when they are covered in the news or addressed in political discussion among voters. Many voters do not tune in to watch debates – particularly with the myriad of media options available in 2020 (see, e.g., Benoit & Billings, 2020) – but even those who do not watch these events may learn something about them from the news, discussion, and social media. McKinney and Carlin (2004; see also Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000) note that “debates attract the greatest media coverage of any single campaign event” (p. 204). The huge audiences for debates, both direct and indirect, means their potential for influence is substantial.

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Third, debates include far less media gate-keeping than the news. Social media have less gatekeeping than the news, although Twitter puts warnings on some posts and removes others (Culliford, 2020). A journalist writing a story can ignore some or all of a candidate’s message; candidates’ statements can be distorted intentionally or unintentionally during reporting. However, everything a candidate says in a debate is broadcast to voters (except, of course, when a mute button is used!). At times journalists participating in a debate may chide a candidate for not answering a question, but there is no question that journalists have far less power to determine which parts of a candidate’s message is heard or read by voters in debates in the news stories they write.

Fourth, candidates do not like voters to hear only their opponent’s message (surely this is one reason candidates interrupt opponents in debates). Even if an opponent is not misrepresenting the facts, candidates almost always want voters to hear *their* side along with their opponent’s views. Debates, unlike stump speeches, tweets, or TV spots, offer candidates the opportunity to be heard along with their opponent.

A fifth advantage of debates for candidates is the opportunity to immediately correct false or misleading statements from opponents. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) observed that “the candidate’s presence provides a check on the discourse” (p. 12). Even when the aggrieved party does not have the next turn to talk, candidates often plead with the moderator for a chance to reply to such comments – and moderators often agree to these requests.

An election debate is, by design, confrontational; Opposing candidates alternate turns at talk. In 2020 (and earlier), moderators explicitly provided candidates with opportunities to reply to opponents’ statements. Not surprisingly, debates often produce dramatic moments. For example, in the final debate of 1984, President Reagan was asked about his age, a concern for some voters. He replied that “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience.” This joke effectively defused this concern. In the 1988 vice presidential debate, Senator Dan Quayle declared that “I have as much experience in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency.” His opponent, Senator Lloyd Bentsen, slapped back at his opponent: “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack

Kennedy.” In the November 9, 2011 Republican primary debate, Governor Rick Perry proclaimed that he would streamline the federal government: “And I will tell you, it is three agencies of government when I get there that are gone. Commerce, Education, and the – what’s the third one there?” The moderator then asked, “You can’t name the third one?” and Perry sheepishly admitted that “I can’t. The third one, I can’t. Sorry. Oops.” This incident sharply undercut Perry’s credibility and he dropped out of the race shortly afterwards. Other interesting moments have occurred in debates; video clips are available on the Internet to watch them (e.g., Stephey, 2019).

Many people choose to watch presidential election debates. The Commission on Presidential Debates (2020) reports the viewership of presidential debates. Presidential debates, held in 1960 and 1976-2016, were watched by 1849.6 million people. Vice presidential debates, which were held in 1976 and 1984-2016, were viewed by 475.5 million people. The huge audience makes the potential for influence from debates high indeed. See Table 1 for these data.

Another potential advantage of political election debates for democracy is the opportunity for clash between candidates. By “clash” we do not simply mean attack, but a juxtaposition of an attack by one candidate with a response by the opponent. When it occurs, clash illuminates the differences between candidates’ positions in greater depth. Candidates often stubbornly stay “on message” (see, e.g., Benoit et al., 2011), repeating their pre-planned campaign themes and sound bites remorselessly. However, debates do provide the *opportunity* for clash, where the two candidates contrast their positions; when it does happen, clash is healthy for democracy.

Research has demonstrated that debates have several effects on those who watch them (see Holbrook, 1996; McKinney & Carlin, 2004; Racine Group, 2002; Shaw, 1999). Benoit, Hansen, and Verser (2003) reported the results of a meta-analysis of the available research on the effects of watching presidential debates. Watching general campaign debates can increase issue knowledge and issue salience (the number of issues a voter uses to evaluate candidates). Debates can alter voters’ preferences for candidates’ issue stands. Debates can have an agenda-setting effect, increasing the perceived importance of the issues discussed in debates. Debates can influence voters’ perceptions of the candidates’ personality (e.g., honesty, compassion). Debates can also influence vote preference. McKinney argues that debates increase political engagement for young viewers (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney, Rill, & Gully, 2011). There can be no question that debates have important effects on viewers and are an essential part of the democratic process.

It is important to realize that all people do not react in the same way to a debate. Each viewer comes to a debate with a different set of beliefs, values, and attitudes about the candidates (ranging from slightly different to widely different attitudes) that influences their perception of statements by the candidates in debates (see Benoit & Billings, 2020). Jarman (2005), for example, looked at reactions of the second general election presidential debate in 2004. Viewers reacted more favorably to comments from the candidate from their own party than to comments by candidates from the opposing party (see also Warner, McKinney, Bramlett, Jennings, & Funk,

2020). Still, debates have effects on viewers (and those who learn about debates indirectly) and are a vital part of the modern political campaign process.

In the following sections we discuss the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse and the research on presidential debates conducted using this perspective. Then we describe the method employed here. This is followed by a presentation of the results. Finally, the findings are discussed and implications of this study are addressed. Page | 12

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

This study extends past work on general presidential (and vice presidential) political election debates using the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2007, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; 2017; 2022; Benoit & Airne, 2005; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Benoit & Glantz, 2015, 2020; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit & Henson, 2009; Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, 2003; Benoit & Rill, 2013; Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, & Price, 2007; Benoit & Wells, 1996). Benoit (2017) reports a meta-analysis supporting predictions of Functional Theory.

Functional Theory was developed to help understand elements of the nature (content) political election campaign messages. Statements in such campaigns are considered to be functional, a means to achieve a goal: obtaining sufficient votes to win the office being contested in the election. Some people run to draw attention to a particular issue or cause; Functional Theory is not meant to help understand candidates who merely seek publicity for an issue. Functional Theory assumes that voting is a comparative act. To win a citizen's vote candidates only need to appear (political election campaigns are about voters' perceptions) preferable to their opponents. No candidate is perfect – in the political arena people often disagree on issues. Candidates need only to convince only enough voters that he or she is preferable to the opposition.

A second assumption is that political candidates must point out contrasts between themselves and opponents. Political candidates do not need to disagree with their opponents on every issue. Who would oppose creating jobs or keeping the country safe from terrorists? But if competing politicians appear the same on every question, voters would have no reason to choose one candidate over another.

The need for political candidates to differentiate themselves from their opponents is why campaign communication is so important to elections. Campaign messages enable candidates to inform voters about their character and policies, and to contrast themselves on some points from their opponents. This third assumption of Functional Theory is that citizens learn about candidates and their issue positions through political messages disseminated by many sources, including the candidates themselves, their supporters, the news media, and special interest groups.

The fourth assumption of this theory is that political candidates can seek to persuade voters of their preferability with messages that employ the three functions of acclaims, attacks,

and defenses. Acclaims promote a candidate's own strengths or advantages. Attacks stress an opponent's alleged weaknesses or disadvantages. Defenses respond to, or refute, attacks directed toward a candidate. Together, these three functions work as an informal version of cost-benefit analysis. Acclaims, if accepted by an audience member, can increase the apparent benefits of that candidate. Attacks, in contrast, if accepted by a voter, can increase the perceived costs of an opponent. Defenses, when voters accept them, can reduce a candidate's perceived costs. Notice that thinking of vote choice as a form of cost-benefit analysis does not mean that Functional Theory holds that voters quantify benefits or costs or that voters engage in mathematical calculations to make vote choices. Still, acclaims, attacks, and defenses work together to help a candidate appear preferable to voters.

Many political issues are controversial: The attitudes of audience members (attitudes are comprised of beliefs and values; see Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) influence the way they perceive messages from and about candidates. This means that differences in voters' beliefs, values, and attitudes mean that different groups of voters react differently to the same message (see Jarman, 2005). For example, a candidate who embraces immigration legislation can simultaneously attract and repel different groups of voters who have different ideas about this topic.

Campaign discourse can discuss two topics – policy and character – a fifth assumption of Functional Theory. Political candidates can address: (1) Policy, or what they or their opponents have done in the past or will they do if elected and (2) Character, or the kind of person the candidates and their opponents are. These concepts correspond to Rountree's (1995) concepts of *actus* and *status*, what we do and who we are. Candidates can acclaim, attack, and defend on both policy and character.

Functional Theory advances several predictions about the content of political election messages. First, acclaims are the most common function of election messages. Many people dislike mudslinging (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). Accordingly, candidates have a reason to avoid excessive reliance on attacks. An attack could damage both the target (from the attack itself) and the source of the attack (for being a mudslinger). Functional Theory does not maintain that candidates must acclaim more than they attack, just that there is a reason for them to use acclaims more often than attacks. In fact, research shows that most candidates do acclaim more often than they attack (Benoit, 2007, 2014a, 2014b).

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007, 2014a, 2014b) also posits that defenses will be employed less frequently than either acclaims or attacks. Political candidates have three reasons to rely on few defenses. First, most attacks occur on a candidate's weaknesses, so a response to an attack (a defense) is likely to take the defending candidate off-message. Second, making a defense could create the impression that the defending candidate appear reactive rather than proactive. Third, in order to refute an attack, the defending candidate must identify the attack being refuted. However, doing so could remind or inform voters of a potential weakness. So, candidates can be expected to use defenses less often than attacks or acclaims.

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H1. Acclaims will be the most frequently used function, followed by attacks and then defenses.

Past research on general election presidential debates from 1960 and 1976-2016 found that acclaims are more common than attacks (55% to 36%) with defenses occurring less often (9%: Benoit, 2014b; Benoit & Glantz, 2020). Vice presidential debates showed the same pattern (53% acclaims, 41% attacks, 6% defenses).

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Functional Theory also addresses the topic of political campaign messages, distinguishing between policy (governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action) and character (personality of candidates). Public opinion polls on the most important determinant of presidential vote choice indicated that more people say policy is a more important factor in presidential vote choice than character (Benoit, 2003). Research (e.g., Pfau & Burgoon, 1989) found that attacks on policy can be more persuasive than attacks on character. Functional Theory does not declare that candidates should never discuss character or that emphasizing character will guarantee a loss (or that they should never attack on character), just that they have reasons to emphasize policy.

H2. Policy will be discussed more often than character.

Research on previous general election presidential debates (Benoit, 2014b; Benoit & Glantz, 2020) found that policy was discussed more often than character (72% to 38%). Vice presidential debates also stressed policy (67%) more than character (33%).

This theory also distinguishes three forms of policy: past deeds (record in office), future plans (proposal to achieve goals) and general goals (the ends candidate seeks). Functional theory also identifies three forms of character: personal qualities (personality), leadership ability (skills needed to succeed in public office), and ideals (values or principles embraced by the candidate). Research investigating campaign discourse (Benoit, 2007, 2014a, 2014b) consistently finds that general goals – and ideals – are used significantly more often as the basis for acclaims than attacks. For example, it is easier to advocate (acclaim) more jobs (a goal) or equality (an ideal) than to attack either idea

H3. Acclaims will be more common than attacks when discussing general go

H4. Acclaims will be more common than attacks when discussing ideals.

This study will test these predictions using data from the 2020 presidential debates. This study will answer two research questions:

RQ1. What is the relative proportion of the three forms of policy?

RQ2. What is the relative proportion of the three forms of character?

We present data from both presidential debates and the vice presidential encounter; however, we focus on the Biden-Trump debates.

Method

This study followed the content analytic procedures developed for the Functional Theory (see, e.g., Benoit, 2007, 2014a, 2014b). Adopting these procedures will assure the data developed here are compatible with previous data. The first step was to divide the text of these debates into themes, which is the coding unit employed in Functional Theory research. Themes are arguments (argument_i in O’Keefe’s [1977] terminology), claims, or ideas; a single theme can vary in length from one phrase to an entire paragraph. Second, each theme was categorized by function: acclaim, attack or defense. Next, the topic of each theme was categorized as policy or character. Finally, the form of policy or character for each theme was determined (defenses are relatively rare so they are not categorized by topic). Examples of acclaims and attacks from political campaign messages on the three forms of policy and of character can be found in Benoit (2014a, 2014b).

Inter-coder reliability was calculated with Cohen’s (1960) *kappa*. About 10% of the transcript was employed to determine inter-coder reliability. *Kappa* was .87 for functions, .89 for topics, .91 for forms of policy, and .85 for forms of character. Landis and Koch (1977) explain that *kappa* values of .81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders, so these data should be considered reliable.

Results

In 2020, Joe Biden-Donald Trump debates were held on September 29 and October 22. The debate for October 15 was cancelled because of the coronavirus. The vice presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence took place on October 7. The results will be illustrated with examples of the three topics and two functions from the first presidential debate (Read the Full Transcript, 2020).

Acclaims comprised 34% of the themes in these debates (52% in the vice presidential debates). For example, Vice President Biden declared that “I’m going to eliminate the Trump tax cuts... and make sure that we invest in the people who, in fact, need the help.” This proposal could appeal to many voters. President Trump exemplified an acclaim when he said “We got the gowns, we got the masks, we made the ventilators... and now we’re weeks away from a vaccine.” Here the president boasted of accomplishments in his first term in office. See Table 2 for these data.

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Table 2. *Functions and Topics of 2020 General Campaign Debates*

	Functions			Character	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	Policy	Character
Biden	151 (31%)	258 (53%)	77 (16%)	264 (65%)	145 (35%)
Trump	165 (36%)	198 (43%)	94 (21%)	248 (68%)	116 (32%)
2020 Presidential	316 (34%)	456 (48%)	171 (18%)	512 (66%)	261 (34%)
1960, 1976-2016	6023 (55%)	3919 (36%)	1001 (9%)	7182 (72%)	2751 (38%)
Harris	109 (51%)	90 (42%)	14 (7%)	94 (47%)	105 (53%)
Pence	111 (53%)	83 (39%)	17 (8%)	137 (71%)	57 (29%)
2020 VP Debates	220 (52%)	173 (41%)	31 (7%)	231 (59%)	162 (41%)
1976, 1984-2016	3134 (53%)	2412 (41%)	360 (6%)	3731 (67%)	1818 (33%)

Source: Benoit, 2014; Benoit & Glantz, 2020

2020 Presidential acclaims vs. attacks χ^2 ($df = 1$) = 25.02, $p < .0001$; 2020 Vice presidential acclaims vs. attacks χ^2 ($df = 1$) = 5.38, $p < .05$

2020 Presidential topics χ^2 ($df = 1$) = 80.86, $p < .0001$; 2020 Vice presidential topics χ^2 ($df = 1$) = 11.76, $p < .05$

The themes in these debates included 48% attacks (41% in the vice presidential debate). To illustrate this function, The GOP nominee criticized his opponent for his environmental proposals: “He’s talking about the Green New Deal. And it’s not \$2 billion or \$20 billion as you said, it’s \$100 trillion.” Biden also used attacks in these debates. For example, Biden criticized his opponent on Covid-19: “Look, 200,000 dead... Over 7 million infected in the United States. We in fact have 5% or 4% of the world’s population, 20% of the deaths. 40,000 people a day are contracting Covid.” This information in each of these attacks could sway some voters against the target of attack.

Candidates in these debates also used defenses (18%; 7% in the Harris-Pence debate). For instance, one attack from Trump concerned a disease outbreak during the Obama/Biden administration: “You didn’t do very well in swine flu. H1N1. A disaster.” Biden defended against this attack by declaring that “14,000 people died, not 200,000. There was no economic recession. We didn’t shut down the economy.” This response does not deny the attack but argues that Trump’s record on this topic was far worse than Biden’s record (minimization). Trump was asked about the *New York Times* report that he only paid \$750 in federal income taxes in 2016 and 2017. He responded that “I paid millions of dollars in taxes. Millions of dollars of income tax.... I paid \$38 million one year. I paid \$27 million one year.” This defense denies the attack.

The first prediction (acclaims would be more common than attacks) was not fully confirmed with these data: Attacks were actually more common than acclaims for both Biden

and Trump in the 2020 presidential debates (this prediction was, however, confirmed by the data from the vice presidential debate). However, in both types of debates defenses were the least common function, consistent with H1.

H2, on the topics of the statements in these debates, was confirmed with both presidential debates (66% policy, 34% character) and vice presidential debates (59% policy, 41% character). These data are also reported in Table 2. Many of the examples of functions offered above focus on policy (e.g., tax policy, response to disease outbreaks, environmental policy). The candidates in these events also discussed character. For instance, Biden called his opponent a “clown,” disparaging Trump’s character. Trump attacked Biden for being “a racist”; how much Trump personally paid in taxes is another example of a character concern.

The first Research Question addressed the distribution of themes over the three forms of policy. In the presidential debates, past deeds was the most common form of policy (54%; 58% in the vice presidential event). General goals constituted 26% of policy themes in the Biden-Trump debates (16% in the VP debate). Future plans occurred in 21% of presidential debates (26% of the vice presidential debate). H3 (more acclaims than attacks on general goals) was confirmed only with vice presidential debates; see Table 3 for these data.

Table 3. *Forms of Policy in 2020 General Campaign Debates*

	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Biden	17	99	58	17	40	33
Trump	96	63	9	21	32	27
Presidential	113	162	67	38	72	60
	275 (54%)		105 (21%)		132 (26%)	
Harris	16	37	19	5	15	2
Pence	56	25	10	26	14	6
Vice presidential	72	62	29	31	29	8
	134 (58%)		60 (26%)		37 (16%)	

Presidential Forms of Policy $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 97.81, p < .0001$; Vice presidential Forms of Policy $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 66.31, p < .0001$

Functions of General Goals Presidential $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 0.92, ns$; Functions of General Goals Vice presidential $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 10.82, p < .001$

The second Research Question, on forms of character, was also addressed in these data: the presidential debates focused on personal qualities (77%; 51% in the Harris-Pence debate). In the presidential debate, 14% of character remarks concerned ideals (also 14% in the vice presidential debates) and 8% of character comments addressed leadership ability (35% in the

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Harris-Pence event). The final prediction was supported with data from both presidential (68% acclaims, 32% attacks) and vice presidential debates (78% acclaims, 22% attacks); Table 4 reports these data.

Table 4. *Forms of Character in 2020 General Campaign Debates*

	Personal Qualities		Leadership Ability		Ideals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Biden	14	93	2	15	30	1
Trump	23	72	1	4	5	11
Presidential	37	165	3	19	25	12
	202 (77%)		22 (8%)		37 (14%)	
Harris	29	23	18	21	12	22
Pence	12	18	13	5	6	3
Vice presidential	41	41	31	26	18	5
	82 (51%)		57 (35%)		23 (14%)	

Presidential Forms of Character $\chi^2 (df=2) = 229.31, p < .0001$; Vice presidential Forms of Character $\chi^2 (df=2) = 32.48, p < .0001$
 Functions of Ideals Presidential $\chi^2 (df=1) = 3.9, p < .05$; Functions of Ideals Vice presidential $\chi^2 (df=1) = 6.26, p < .05$

Discussion and Conclusions

The primary focus of this investigation is a functional analysis of the 2020 presidential and vice presidential debates. However, we believe scholars have a moral obligation to call out

The primary focus of this investigation is a functional analysis of the 2020 presidential and vice presidential debates. However, we believe scholars have a moral obligation to call out clearly inappropriate behavior in

clearly inappropriate behavior in discourse. President Trump had a history of frequent lies: Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly (2020b) reported that “As of July 9, the tally in our database stands at 20,055 claims in 1,267 days.” His proclivity for untruths surfaced in the first debate: Dale (2020) called Trump’s

statements “an avalanche of lies from President Donald Trump – while Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden was largely accurate in his statements.” Woodward and Yen (2020) characterized the president’s performance as “a torrent of fabrications.” Megerian (2020) observed that “President Trump unleashed a blizzard of falsehoods” in the first debate. In fact,

Dale (2020) noted that “There were times, particularly during the conclusion of the debate, when almost every comment from Trump was inaccurate.” So, President Trump repeatedly lied to voters in the first 2020 presidential debate. Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly said that “President Trump yet again broke the fact-check meter at the second presidential debate, while Democratic nominee Joe Biden made relatively few gaffes” (2020a). CNN also reported that Trump lied more than Biden in the second presidential debate: “Trump’s performance was riddled with false claims, on topics ranging from the coronavirus to foreign policy to immigration. And while former Vice President Joe Biden made some missteps and stretched the truth at times, his comments essentially hewed to the truth” (2020). Fact-checks of the vice presidential debate reached similar conclusions (the Republican candidates lied more than the Democratic candidates; see Merica, 2020; Pearce, 2020). None of these candidates were perfect (they are, after all, humans and perfection is difficult if not impossible to achieve), but the evidence shows that the GOP candidates lied far more often in these encounters than their opponents. As noted above, Trump’s heavy reliance on lies in these encounters is consistent with his behavior as president since he took office in January 2017 (see, e.g., Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2020b). We must strongly condemn presidential candidates – especially President Trump and Vice President Pence – for degrading voters’ ability to make informed decisions with their outrageous lies in the 2020 presidential debates.

It is remarkable that these debates are replete with attacks, unlike most prior debates. We cannot know for certain why these presidential debates were so negative, but the 2020 Biden-Trump debates were significantly more negative than prior debates ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 44.48, p < .0001, \phi = .1$). One possible reason for the high levels of attacks is the polarization of voters in America. American voters are more ideologically divided than in recent memory and possibly more than ever before. One implication is that “A growing proportion of Americans dislike the opposing party more than they like their own party” (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016, p. 21). Abramowitz and Webster (2018) labeled this phenomenon “negative partisanship.” The fact that more Americans dislike the other party more than they like their own party makes attacks more attractive to candidates. However, the vice presidential debate was more positive than the presidential debates, rendering this explanation for the high level of attacks in presidential debates unlikely.

A second possible explanation for the degree of negativity in the debates is that Donald Trump has a proclivity for attacks. In 2016 (Benoit & Glantz, 2020), Trump attacked more than he acclaimed in his convention acceptance address (53% to 47%), his television spots (52% to 48%), his debates (47% to 40%), his social media (54% to 44%). Furthermore, President Trump was behind in public opinion polls during the debates (see, e.g., Electoral-Vote.com, 2020), a factor which is associated with higher levels of attacks (Benoit, 2014a; Maier & Jansen, 2015). Why might Biden also have so many attacks? Research has shown that when one candidate goes negative, the opponent is likely to follow suit (Damore, 2002), so Biden had an incentive to reply in kind, which could account for Biden’s level of attacks.

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The candidates in these debates stressed policy more than character (only Harris discussed character more often than policy, and this difference was not significant: $\chi^2 [df=1, p > .6]$, a finding in line with Functional Theory and past research (Benoit, 2007, 2014a, 2014b). In 2016, both Clinton and Trump stressed character over policy on both Twitter and Facebook (Benoit & Glantz, 2020). Perhaps the moderators in 2020 focused the candidates' attention on policy.

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The vice presidential debate in 2020 was not particularly remarkable. Acclaims were more common than attacks, which in turn were more common than defenses. Policy was discussed more frequently than character. General goals and ideals were more often used to acclaim than to attack. Still, the unusual nature of the 2020 presidential debates shows that we need to continue to study presidential debates in election campaigns.

The Democratic ticket persuaded 79,819,502 Americans to cast votes for them; on the other hand, the GOP team received 73,788,568 votes. The Electoral College went to Biden-Harris by 306 to 232 (Election 2020 results and live updates, 2020). We cannot say that Biden and Harris won the Oval Office because of their discourse in these debates. However, it is very clear that Trump and Pence were unable to win re-election via debates. It is also clear that many voters watched these events and learned about the candidates' policy positions and character.

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Table 1. *Viewers for American General Election Debates*

Year	Dates	Candidates	Viewers
Presidential			
1960		John Kennedy, Richard Nixon	
	9/26		66.4
	10/7		61.9
	10/13		63.7
	10/21		60.4
1976		Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford	
	9/23		69.7
	10/6		63.9
	10/22		62.7
1980		Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan	
	10/28		80.6
1984		Walter Mondale, Ronald Reagan	
	10/8		65.1
	10/22		67.3
1988		Michael Dukakis, George Bush	
	9/25		65.1
	10/13		67.3
1992		Bill Clinton, George Bush, Ross Perot	
	10/11		64.2
	10/15		69.6
	10/19		66.9
1996		Bill Clinton, Bob Dole	
	10/6		46.1
	10/16		36.3
2000		Al Gore, George Bush	
	10/3		46.6

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	10/11		37.5
	10/17		37.7
2004		John Kerry, George Bush	
	9/30		62.5
	10/8		46.7
	10/13		51.2
2008		Barack Obama, John McCain	
	9/26		52.4
	10/7		63.2
	10/15		56.5
2012		Barack Obama, Mitt Romney	
	10/3		57.2
	10/16		65.6
	10/22		59.2
2016		Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump	
	9/26		84
	10/9		66.5
	10/19		71.6
2020		Joe Biden, Donald Trump	
	9/25		73.1
	10/22		63
Total	34		1849.6

Vice presidential

1976	10/15	Walter Mondale, Bob Dole	43.2
1984	10/11	Geraldine Ferraro, George Bush	56.7
1988	10/5	Lloyd Bentson, Dan Quayle	46.9
1992	10/13	Al Gore, Dan Quayle	51.2
1996	10/9	Al Gore, Jack Kemp	26.6

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2000	10/5	Joe Lieberman, Dick Cheney	28.5
2004	10/13	John Edwards, Dick Cheney	43.5
2008	10/2	Joe Biden, Sarah Palin	69.6
2012	10/11	Joe Biden, Paul Ryan	51.4
2016	10/4	Tim Kaine, Mike Pence	37
2020	10/7	Kamala Harris, Mike Pence	57.9
Total	11		475.5

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*Audience debate data from Commission on Presidential Debates:
<http://www.debates.org/pages/history.html>; see also Benoit (2014)

Table 2. *Functions and Topics of 2020 General Campaign Debates*

	Functions			Character	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	Policy	Character
Biden	151 (31%)	258 (53%)	77 (16%)	264 (65%)	145 (35%)
Trump	165 (36%)	198 (43%)	94 (21%)	248 (68%)	116 (32%)
2020 Presidential	316 (34%)	456 (48%)	171 (18%)	512 (66%)	261 (34%)
1960, 1976-2016	6023 (55%)	3919 (36%)	1001 (9%)	7182 (72%)	2751 (38%)
Harris	109 (51%)	90 (42%)	14 (7%)	94 (47%)	105 (53%)
Pence	111 (53%)	83 (39%)	17 (8%)	137 (71%)	57 (29%)
2020 VP Debates	220 (52%)	173 (41%)	31 (7%)	231 (59%)	162 (41%)
1976, 1984-2016	3134 (53%)	2412 (41%)	360 (6%)	3731 (67%)	1818 (33%)

Source: Benoit, 2014; Benoit & Glantz, 2020

2020 Presidential acclaims vs. attacks $\chi^2 (df=1) = 25.02, p < .0001$; 2020 Vice presidential acclaims vs. attacks $\chi^2 (df=1) = 5.38, p < .05$

2020 Presidential topics $\chi^2 (df=1) = 80.86, p < .0001$; 2020 Vice presidential topics $\chi^2 (df=1) = 11.76, p < .05$

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Table 3. *Forms of Policy in 2020 General Campaign Debates*

	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Biden	17	99	58	17	40	33
Trump	96	63	9	21	32	27
Presidential	113	162	67	38	72	60
	275 (54%)		105 (21%)		132 (26%)	
Harris	16	37	19	5	15	2
Pence	56	25	10	26	14	6
Vice presidential	72	62	29	31	29	8
	134 (58%)		60 (26%)		37 (16%)	

Presidential Forms of Policy $\chi^2 (df=2) = 97.81, p < .0001$; Vice presidential Forms of Policy $\chi^2 (df=2) = 66.31, p < .0001$

Functions of General Goals Presidential $\chi^2 (df=1) = 0.92, ns$; Functions of General Goals Vice presidential $\chi^2 (df=1) = 10.82, p < .001$

Table 4. *Forms of Character in 2020 General Campaign Debates*

	Personal Qualities		Leadership Ability		Ideals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Biden	14	93	2	15	30	1
Trump	23	72	1	4	5	11
Presidential	37	165	3	19	25	12
	202 (77%)		22 (8%)		37 (14%)	
Harris	29	23	18	21	12	22
Pence	12	18	13	5	6	3
Vice presidential	41	41	31	26	18	5
	82 (51%)		57 (35%)		23 (14%)	

Presidential Forms of Character $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 229.31, p < .0001$; Vice presidential Forms of Character $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 32.48, p < .0001$

Functions of Ideals Presidential $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 3.9, p < .05$; Functions of Ideals Vice presidential $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 6.26, p < .05$

