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# A Functional Analysis of 2008 General Election Presidential TV Spots

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## **A Functional Analysis of 2008 General Election Presidential TV Spots**

William L. Benoit & Mark Glantz

### **Abstract**

This study performed content analysis on the general election TV spots from Democratic nominee Barack Obama and Republican nominee John McCain in the 2008 presidential campaign. There was no significant difference in function by incumbency, which is not surprising given that neither major party candidate was the sitting president or vice president. Unlike ads from previous years, these ads contained more attacks (65%) than acclaims (34%; and like earlier campaigns few defenses: 1%). These ads stressed policy (58%) more than character (42%). The Democratic candidate, as in previous elections, discussed policy more, and character less, than the Republican candidate. Both candidates had a tendency to discuss Democratic issues generally (and the economy and jobs in particular), but Obama stressed Democratic issues more, and Republican issues less, than McCain. This essay ends with discussion of some of the unique features of the 2008 general presidential campaign.

*Key Terms:* 2008 general election, TV advertising, Obama, McCain, functions, topics, issue ownership

### **Introduction**

The 2008 race for the White House had a number of unusual features. For the first time, an African-American, Barack Obama, was nominated to represent one of the two major political parties—and, for the first time, an African-American was elected president. For only the second time – and the first time in the Republican party – a woman was chosen as the vice presidential candidate (Governor Sarah Palin) for one of the two major parties. For the first time since 1952, no candidate was a sitting president or vice president. In 2008, candidates for the American presidency raised over one billion dollars (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009). Senator Barack Obama spent over \$235 million on television advertising; Senator John McCain spent over \$125 million (*New York Times*, 2008), a new record for presidential candidate advertising spending (these figures include both primary and general campaign spending). Part of this increase in spending (which meant more TV spots were broadcast, including a 30 minute spot aired by Obama near the end of the campaign) occurred because Obama was the first candidate in history to decline federal campaign funds for the general election. This meant he could spend more than the \$84 million limit; he could spend as much as he could raise. This study investigates the general election television spots of Obama and McCain, using Functional Theory. The main purpose of the study is to extend previous research, which has analyzed general election presidential TV spots from 1952 through 2004 (see Benoit, 2007) to include 2008, but also to study the ads from this campaign.

It is important to realize that political ads are not equally persuasive – nor is a given spot equally effective with all viewers. However, meta-analysis has established that political advertising can have significant effects on viewers. Benoit, Leshner, and Chattopadhyay (2007) found that political spots increased issue knowledge, influenced perceptions of the candidates' character, changed attitudes toward candidates, affected candidate preference (vote choice), and affected vote-likelihood (turn-out). Other meta-analyses (Allen & Burrell 2002; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007) have found no significant differences in the effects of negative versus positive ads. Clearly political television ads – both positive and negative – can affect viewers and merit scholarly attention.

### **Literature Review**

Presidential television advertising was first employed in 1952 in the campaign featuring Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stephenson (Benoit, 1999). Because this message form has such a prominent place in presidential campaigns for over half a century it is not surprising that TV spots have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Books on political advertising include Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), Benoit (1999), Diamond and Bates (1992), Dover (2006), Goldstein and Strach (2004), Jamieson (1996), Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991, 1997), Kaid and Johnston (2001), Kahn and Kenney (1999), Kern (1989), Lau and Pomper (2004), Maisel and West (2004), Nelson and Boynton (1997), Nesbit (1988), Schultz (2004), Thurber, Nelson, and Dulio (2000), and West (2001). Overall, from 1952-2004 (Benoit, 2007; see also Kaid & Johnston, 2001), televised ads in the general election campaign tend to be positive: 57% acclaims (positive statements), 40% attacks (criticisms of opponent), and 1% defenses (refutations of attack). Incumbents tend to offer more acclaims (64% to 55%) and fewer attacks (35% to 44%) than challengers (Benoit, 2007). Historically, these ads discuss policy (problems amenable to governmental action, past and future governmental action) more than character (personality) at a rate of 62% to 38% (Benoit, 2007). However, again some differences have emerged on topic emphasis. Democrats as a group tend to discuss policy more (64% to 59%) and character less (36% to 41%) than Republicans (Benoit, 2007). Gronbeck (1992) discussed negative political ads, focusing on narrative in the 1988 presidential campaign. He argued this campaign broke with tradition. Instead of confining most negative advertising in the general campaign, he argued that the 1988 campaign was negative throughout. Geer (2006) offers a different perspective on attack ads. Geer shows that such ads are more likely to discuss policy than character and are more likely to include evidence than positive ads. For a general discussion of political advertising, see Kaid (2004).

Kaid, Fernandes, and Painter (2011) investigated the effects of viewing TV spots from McCain and Obama on younger voters. Exposure occurred in October 2011. Participants learned more about the candidates' issue positions than their personal qualities. These ads increased evaluations of Obama but decreased evaluations of McCain. Exposure to ads increased political information efficacy, which increased their confidence that they were equipped to participate in the political system. Perhaps consistent with that finding, these ads did not increase

political cynicism. The study also reported that females learned more than males about issues and character.

Some research applied Functional Theory to other campaign messages besides advertising. Wicks et al. (2011) applied Functional Theory to campaign blogs in 2008. They found that candidates use blogs mainly for acclaims; political parties used them mainly for attacks, and that defenses were uncommon. Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock (2011) analyzed presidential primary debates from 2008. Candidates used acclaims more than attacks, with defenses the least common function. They discussed policy more than character. Democrats emphasized Democratic issues more than Republicans, whereas Republicans discussed Republican issues more than Democrats (see Petrocik, 1996). Benoit et al. (2011) looked at the extent to which presidential candidates in the 2008 primary were consistent across message forms (“staying on message”). Candidate messages frequently varied across medium in tone, topic, and issue emphasis. Morris and Johnson (2011) applied van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s (2004a, 2004b) praga-dialectic perspective to investigate strategic maneuvering in the three general election debates of 2008). We have been unable to locate studies on the content of the 2008 general election TV spots.

This study will content analyze TV spots from the 2008 presidential general election campaign using Functional Theory to see whether these trends continue. This paper first describes Functional Theory (and develops predictions and research questions), describes the method employed, reports results, and then discusses the findings.

### **Functional Theory**

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse was developed by Benoit and his associates through a series of studies (see, e.g., Benoit, 1999, 2007; Benoit et al., 1998, 2003). The most thorough overview can be found in Benoit (2007). Functional Theory posits citizens vote for the candidate who appears *preferable* on the criteria considered most important to each voter (Benoit, 2007). Candidates can demonstrate their desirability in three ways. First, the candidate can engage in acclaiming or self-praise. The greater the benefits or advantages of one candidate, the more likely that person will appear preferable to voters, compared with opponents. Second, candidates can attack or criticize opponents; as voters become aware of more costs or disadvantages of opponents, those competitors should appear less desirable to voters (of course, it is possible that the source of these attacks can experience a backlash from voters who dislike mudslinging). Finally, candidates who have been the target of attack can defend against (refute) those attacks. The fewer and smaller the costs or disadvantages, the more likely a candidate will appear preferable to opponents. These three options can be seen as roughly similar to cost-benefit analysis, providing information that can help persuade the voter to prefer one candidate (we do not claim that voters systematically quantify the impact of acclaims, attacks, or defenses or perform mathematical calculations to decide their vote choice; acclaims tend to increase one’s benefits, attacks may increase an opponent’s costs, and defenses can reduce one’s costs). For example, research on

German presidential debates has confirmed viewers react differently to acclaims and attacks (Reinemann & Maurer, 2005).

The three functions (acclaims, attacks, and defenses) can be employed on two distinct topics, policy (issues) or character (personality). Policy utterances address governmental action or problems that are amenable to governmental action. Character comments are about the candidates as individuals (personality, leadership experience, and values). Of course, the relative importance of these two general topics of discourse can vary from one voter to another. Functional Theory also subdivides the two topics into three forms of policy and three forms of character (see the Appendix for examples of acclaims and attacks on the three forms of policy and the three forms of character). Based on this theory, we advance several predictions concerning TV spots in the 2008 general presidential campaign.

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) anticipates that acclaims will be more common than attacks: Acclaims have no drawbacks, but because many voters report they dislike mudslinging (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975) there is some incentive to moderate attacks. Defenses are expected to be rare for three reasons: Most attacks occur where a candidate is weak, so responding to an attack will usually take the candidate off-message; one must identify an attack to refute it and that identification may inform or remind voters of a potential weakness; and attacks may create the undesirable impression that the candidate is reactive rather than proactive.

*H1:* American presidential TV spots in the 2008 general election campaign will use more acclaims than attacks and more attacks than defenses.

As the literature review made clear, this prediction is consistent with past research on presidential TV spots (Benoit, 2007).

As the literature review indicated, as a group incumbents tend to be more positive (more acclaims, fewer attacks) than challengers (Benoit, 2007). This is in part due to the nature of their record in office: Only the incumbent has a record in the presidency, and that record is arguably the most relevant evidence for how one will perform in that office. Both candidates have a tendency to discuss the incumbent's record more often than the challenger's record. Of course, when incumbents talk about their record in office, they tend to acclaim. In contrast, when challengers discuss the incumbent's record, they are prone to attack.

*H2:* The incumbent party candidates in 2008 general election campaign spots will acclaim more, and attack less, than the challenger.

Of course, as noted earlier, there is no true incumbent in 2008: President George W. Bush is at the end of his second term and Vice President Dick Cheney decided not to run for the presidency. Still, McCain is of the same party as the president and this relationship may continue in 2008.

Research on previous presidential TV Spots has found that policy is more common than character (Benoit, 2007). Public opinion polls for presidential

(Benoit, 2003) elections in America reveal that most voters say policy is a more important influence on their vote than character. Because candidates have incentive to adapt to voter desires, Functional Theory predicts that policy will receive a heavier emphasis than character:

*H3:* American presidential TV spots in the 2008 general election campaign will discuss policy more than character.

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that in general, Democrats are more likely to emphasize policy than Republicans, whereas Republicans discuss character more than Democrats. Democrats have a proclivity to see governmental solutions to problems whereas Republicans often prefer private action (e.g., charity). This means Democrats are more likely to discuss policy than Republicans. Research on prior presidential TV spots (Benoit, 2007) confirms this expectation.

*H4:* The Democratic candidate will discuss policy more, and character less, than Republican candidate in 2008 American general election TV spots.

This study also investigates the distribution of the three forms of policy and three forms of character in these ads.

*RQ1:* What is the relative emphasis on the three forms of policy in 2008 American presidential general election TV spots?

*RQ2:* What is the relative emphasis on the three forms of character in 2008 American presidential general election TV spots?

See the Appendix for illustrations of attacks and acclaims on the three forms of policy and three forms of character.

Functional Theory predicts candidates will be more likely to use general goals and ideals as the basis for acclaims rather than attacks (Benoit, 2007). Some ends or principles are not really susceptible to attack: How does one oppose a goal such as creating jobs or making America secure? The last hypotheses predict that:

*H5:* General goals will be employed more frequently as the basis for acclaims than for attacks in 2008 American presidential general election TV spots.

*H6:* Ideals will be employed more frequently as the basis for acclaims than for attacks in 2008 American presidential general election TV spots.

One additional prediction, derived from issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) will be investigated in this study. Over time, each of the two major political parties in the U.S. has become associated with different issues: More voters think one party can better deal with a given issue than the other party. For example, people tend to believe that Democrats can do a better job handling such issues as education and the environment; citizens are prone to think Republicans

can do a better job handling such issues as taxes and crime. Petrocik (1996) predicts presidential candidates are likely to discuss the issues owned by their own political party more often than candidates from the other party. Research has supported this prediction in presidential nomination acceptance addresses and general television spots (Petrocik, Hansen, & Benoit, 2003/2004) as well as in presidential primary and general election debates (Benoit & Hansen, 2004). This study will investigate this prediction in the 2008 presidential primary debates:

*H7: Democrats discuss Democratic issues more, and Republican issues less, than Republicans in 2008 American presidential general election TV spots.*

These hypotheses and research questions will guide this analysis of television spots from the 2008 American general election presidential campaign.

## Method

### *Sample*

The texts of TV spots broadcast by Obama and McCain in the general election campaign (defined as ads run after a candidate clinched his political party's nomination) were obtained from several sources. Some ads were downloaded from the candidates' webpages and some were obtained from the *National Journal's* webpage. The sample was limited to ads broadcast on television, omitting web-only ads. This decision made the current sample comparable to samples from past research. Furthermore, it seems likely that web-only ads have a different audience (i.e., we believe a candidate's supporters are most likely to watch web-ads rather than independent voters, undecided voters, or voters who currently support the opposing political party). 80 Obama ads and 69 McCain ads comprised the sample (no ads sponsored exclusively by political parties or ads from 527 groups or PACs were included).

### *Coding Procedures*

The content analysis, following previous research using the Functional approach, employed four steps. First, the texts of spots were unitized into themes, or utterances that address a coherent idea (only candidate remarks were coded, although questions were part of the context unit used to interpret the candidates' utterances). Benoit (2000) described the theme as "the smallest unit of discourse that is capable of expressing a complete idea" (p. 280). Similarly, Berelson (1952) indicated a theme is "an assertion about a subject" (p. 18). Holsti (1969) defines a theme as "a single assertion about some subject" (p. 116). Themes vary in length from a short phrase to several sentences: The textual excerpt must focus on a single idea to qualify as a theme.

Second, each themes' function was classified using the following rules: *Acclaims* portray the candidate speaking favorably. *Attacks* portray opponents unfavorably. *Defenses* respond to a prior attack on the candidate who is speaking.

Almost all in the texts of the debates in our sample served one of these functions; the very few other (non-functional) utterances that occurred were not analyzed.

Third, the topic of each theme was classified according to these rules: *Policy* remarks concern governmental action and problems amenable to such action. *Character* remarks address properties, abilities, or attributes of the candidates.

Because defenses occur infrequently they were not coded by topic (policy or character). Finally, policy themes were coded into one of the three forms of policy while character themes were categorized as one of the three forms of character. The Appendix provides examples of acclaims and attacks on the three forms of policy and of character, taken from a 2008 presidential primary debate.

Lexis-Nexis polls from the Roper Center in 2007 were employed to select the issues employed to test the last hypothesis on issue ownership. Iraq, the economy/jobs, health care, education, and the environment were chosen as issues owned by the Democratic party; immigration, terrorism, abortion, taxes, and crime were selected as Republican issues.

An advertisement from Obama (“Coin”) illustrates how these texts were coded:

OBAMA: I’m Barack Obama and I approve this message.

ANNOUNCER: On health care, there are two sides. Barack Obama would require insurance companies to cover routine treatments like vaccines and mammograms [acclaim, policy, future plans, health care]. John McCain would deregulate the insurance giants, letting them bypass patient protections in your state [attack, policy, general goals, health care]. Obama would force insurance companies to cover pre-existing conditions [acclaims, policy, future plans, health care]. McCain would let them continue to do as they please [attack, policy, future plans, health care]. Isn’t your health care too important to be left to chance?

This ad contains four codable themes, two acclaims and two attacks.

We employed Cohen’s for calculating inter-coder reliability because this statistic controls for agreement by chance. Reliability was calculated on about 10% of the texts. The  $s$  were .97 for functions, .94 for topics, .91 for forms of policy, .87 for forms of character, and .86 for issue addressed. Landis and Koch (1977) indicate these levels of agreement are acceptable:  $s$  of .81 and above reflect “almost perfect” agreement (p. 165). We can place confidence in the reliability of these data.

## Results

The first hypothesis concerned the distribution of functions in these ads. Table 1 reveals that 34% of themes were acclaims, 65% attacks, and 0.4% defenses. For example, a spot for McCain (“Spread the Wealth”) relied on Governor Charlie Crist: “John McCain ... will stop wasteful government spending.” Most voters would agree that eliminating “wasteful” spending is a good idea, so this utterance functions as an acclaim. An Obama ad stated that “John McCain’s health care plan” is “going to tax health care benefits.” Presumably, most voters would not favor taxing health care benefits, so this illustrates an attack. The McCain campaign used video footage of Obama’s eventual running mate, Joe

Biden, raising questions about Obama's qualifications for office in a Democratic primary debate. The Obama ad "Tested" used another statement from Biden to refute that attack:

ANNOUNCER: Here's what Biden actually said about Barack Obama.

BIDEN: They're going to find out this guy's got steel in his spine.

This excerpt illustrates a defense. A *chi-square goodness of fit* test reveals that this distribution is significant ( $X^2 [df = 2, 778] = 486.51, p < .0001$ ). However, the functions are not ordered as in past campaigns: attacks were almost twice as common as acclaims, so this hypothesis was not supported (the frequency of acclaims versus attacks was also significant:  $X^2 [df = 1, 775] = 70.66, p < .0001$ ). Note that Obama's 30 minute advertisement (not added in with his other spots) relied heavily on acclaims (82%), suggesting he wanted the final impression he made in his advertising messages to be mainly positive.

Table 1  
*Function of 2008 General Presidential TV Spots*

|                 | Acclaims   | Attacks    | Defenses |
|-----------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Obama (79 ads)  | 133 (32%)  | 281 (68%)  | 2 (0.5%) |
| McCain (67 ads) | 137 (38%)  | 224 (62%)  | 1 (0.3%) |
| Total           | 270 (34%)  | 505 (65%)  | 3 (0.4%) |
| Obama 30 min ad | 120 (82%)  | 26 (18%)   | 0        |
| 1952-2004       | 3454 (57%) | 2339 (40%) | 71 (1%)  |

Hypothesis two contrasted the functions of the incumbent- and challenger-party candidates. Although Obama's ads had a larger percentage of attacks, and a smaller percentage of acclaims, these differences were not significant ( $X^2 [df = 1, 775] = 2.88, p > .05$ ). H2 was not supported in these data.

H3 predicted that these ads would discuss policy more often than character. 58% of the themes were policy while 42% concerned character. For example, Obama's spot "Defining Moment" declared that:

I'll launch a rescue plan for the middle class that begins with a tax cut for 95% of working Americans.... I'll end the tax breaks for companies that ship our jobs overseas and given them to companies that create jobs here in America. And I'll make low-cost loans available to small businesses.

Each of these proposals concern policy. In contrast, McCain's "TV Special" advertisement stated that "Barack Obama lacks the experience American needs,"

a criticism of his character (leadership ability). These differences were statistically significant ( $X^2 [df = 1, 775] = 21.14, p < .0001$ ), so H3 was supported. See Table 2 for these data.

Table 2

*Topic of 2008 General Presidential TV Spots*

|                 | Policy     | Character  |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Obama           | 256 (62%)  | 158 (38%)  |
| McCain          | 196 (54%)  | 165 (46%)  |
| Total           | 452 (58%)  | 323 (42%)  |
| Obama 30 min ad | 80 (55%)   | 66 (45%)   |
| 1952-2004       | 3581 (62%) | 2212 (38%) |

H4 anticipated that Obama, the Democratic nominee, would discuss policy more (and character less) than McCain, the Republican nominee. Both candidates emphasized policy over character, but the contrast was larger for Obama (62% to 38%) than for McCain (54% to 46%). These differences were significant ( $X^2 [df = 1, 775] = 4.51, p < .05, phi = .08$ ), confirming this prediction.

The two research questions concerned the relative frequency of the three forms of policy and of character in these ads. When Obama and McCain discussed policy, general goals were most common (51%) followed by past deeds (35%) and future plans (14%). When the candidates addressed character personal qualities were discussed most often (60%), followed by leadership ability and ideals (both 20%). See Table 3 for these data.

Table 3  
Forms of Policy and Character in 2008 Presidential General Election TV Spots

|                 | Policy     |      |              |     |               |     |                    |     | Character          |     |           |    |
|-----------------|------------|------|--------------|-----|---------------|-----|--------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|-----------|----|
|                 | Past Deeds |      | Future Plans |     | General Goals |     | Personal Qualities |     | Leadership Ability |     | Ideals    |    |
| Obama           | 20         | 84   | 14           | 35  | 68            | 42  | 15                 | 88  | 4                  | 24  | 19        | 17 |
|                 | 104 (40%)  |      | 49 (19%)     |     | 110 (42%)     |     | 103 (62%)          |     | 28 (17%)           |     | 36 (22%)  |    |
| McCain          | 12         | 49   | 10           | 9   | 69            | 64  | 32                 | 69  | 15                 | 25  | 7         | 24 |
|                 | 61 (29%)   |      | 19 (9%)      |     | 133 (62%)     |     | 101 (59%)          |     | 40 (23%)           |     | 31 (18%)  |    |
| Total 2008      | 32         | 133  | 24           | 44  | 137           | 106 | 47                 | 157 | 19                 | 49  | 26        | 41 |
|                 | 165 (35%)  |      | 68 (14%)     |     | 243 (51%)     |     | 204 (60%)          |     | 68 (20%)           |     | 67 (20%)  |    |
| Total 1952-2004 | 715        | 1174 | 358          | 331 | 911           | 92  | 601                | 555 | 547                | 126 | 322       | 61 |
|                 | 1889 (53%) |      | 689 (19%)    |     | 1003 (28%)    |     | 1156 (52%)         |     | 674 (30%)          |     | 383 (17%) |    |

Note. Percentages do not always total to 100% due to rounding.

The next two predictions concerned the functions of utterances using general goals and ideals. Although the percentages for general goals were in the predicted direction (56% acclaims, 44% attacks), this difference was not significant ( $X^2 [df = 1, 243] = 3.36, p > .05$ ). Ideals were used more often to attack than acclaim (61% to 39%), significant ( $X^2 [df = 1, 67] = 3.95, p < .05$ ) but in the wrong direction. Thus, neither hypothesis H5 nor H6 were supported.

The final prediction concerned issue ownership. Both candidates had a tendency to emphasize Democratic issues in their ads, but this proclivity was much more pronounced in Obama's (70% to 30%) than McCain's (57% to 43%) ads. These differences were significant ( $X^2 [df = 1, 292] = 5.17, p < .05, \phi = .13$ ). So, this hypothesis was supported (see Table 4 for these data).

Table 4.

*Issue Ownership in General TV Spots*

|        | Democratic Republican |          |
|--------|-----------------------|----------|
| Obama  | 128 (70%)             | 54 (30%) |
| McCain | 63 (57%)              | 47 (43%) |

### Discussion

The 2008 presidential campaign advertisements analyzed here are the most negative in the history of American televised presidential spots (disconfirming H1). These ads were even more negative than those of the heated 1952 campaign season between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson: 69% of the statements in Eisenhower's TV spots were negative (Benoit, 1999). Many of the attacks made by Obama came by way of attempts to associate his opponent with President George W. Bush, whose approval rating in October of 2008 was at just 22% (Cooper & Sussman, 2008, October 31). Although there was no true incumbent in this election (as in 1952), the Obama campaign worked hard to present McCain as a surrogate incumbent- a Republican candidate who would continue the policies of the current Republican administration. McCain's party affiliation may have very well been the first strike against him, but the Obama team worked hard to find additional ways of making a McCain presidency look like four more years of George W. Bush. This echoes 1952, when Eisenhower attacked Stevenson as if the Democrat was part of the current administration (Benoit, 1999).

Some of the attacks designed to link McCain to Bush made reference to John McCain's past deeds. For instance, an ad titled "Delighted" reminded voters that McCain "voted with Bush and Cheney 90 percent of the time." For the voter who does not approve of President Bush, such claims could raise serious doubts about McCain's candidacy. Perhaps even more damning was the "90 Percent" ad in which the same claim comes from McCain's own mouth: "I voted with the president over 90 percent of the time -- higher than a lot of my -- Republican colleagues." This ad suggests not only that McCain thinks like Bush, but that McCain's votes may be partly responsible for many of the country's

current troubles. By using reluctant testimony in which McCain's own words are used against him, the potential appeal of the ad increases.

Importantly, other ads connecting McCain to Bush were focused on the future. After questioning the character of McCain's closest advisors, an ad titled "Who Advises?" asserts, "Then there's George Bush, whose disastrous policies McCain wants to continue." President Bush's position at the end of a long list of questionable characters implies that Bush may in fact be the worst offender of all. Many ads like this provided visual reinforcement of the connection between Bush and McCain by featuring photographs of the two standing side by side. One such ad ("Never") also featured a narrator claiming, "We just can't afford more of the same." Other Obama ads were more specific in their attempts to link the two Republicans. For instance, "New Energy" focused on off-shore drilling policy, telling voters, "McCain and Bush support a drilling plan that won't produce a drop of oil for seven years." Another ad, titled "Floridians Hurting" tackled economic woes: "McCain promises more of the same failed Bush policies that got our economy into this mess in the first place." These ads address specific issues and still invoke the same guilt-by-association appeal echoed throughout the rest of the campaign.

Although our study does not speak to the effectiveness of Obama's attempt to paint McCain as the incumbent, poll data suggests that many Americans saw it as Obama did. Just one day prior to the election, the *Washington Post* reported that half of all likely voters saw connections between McCain and Bush (Cohen & Agiesta, 2008, November 3).

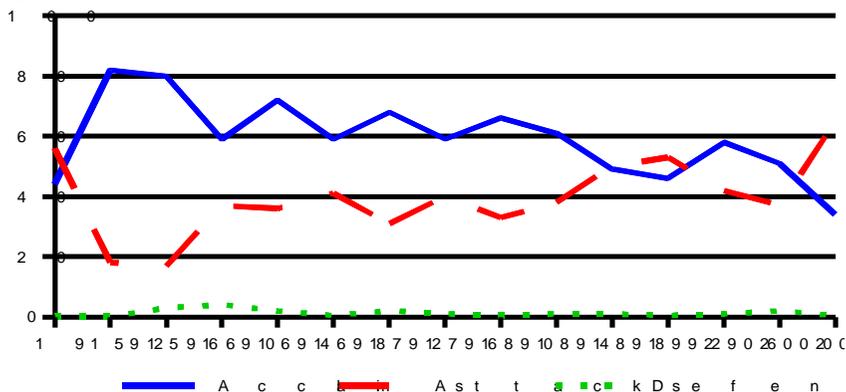
Notably, Obama was not the only candidate to use this guilt-by-association tactic in his advertisements. Obama's tax plan was a prominent theme of attack for McCain. To emphasize that his opponent would raise taxes, McCain often tried to associate Obama with other politicians who are perceived as likely to raise taxes. In "Spread the Wealth," an announcer warns: "Barack Obama and congressional liberals call it 'spreading the wealth around.' We call it higher taxes, bigger government." This ad attempts to link Obama to unnamed "congressional liberals" who would also institute tax policies with which Americans might not agree.

Statistically, McCain's advertising was no less negative than Obama's. This is notable because if McCain were a true incumbent, and not merely a surrogate incumbent, as he has been labeled here, he would have been expected to use fewer attacks and more acclaims (as H2 predicted). Because he had never been part of the executive branch, he was unable to acclaim any past achievements as president or vice president that could serve as evidence of his fitness for office.

Consistent with previous research (Benoit, 1999), these spots contained very few defenses. There are many reasons candidates would choose not to defend themselves against their opponent's attacks. Candidates who use valuable airtime to refute an opponent risk reminding audiences of prior attacks they might prefer be forgotten. Furthermore, this can take a candidate off message, forcing them to speak about a topic on which they may already be viewed as weak. For fear of appearing reactive rather than proactive, both McCain and Obama limited their use of defenses. The fact that Obama spent so much money

on television advertising in 2008 (more than ever before) meant his messages had a reach (audience exposure) unparalleled in history. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of general election TV spot functions over time.

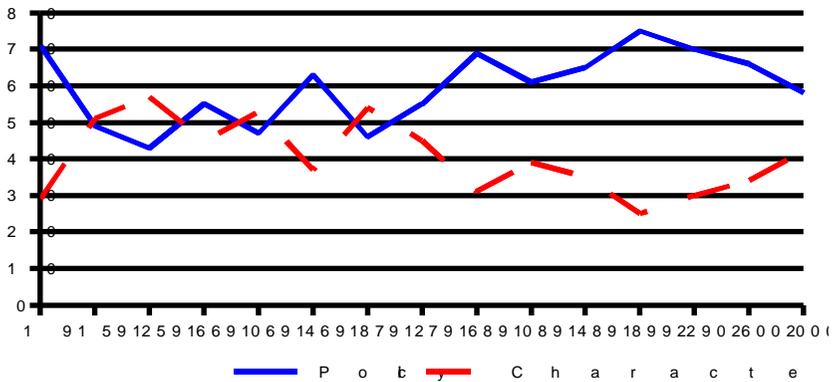
Figure 1. *Functions of General Election Presidential TV Spots, 1952-2008*



As in previous presidential campaigns, candidates spoke more about policy than they did character (as predicted by H3). In fact, this campaign's distribution of 58% policy remarks and 42% character utterances matches what was revealed by analysis of all previous presidential campaign spots (Benoit, 2007). H4, which predicted a difference in topic of utterance based on party affiliation was also upheld. Democrats tend to speak about policy more, and character less than Republicans. A common explanation for this is a willingness on the part of Democrats to suggest government solutions to society's problems. Conversely, Republicans tend to see such problems as best resolved by the private sector. Figure 2 depicts the topics of general election TV spots over time.

The distribution of forms of policy (RQ1) and character (RQ2) are reported above. The use of these forms to attack or acclaim during this campaign suggest differences from previous campaigns. Candidates were predicted to use general goals to acclaim themselves more often than to attack their opponents (H5). Similarly, it was predicted, based on previous research, that candidates would use ideals to acclaim more often than to attack (H6). Analysis of the data collected from the 2008 presidential TV spots suggests no statistical support for either of these predictions. The best explanation for this is probably the sheer volume of attacks in this body of discourse. Because candidates were on the attack so often, it is little surprise that they would attack on sub-topics of policy and character more often than other presidential candidates have.

Figure 2. *Topics of General Election Presidential TV Spots, 1952-2008*



Additional explanation comes from the lack of a true incumbent in this race. Typically, a challenger-party candidate will attack an incumbent on their past deeds as president. However, with neither candidate having ever been President of the United States, the campaigns were forced to attack on other forms of policy about which they might not typically be so negative, such as general goals. This may have also encouraged candidates to attack on forms of character, such as ideals, more than they normally might.

Where issue ownership is concerned, Obama, a Democrat, talked about Democratic issues more, and Republican issues less, than McCain, a Republican (as predicted by H7). Obama. As expected, candidates played to their own strengths, sticking to the issues their own political party is perceived as handling well. The economy was the single issue about which Obama spoke most, ac-claiming his goals and plans for dealing with the recent economic downturn and attacking McCain’s inability to adequately address the problem. McCain’s ads spoke most often about taxes, creating concern that Obama would raise taxes, and reassuring voters that his own policies were more fair than Obama’s.

That both candidates discussed more Democratic issues than Republican ones must be interpreted as an advantage for Barack Obama and the Democrats. Obama was able to discuss issues on which his party is regarded as strong or effective, while McCain was forced to discuss issues that are viewed as relative weakness for his party. A Gallup poll confirms that Americans viewed Democrat-owned issues as more important than Republican-owned issues in 2008. The economy, Iraq, health care, and education comprised 72% of all responses when people were asked which issue is most important to them. Republican-owned issues such as immigration, terrorism, taxes, abortion, and crime, collectively made up just 10% of the public’s responses. It can therefore be argued that the candidates, in addressing Democratic-owned issues so often, were responding to the public’s concerns. McCain was forced by events (the economic melt-down) and corresponding public opinion to focus more on Democratic-than Republican-owned issues. Still, it certainly benefitted Obama that the num-

ber one issue of concern among voters- the economy, is an issue his party is viewed as being best able to handle. Research on issue ownership in TV spots in the past shows that candidates tend to address Republican issues more than Democratic issues – although Republican candidates discussed GOP-owned issues even more than Democrats (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hanesn, 2003-2004).

### Conclusion

The advertisements analyzed here demonstrated some similarities to presidential campaign spots analyzed previously. For instance, these candidates discussed policy more than character. Additionally, as previous research would predict, there were differences related to party affiliation. More specifically, Democrats discussed policy more, and character less than Republicans. Another important similarity relates to issue ownership; Democrats discussed Democrat-owned issues more, and Republican-owned issues less than Republicans.

Importantly, there were also differences between these advertisements and ones run in previous presidential elections. Many, but not all, of these differences relate to the lack of a true incumbent in the race. Functional analysis suggests that these ads were more negative than those used in any other presidential campaign. Candidates actually attacked more often than they acclaimed. Candidates also attacked relatively more than they acclaimed on sub-topics such as ideals and general goals, thus marking another difference from other campaigns.

Although these findings are limited to a particular campaign season at just one level of government, they nonetheless provide important, and sometimes surprising information regarding the unique context of the 2008 presidential election. Ultimately, this study has contributed to our knowledge regarding a campaign medium of utmost prominence in our democratic society. Future research should include web-only ads and examine advertising in other countries and at lower levels of government in the U.S. It would be interesting to combine functional analysis with issue ownership: do candidates use acclaims and attacks at the same rate with issues owned by their party and by the opposition party? Ads from non-candidate groups are also worth studying. The emergence of SuperPACs in the 2012 primary suggests that negative advertising may increase in the future.

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## Appendix

### Examples of Acclaims and Attacks on Forms of Policy and Character

#### Policy

##### *Past Deeds*

Acclaim: I “authored the Family and Medical Leave Act” (Dodd)

Attack: “This administration’s been fundamentally derelict in not funding any of the requirements that are needed even to enforce the existing [immigration] law” (Biden)

##### *Future Plans*

Acclaim: “I will immediately draw down 40-50,000 troops and, over the course of the next several months, continue to bring our combat troops out of Iraq until all of our combat troops are in fact out of Iraq” (Edwards)

Attack: The president “intends to have about 100,000 or so troops [in Iraq] when he leaves office ... he would leave this war to his successor” (Clinton)

### *General Goals*

Acclaim: “I will do everything I can to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power” (Clinton)

Attack: “I have a fundamental difference with Senator Obama, Senator Edwards, and Senator Clinton. . . . Their position is basically changing the mission” in Iraq (Richardson)

### Character

#### *Personal Qualities*

Acclaim: “I remember where I came from. I remembered my parents counting pennies to pay the utility bills. . . , and so I know why I went into public office. I went in to stand up for the people” (Kucinich)

Attack: “I think it’s important for the next president to tell the American people not just what they want to hear or to tell our base what they want to hear” (Obama)

#### *Leadership Ability*

Acclaim: “My experience on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, knowing how challenging it will be to take on the special interests. . . gives me a special insight into what we must do” (Clinton)

Attack: “Rudy Giuliani doesn’t know what the heck he’s talking about. He’s the most uninformed person on American foreign policy now running for president” (Biden)

#### *Ideals*

Acclaim: “You have to remember the message of the Statue of Liberty. That is who America is: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses” (Kucinich)

Attack: spending far more on Iraq than cancer research “shows the mistaken priorities that we have in this country” (Richardson)

All examples taken from the 9/26/07 Democratic primary debate.

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