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A Functional Analysis of 2008 Presidential Primary TV Spots

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Abstract

The 2008 presidential campaign was unusual for a number of reasons. For the first time since 1952, neither the President nor the Vice President contended for the Oval Office. This meant highly contested primaries in both major political parties. As the Democratic primary ground toward the end, the leading candidates were an African-American–Barack Obama–and a woman–Hillary Clinton. More money was raised and spent on the primary campaign than ever before. This means that the campaign messages in this election deserve scholarly attention. This study applies Benoit's Functional Theory and Petrocik's Issue Ownership Theory to primary campaign ads from both major parties in this campaign. Ads from both political parties used acclaims more than attacks (no defenses occurred in these ads) and discussed policy more than character. They discussed the issues owned by their own party more than those owned by the opposing party. Despite the unusual features of this election, the campaign messages produced were similar to those from previous campaigns.

Key Terms: Functional Theory, Issue Ownership Theory, 2008, presidential, primary, TV spots

Introduction

The 2008 presidential election reflected many firsts: The first time since 1952 neither major party nominee was a sitting president or vice-president, the first time the Republicans nominated a woman for vice-president (the Democrats selected Geraldine Ferraro in 1984), the first time a major party nominee was an African-American, the first time a presidential candidate declined public financing for the general election (Barack Obama). Furthermore, the presidential primary campaign also had several points of interest. Both major political parties had contested primaries. The Democratic campaign came down to a race between an African-American (Barack Obama, who secured the nomination) and a woman (former First Lady and Senator Hillary Clinton). The primary started earlier than ever, with New Hampshire moving its primary from January 27 (2004) to January 22 (2008). The state of Florida violated rules about the date of its primary and at first none of the delegates were allowed to vote at the Democratic National Convention; eventually the state delegate count was halved. Did the campaign messages produced in these circumstances resemble those from past campaigns? This phase of the presidential campaign clearly merits scholarly attention.

Literature Review

Research has investigated the nature primary television advertising in earlier presidential campaigns. This work will be divided into two major dimensions: the functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses – or positive and negative ads) and the topics (policy and character or issue and image) of these commercials.

Functions of Presidential Primary TV Spots

Kaid and Ballotti (1991) performed content analysis on more than 1,000 presidential primary campaign advertisements broadcast from 1968-1988. They reported that 18% of these ads were negative and the rest positive. West (1993), examining 262 primary spots from 1952-1992, reported that primary spots were mostly negative (55%). Benoit (2007) summarized content analysis of presidential primary TV spots from 1952-2004, indicating that 72% of the utterances in these ads were acclaims, 27% attacks, and 1% defenses. Except for West's study (which does not use a random sample of spots), extant research suggests that presidential primary spots tend to be relatively positive.

Other studies have investigated political advertising in specific primary campaigns. Payne, Marlier, and Baukus (1989) reported that 11% of the primary campaign ads in 1988 were negative. Kaid (1994) indicated that in 1992 about 17% of the Republican and Democratic primary commercials were attack ads. In 1996, 21% of the primary television advertisements were negative (Kaid, 1998). Taken as a whole this research also suggests that primary TV spots are mainly positive. This study extends this work by providing data on the functions of the primary television ads from the 2008 presidential primary campaign.

Topics of Presidential Primary Television Spots

The content of presidential primary television advertisements can also be analyzed by topic, as discussing either policy (issues) or character (image). Kaid and Ballotti's (1991) study or presidential primary commercials from 1968-1988 reported that 48% of these ads addressed issues while 32% discussed image. West (1993), who examined 150 presidential TV ads from 1972 to 1992, indicated that policy appeals were over twice as prominent in primaries (65%) than character (30% of ads; the other 5% of the ads discussed the campaign and parties). Benoit's (2007) summary of multiple studies of primary ads from 1952-2004 found that 54% of the themes in these spots concerned policy and 46% addressed character. He also reported a trend, beginning in 1980, of a greater emphasis of policy than character.

Again, studies of specific presidential primary elections also investigated the topics of these ads. Kaid (1994) reported that 59% of the television advertisements in 1992 concerned image, and 24% addressed issues. Kaid also found (1998) that the 1996 presidential primary spots were skewed to image, 59% to 41%. The discrepancy between Kaid's results and other research could stem from either the difference in procedures (Kaid codes entire spots, Functional Theory codes themes) or from the fact that Kaid seems to separate negative spots from image and issue spots: She categorized ads as negative, image, or issue (of course, negative ads can discuss either image or issues). So, policy

(issues) is discussed somewhat more than character (image) but the relatively emphasis on these two topics may vary somewhat from campaign to campaign.

Theoretical Foundations

This study investigates presidential primary TV spots from the 2008 presidential campaign. It uses two theories – Functional Theory and Issue Ownership Theory – as a theoretical foundation. Each theory and the predictions derived will be discussed next.

Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign discourse (e.g., Benoit, 1999, 2007) to test the first two hypotheses on presidential primary TV spots from the 2008 election. This theory posits that political campaign messages are essential comparative: Each candidate strives to win by persuading voters that he (or she) is *preferable* to other candidates (occasionally a candidate will run more to champion a cause than to seek office; Functional Theory is not designed for such candidates). The choice for president need not be (or, reasonably, can be expected to be) perfect. He or she only must appear *better* for this office than opponents for enough voters. Three message strategies are available to demonstrate one's preferability.

First, a candidate can employ acclaims, engaging in self-praise. The more desirable a candidate appears to a voter, the more likely that candidate will receive a citizen's vote. For example, an ad for Clinton ("Change") declared, "We will end this war. We will give health coverage to everyone. We will be energy independent." Ending the war, providing health coverage, and energy independence are goals that are likely to appeal to many Democrats, making these utterances acclaims.

Second, candidate messages can criticize or attack opponents. An attack (if persuasive to the audience) can increase the attacker's *net* favor ability by reducing the apparent desirability of the opponent. For instance, an ad sponsored by Romney ("Remember") attacked his opponent in this passage: "John McCain has been one of those Republicans that have been wrong on tax cuts." This utterance functions to criticize his opponent, illustrating an attack.

Third, when a candidate is subjected to an attack, he or she can attempt to defend, or refute, the accusation in the attack. A defense may be able to restore some preferability lost to an attack (there were no examples of defenses in the sample of TV spots for this study).

These three functions work together as an informal variant of cost-benefit analysis. Acclaims are designed to increase a candidate's perceived benefits. Attacks, on the other hand, are intended to increase an opponent's apparent costs (so attacks increase *net* favorability). Defenses are employed to reduce a candidate's perceived costs (again, increasing *net* favorability). Each strategy contributes to the candidate's goal of persuading voters that the candidate is *preferable* to opponents. It is important to note that citizens do not constantly quantify pros and cons, performing mathematical calculations (making a voting decision is a *variant* of cost-benefit analysis). Rather, acclaims tend to increase the candi-

date's perceived benefits, attacks can increase an opponent's perceived costs, and defenses are capable of reducing the candidates' apparent costs. Together, these functions can increase the likelihood that a candidate will be perceived as preferable to an opponent.

Functional Theory predicts that the most common function of political campaign messages will be acclaims, which have no drawbacks. No utterance is automatically persuasive – indeed, different audience members (e.g., Democrats versus Republicans) often react differently to a given message because of their beliefs and values. However, attacks have a potential drawback, which does not apply to acclaims: Voters often say they do not dislike mudslinging (e.g., Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). This means that attacking risks inciting backlash from voters; it does not mean candidates never attack but it gives then an incentive to attack less than they acclaim. Finally, defenses have three potential drawbacks. Given the fact that candidates usually are attacked on their weakest areas, defending against an attack usually takes the candidate off-message. Second, one must identify an attack in order to refute it; this means a defense could inform the audience of an attack they did not know about or remind them of a weakness they had forgotten. Finally, defending could create the impression that a candidate is reactive rather than proactive. For these reasons, Functional Theory anticipates that defenses will be the least frequent function used in political campaign messages. This means the first hypothesis tested here is:

H1: Acclaims will be more common than attacks, and defenses will be the least
     common function.

Functional Theory posits that campaign discourse can address two potential topics: policy and character. Other scholars utilize the terms "issue" for policy and "image" for character. However, this usage has drawbacks. "Issue" has two very distinct meanings. It can refer to policy questions, as we would use the term here. However, "issue" can also represent a question on which people disagree. Because political candidates at times discuss character (e.g., is my opponent honest?), character or image can be considered an issue in the second sense of the term). Furthermore, because discourse concerns perceptions of reality, it is possible speak of the "image" a candidate projects on policy, or the issues. To avoid these possible problems, Functional Theory uses the word "policy" rather than "issues" and "character" rather than "image."

It is important to acknowledge that the two concepts of policy and character are interrelated (see, e.g., Hacker, Zakahi, Giles, & McQuitty, 2000; Hinck, 1993; Rosenthal, 1966). Devlin (1995) explains, "I make no distinction [between image and issue ads] because issue ads really do create image impressions on the part of the viewer, and image ads can convey substantive information" (p. 203). Such a "spill-over" effect, in which a message addressing one topic influences the voter's perceptions on the other topic, can occur in either direction. A candidate who frequently brings up social concerns (e.g., the homeless) -- policy -- may well foster them the impression that he or she is a caring and compassionate individual -- a character impression. On the other hand, a candidate who

frequently declares that he or she cares for people, a character trait, may be assumed to have a agenda for helping the homeless, a policy question. Nevertheless, it is useful to classify campaign messages by topic. It seems likely that campaign messages would have larger effects on their explicit topics compared with the "spill-over" effect on the other topic.

Some discourse in political campaign messages addresses policy considerations. For example, Obama ("President") declared, "I'll be a president who finally makes health care affordable to every single American by bringing Democrats and Republicans together. I'll be a president who ends the tax breaks for companies that ship our jobs overseas and put a middle-class tax cut into the pockets of working Americans. And I'll be a president who ends this war in Iraq and finally bring our troops home." These topics – health care, taxes, jobs, war – illustrate discussion of policy.

The other topic of campaign discourse is character. McCain's TV spot "Backbone of Steel" declared, "John has a backbone of steel. He's a man of principle who sticks to his guns. He's been tested like no other politician in America. As a prisoner of war, he turned down an offer for early release because he refused preferential treatment." Talking about the candidate's backbone and principle illustrates character utterances.

Functional Theory expects that generally policy will be discussed more often than character in presidential campaign discourse. It appears that more voters believe the president is a policy maker instead of a role model. Research has established that (1) more citizens say policy is the most important determinant of their vote for president, rather than character, and (2) those who win presidential primary and general elections tend to discuss policy more, and character less, than losers (Benoit, 2003). These considerations lead Functional Theory to hypothesize that:

H2: Candidates will discuss policy more than character.

Functional Theory divides policy utterances into three forms of policy: past deeds – record in office, successes or failures – future plans – future governmental action, means – and general goals – ends sought by future government action. Character utterances can discuss personal qualities – character traits, such as honesty, empathy, or determination – leadership ability – skill in governing, experience in government – and ideals – values or principles. The Appendix offers an example of an acclaim and an attack on each form of policy and character. This study will also answer two research questions:

RQ1: What are the relative frequencies of the three forms of policy?
RQ2: What are the relative frequencies of the three forms of character?

Issue Ownership Theory
Petrocik (1996) developed Issue Ownership Theory to understand issue emphasis in political campaign massages. Over time, each of the two major political parties in the U.S. has become associated with different sets of 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 that Republicans can do a better job handling such issues as taxes and crime. Petrocik (1996) predicts that 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, Benoit, & Hansen, 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 ads:

H3: Democrats discuss Democratic issues more, and Republican issues less,
      than Republicans.

Method

This study began by obtaining the texts of presidential primary TV spots from the 2008 presidential campaign. First, the advertisements were unitized into themes, or utterances that address a coherent idea. Berelson (1952) explained that a theme is "an assertion about a subject" (p. 18). Holsti (1969) defined a theme as "a single assertion about some subject" (p. 116). Because naturally occurring discourse is enthymematic, themes can vary in length from a phrase to several sentences. Each part of a statement was broken into a separate theme whenever that part of the utterance would have been considered a theme if it had appeared alone. For instance, if a candidate said, "I will create jobs, reduce taxes, and protect the environment," that statement would be considered three themes because it has three subjects: jobs, taxes, and the environment.

The next step in the coding procedure was to classify each theme by function (as an acclaim, attack, or defense) according to these rules: *Acclaims* are themes that portray the candidate or the candidate's party favorably. *Attacks* are themes that portray the opposing candidate or party unfavorably. *Defenses* are themes that repair the candidate's or party's reputation (from attacks by the opposing party).

Only utterances that performed the functions of acclaiming, attacking, or defending (which were in fact virtually all of themes in these spots) were analyzed in this research.

Third, each theme was classified by topic, as concerned with either policy or character, according to these rules: Policy themes concern governmental action (past, current, or future) and problems amenable to governmental action. Character themes concern characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes of the candidates.

Fourth, each policy theme was considered to determine whether it addressed one of the Democratic or Republican issues selected for this study.

We verified inter-coder reliability on a sample of 10% of the texts. Cohen's (1960) *kappa* was calculated to control for agreement by chance. Inter-coder reliability for function was .93; for target of attack it was .91 to 1.0; for topic it

was .87; for form of policy it was .82; for form of character it was .95, for issue topic it was .84. Landis and Koch (1977) explain that values of *kappa* between 0.81 and 1.0 reflect "almost perfect" inter-coder reliability (p. 165). These values give confidence in the coding of these messages.

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

Results

The first hypothesis concerned the functions of TV spots in the 2008 presidential primary campaign. Overall, acclaims comprised 80% of the themes in this sample, whereas attacks accounted for 20% (no defenses were used in these ads). A *chi-square* goodness of fit test confirmed that this difference was significant (χ^2 [df = 1] = 581.17, $p < .0001$). The distribution of functions was about the same in both Democratic and Republican ads. So, the hypothesis on functions of 2008 presidential primary ads was confirmed; these data are also consistent with data from previous elections. See Table 1 for these data.

Table 1
Functions of 2008 Presidential Primary Television Spots

	Spots	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Democratic				
Biden	6	26	0	0
Clinton	64	299	70	0
Dodd	8	31	4	0
Edwards	31	68	47	0
Obama	60	241	59	0
Richardson	19	81	12	0
Total	188	746 (80%)	192 (20%)	0
Republican				
Giuliani	18	92	12	0
Huckabee	10	53	7	0
McCain	19	97	23	0
Paul	8	42	3	0
Romney	41	191	60	0
Tancredo	2	2	3	0
Thompson	6	37	6	0
Total	105	514 (82%)	114 (18%)	0
Grand Total	293	1260 (80%)	306 (20%)	0
1952-2004		4123 (54%)	1544 (27%)	56 (1%)

Hypothesis two investigated the topics of the themes in these advertisements. In this sample, 58% of the themes addressed policy and the remaining 42% concerned character. Statistical analysis confirmed that this distribution was significant (χ^2 [*df* = 1] = 39.91, *p* < .0001), confirming H2; these data are also consistent with data from previous elections. Again, this distribution was similar in the ads from each political party. These data are reported in Table 2.

Table 2
Topics of 2008 Presidential Primary Television Spots

	Policy	Character
Democratic		
Biden	14	12
Clinton	216	153
Dodd	20	15
Edwards	56	59
Obama	163	137
Richardson	65	28
Total	534 (57%)	404 (43%)
Republican		
Giuliani	66	38
Huckabee	33	27
McCain	43	77
Paul	30	15
Romney	169	82
Tancredo	5	0
Thompson	28	15
Total	374 (60%)	254 (40%)
Grand Total	908 (58%)	658 (42%)
1952-2004	3066 (54%)	2601 (46%)

Research question 1 concerned the distribution of the three forms of policy. In these data, when candidates discussed policy, they addressed past deeds and general goals at the same level (46%) and future plans less often (7%). See Table 3 for these data.

Table 3
Forms of Policy in 2008 Presidential Primary TV Spots

	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Democrats	104	123	42	4	255	6
Republicans	111	83	21	0	150	9
Total	215	206	63	4	405	15
	421 (46%)		67 (7%)		420 (46%)	

The second research question addressed the distribution of the three forms of character. These candidates most often talked about personal qualities (50%),

leadership abilities next (31%), and, less frequently, ideals (19%). These data are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4
Forms of Character in 2008 Presidential Primary TV Spots

	Personal Qualities		Leadership Ability		Ideals	
	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks	Acclaims	Attacks
Democrats	187	56	116	3	42	0
Republicans	73	13	79	3	80	6
Total	260	69	195	6	122	6
	329 (50%)		201 (31%)		128 (19%)	

The third hypothesis concerned issue ownership in these political advertisements. The Democratic candidates discussed their own issues in 93% and Republican issues in 7% of themes. Republicans, in contrast, focused on issues owned by their party (77%), with fewer themes devoted to Democratic issues (23%). Statistical analysis confirmed that this distribution was significant (χ^2 [*df* = 1] = 252.7, *p* < .0001, φ = .72). Benoit (2007) reports data on Issue Ownership patterns in presidential primary debates, which are consistent with these data. See Table 5 for these data.

Table 5
Issue Ownership in 2008 Presidential Primary TV Spots

	Democratic Issues	Republican Issues
Democrats	**253 (93%)**	20 (7%)
Republicans	50 (23%)	**171 (77%)**

Discussion

This study content analyzed presidential TV spots from the 2008 presidential primary election. Both Democratic and Republican ads were included in this sample (all ads in this sample were sponsored by one of the candidates rather than by PACs or other organizations). Functional Theory predicts that acclaims will be more common than attacks and defenses will be the least common function. Acclaims have no drawbacks; attacks have one risk – backlash from voters who dislike mudslinging; and defenses have three potential drawbacks – defenses often take a candidate off-message, they can create the impression that the candidate is not proactive, and they can remind/inform viewers of a potential weakness. Television advertisements from both Democrats and Republicans confirm this expectation.

Functional Theory predicts that policy will be more common than character. Some voters are mostly concerned with the candidates' character, but most voters view the president as a policy maker than a role model. In the spots analyzed

here, both Democratic and Republican candidates devoted more themes to policy than to character, confirming this prediction.

Functional Theory does not make predictions about the forms of policy and of character. In these data, past deeds and general goals were the most frequent forms of policy; future plans were discussed less often. Most character utterances discussed personal qualities, followed by leadership ability, and ideals were the least frequently discussed character form.

The last hypothesis was adopted from Issue Ownership Theory. As Petrocik (1996) predicts, in 2008 presidential primary ads Democrats discussed Democratic issues more, and Republican issues less, than Republican candidates. The effect size (.72) is quite large, revealing that the relationship between political party affiliation and issue topics discussed by these candidates is very large.

Conclusion

This study extended previous work on presidential primary campaigns to television spots from the 2008 election. As predicted by Functional Theory, and consistent with data from previous elections, acclaims were more common than attacks or defenses (no defenses were used in these ads) in this sample. The distribution of topics in these advertisements favored policy over character. Furthermore, the candidates in these campaign messages conformed to the expectations of Petrocik's Issue Ownership theory: Candidates emphasized the issues owned by their own political party more than the issues owned by the opposition party. Thus, the content of television advertisements in the2008 presidential primary campaign tend to conform to theoretical expectations and past research. Although the Democratic nomination for president was not contested in 2008 – President Barack Obama will have the opportunity to run for re-election. However, it would be interesting to see if the Republicans in 2012 follow the predictions of Functional Theory and past practice.

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Appendix
Acclaims and Attacks on Forms of Policy and Character

Policy

Past Deeds
> Acclaim: Giuliani, "Challenges," "He cut taxes $9 billion, welfare 60 percent, crime in half."
> Attack: Clinton, "Yucca," "John Edwards voted to keep Yucca Mountain [waste dump] open – twice."

Future Plans

Acclaim: Clinton, "President," "Hillary's plan: freeze home foreclosures, freeze rates on adjustable mortgages"

Attack: McCain, "Tied Up," Clinton wants to "spend $1 million on the Woodstock concert museum."

General Goals

Acclaim: Biden, "Cathedral," "We must end this war" in Iraq.

Attack: Giuliani, "Promise," The Democrats, Clinton, Edwards, and Obama, " are making the promise to raise taxes."

Character

Personal Qualities

Acclaim: Clinton, "Change," "she has the strength" necessary

Attack: Obama, "Candor," the other candidates are "dodging"

Leadership Ability

Acclaim: Biden, "Security," "for over 30 years and as head of the Foreign Relations Committee, Joe Biden has dealt with the world's most dangerous problems, from nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union, to genocide in the Balkans and Darfur"

Attack: Romney, "Experience Matters," "Hillary Clinton wants to run the largest enterprise in the world. She hasn't run a corner store. She hasn't run a state. She hasn't run a city."

Ideals

Acclaim: Clinton, "Proud–Iowa," "I see so many families who share the same values I was brought up with. My mom taught me to stand up for myself and to stand up for those who can't do it on their own. I'm proud to live by those values."

Attack: McCain, "Trust," video of Mitt Romney: "I'm not running as the Republican view or a continuation of Republican values."

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