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Analyzing Televised Presidential General Election Debates

This paper describes how general election presidential debates have changed over the last four decades. It will trace the development of the debate format, the dynamics of visual rhetoric, and the patterns of discourse; and will compare the standards followed by John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon in the first series of general election presidential debates held in 1960, with those followed by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in the latest series of debates held in 2012. It will also analyze debate videos and transcripts in order to identify the techniques used during both series of debates, and emphasize the similarities, differences, and effectiveness thereof. Considering the growing influence of the media on presidential campaigns over the last forty years, it is assumed that the rules and format for debates, as well as the dynamics of visual rhetoric and functions of debate discourse, have changed. This stands in contrast to the role of such debates in managing and guiding public opinion during elections, which has remained the same.

Key words: visual rhetoric, general election presidential debates, TV

Studies on Presidential Debates

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the issue of debates. As **Nikolaos Dimou** writes in "2012 American Presidential Debates: A Rhetorical Analysis," research in the area concentrates specifically on how debates affect: (1) voters' knowledge of issues (Lemert 1993); (2) voters' perception of candidates' images (McKinney and Carlin 2004); (3) citizens' voting decisions (Geer 1988); (4) voters' confidence in the democratic process (Pfau et al. 2005); and (5) voters' perceptions of the winner of debates (Tsfati 2003). A considerable amount of literature has also been published on how the media affect debates (Kraus 2000, McQuail 1992), as well as on how the public affects debates (Noelle-Neumann 1993).

Numerous studies have also paid attention to the rhetorical aspects of debates. These include: the influence that debate rhetoric has on voters' perceptions of specific concerns (Iyengar and Kinder 1987); voters' views on specific topics (Bartels 2006); voters' understanding of events, as well as the traits of candidates and their

positions (Lau and Redlawsk 2006); and the role of voters in agenda setting, both in terms of topics (McCombs 2004) and strategies (Page and Shapiro 1992). Studies on debates have also focused on their format (Kraus 1988), and on their character and role in presidential campaigns (Benoit et al. 2003).

Debates have been extensively researched from various angles, such as that of democratic theory (Miller and MacKuen 1979), agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972), uses and gratifications (Sears and Chaffee 1979), argumentation and debate theory (Benoit and Wells 1996), expectancy theory (Pfau 1987), interpersonal communication theories (Pfau and Kang 1991), stereotyping theory (Zhu et al. 1994), consistency theories, social judgment theory, social learning theory, and the functional theory of attitude formation and change (Lanoue and Schrott 1991).

Functional Theory of Campaign Discourse

For this study, the functional theory of campaign discourse was used. Developed by William L. Benoit et al., the theory holds that presidential campaign discourse is instrumental and functional in nature. Its goal is to persuade citizens to cast their votes for a particular candidate (1998; 2002; 2007). The theory is founded on five assumptions: (1) voting is a comparative act; (2) candidates must distinguish themselves from opponents; (3) political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves; (4) candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending; (5) campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy and character. This means that in contested campaigns, voters make choices based on judgments about the differences between candidates. Therefore, it is essential for candidates to emphasize distinctions between each other. Political campaign discourse is viewed as a means to win public approval.

Candidates can contend for votes through three discourse functions and on two topics. For the purpose of this paper, only the fourth and fifth assumptions of the functional theory will be discussed in detail. According to the fourth, candidates have a choice of three discourse functions through which to present themselves as desirable. First, candidates may increase the chances that voters will see them as preferable through self-acclaim. Statements of self-praise emphasize candidates' advantages and benefits over their opponents. Second, candidates may persuade the public that they are better suited for the position than their opponents through attacks. Critical remarks highlight the undesirable attributes of opponents, and stress any controversial aspects of their political positions. Third, candidates may affect their preferability through defense tactics. Responses to attacks are designed to either restore a perceived loss in credibility, or to prevent additional damage (Benoit 2007).

According to the fifth assumption of the functional theory, candidates contend for public opinion in two topics: policy, which concerns governmental action; and character, which concerns candidates' characteristics, qualities, abilities, and attributes. Topics on policy and topics on character are each divided into three subforms. The subforms of policy are: past deeds (decision and actions taken during candidates' political careers); future plans (promises made during the campaign);

and general goals (aims to be achieved when elected for the contested office). The subforms of character are: personal qualities (human traits); leadership abilities (experience); and ideals (principles and values). Although candidates can acclaim, attack, and defend policies and character traits, they do not always use these options in equal measure. Content analyses of presidential campaign rhetoric have shown the following: candidates use acclaims more often than attacks; they use attacks more frequently than defenses; policy remarks outnumber character remarks; acclaims are more common when general goals and ideals are discussed; and attacks are more common when future plans are considered (Benoit 2007).

Analysis

This analysis applies the above aspects of the functional theory to the presidential debates of 1960 and 2012. When doing research for this paper, eight debate video recordings and transcripts were tagged with an identifying number and entered into a computer data bank so that the desired patterns could be examined. In addition, each recording was coded with the following information: date; time; sponsor; moderator; panelists; topic; and format. Attention was paid to shot type (one shots, shots of each candidate with the moderator, shots of each candidate with the audience, shots of each candidate with the moderator and the audience, two shots, shots of both candidates with the moderator, shots of both candidates with the audience, shots of both candidates with the moderator and the audience), shot angle (frontal, profile, rear), and shot length (close-up, medium, long/wide). Moreover, the patterns of eye contact were noted, with special attention paid to shots of the debaters maintaining eye contact with the moderator and the audience, and with distinctions being made between shots of debaters looking at their opponent, straight at *the camera, and* down/ahead. Finally, the content of the debaters' statements was catalogued, with distinctions being made between functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses), topics (policy, character), and subforms (past deeds, future plans, general goals, personal qualities, leadership abilities, ideals).

Format

The rules and format for debates have changed over the years. The number of presidential debates for elections has been reduced from four to three, but the time for each has been lengthened from 60 to 90 minutes. Previously sponsored by ABC, CBS, and NBC, contemporary debates are funded by the Commission on Presidential Debates, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization which finances and produces debates for United States presidential candidates. All debates have been moderated by a single individual, a representative of a television network, whose role has shifted from moderator to questioner. In the 1960 debates, a panel of four journalists asked questions; while in 2012, questions were asked by the moderator, with the exception of the second debate, in which citizens – i.e. uncommitted voters selected by the Gallup Organization – asked the questions. Also evident is a shift of focus – away from foreign affairs. While in 1960, foreign

policies were the subject of three debates; in 2012, they were discussed at only two debates, with the second debate also devoted to domestic policies. It should also be noted that unlike the nominees in 1960, the candidates in the 2012 election were informed of the topics to be discussed ahead of time. In terms of format, all four 1960 debates had the same format. The candidates stood during their question-and-answer time, and sat only during their opponent's opening statements (with the exception of the third debate, where the candidates debated on television from different locations). In 2012, the debates featured both candidates in one studio either standing at podiums when speaking, or sitting on a stool when listening to their opponent's replies, or seated at a discussion table. The 1960 debates featured eight-minute opening statements and three-minute closing statements (the second and third debate allowed no opening or closing statements). Then, each candidate was questioned and given two and a half minutes to answer, and their opponent was given one and a half minutes for rebuttal. In 2012, the debates were arranged according to two models. The first and third debate were divided into six time segments of about fifteen minutes. Each segment opened with a question, followed by the candidate's two-minute reply and discussion. During the second debate, held in the form of a town meeting, the candidates had two minutes to answer questions, and an additional two minutes for discussion facilitated by the moderator.

Visual Rhetoric

The dynamics of visual rhetoric have significantly changed over time (see table 1). First, the study showed a major difference in the number of one shots taken in 1960 and 2012. In 2012, there were twice as many one shots than in 1960, and over three times as many shots of candidates with coordinator/moderators. Shots of each candidate with the audience, and with both the audience and moderator, were taken only during the 2012 debates. Second, in 2012, there was a substantial increase in the number of two shots and shots with the moderator/coordinator – over 12 and 28 times more than in 1960, respectively. Again, shots of both candidates with the audience and with the audience and the moderator were taken only during the 2012 debates. Third, the analysis revealed notable differences in camera framing. In 2012, there were almost 16 times more long/wide shots than in 1960, nearly 21 times more medium shots, and 20 percent fewer close-up shots. Fourth, a clear trend of increasing camera angles was observed. In 2012, there were over four times more frontal angles, ten times more profile angles, and almost 100 times more rear angles than in 1960. Fifth, in terms of body language, the study did not reveal any essential differences between the debaters' hand and head gestures or facial expressions. However, solid evidence for new patterns of eye contact was found. In 2012, there were 30 times more shots of debaters maintaining eye contact with the moderator, over ten times more shots of debaters looking at the opponent, over 12 times fewer shots of debaters looking straight at *the camera*, and over five times more shots of debaters looking down or ahead. Shots of candidates maintaining eye contact with the audience were taken only during the 2012 debates.

Table 1. Elements of visual rhetoric in the 1960 and 2012 presidential debates

	First Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Second Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Third Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Fourth Kennedy-Nixon Debate		First Obama-Romney Debate		Second Obama-Romney Debate		Third Obama-Romney Debate	
	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney
One shots	34	34	24	25	14	13	16	15	61	72	22	22	91	83
Shots of each candidate with the moderator	4	5	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	10	4	1	9	10
Shots of each candidate with the audience	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	121	97	-	-
Shots of each candidate with the moderator and the audience	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	12	-	-
Two shots	1	1	9	9	1	1	6	6	67	67	52	52	87	87
Shots of both candidates with the moderator	3	3	-	-	-	-	2	2	65	65	-	-	76	76
Shots of both candidates with the audience	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	41	41	-	-
Shots of both candidates with the moderator and the audience	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	88	88	-	-
Frontal angle shots	41	43	29	28	15	14	18	18	110	121	218	196	167	158

	First Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Second Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Third Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Fourth Kennedy-Nixon Debate		First Obama-Romney Debate		Second Obama-Romney Debate		Third Obama-Romney Debate	
	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney
Profile angle shots	2	3	6	6	-	-	-	-	9	5	51	41	28	37
Rear angle shots	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	69	69	79	77	49	52
Close-up shots	29	32	22	22	13	12	15	15	61	73	-	-	-	-
Medium shots	5	1	11	12	1	1	5	5	69	74	221	199	105	186
Long/wide shots	10	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	54	55	123	115	27	41
Shots of debaters maintaining eye contact with the audience	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	220	147	2	2
Shots of debaters maintaining eye contact with the moderator	3	8	3	1	-	-	2	3	111	88	61	66	133	136
Shots of debaters looking at their opponents	21	19	8	-	-	-	9	8	118	161	68	111	129	115
Shots of debaters looking straight at the camera	22	30	26	26	15	14	15	15	7	3	-	-	2	1
Shot of debaters looking down or ahead	14	6	2	2	6	-	3	2	87	35	24	21	15	7

Table 2. Functions, topics, and subforms in the presidential debates of 1960 and 2012

			First Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Second Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Third Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Fourth Kennedy-Nixon Debate		First Obama-Romney Debate		Second Obama-Romney Debate		Third Obama-Romney Debate	
			Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney
Acclaims	Policy	Past deeds	20	17	5	14	3	13	5	15	30	7	31	8	39	7
		Future plans	-	-	5	7	3	2	1	-	1	11	-	13	7	8
		General goals	12	10	6	10	13	14	11	11	17	37	16	22	25	40
	Character	Personal qualities	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-		
		Leadership abilities	2	2	-	1	-	1	3	2	2	4	1	6	5	6
		Ideals	2	2	7	4	1	1	-	-	-	1	4	2		
Attacks	Policy	Past deeds	15	12	33	10	14	8	15	4	3	28	10	43	11	31
		Future plans	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
		General goals	2	9	4	2	4	8	1	3	18	16	14	1	13	5

			First Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Second Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Third Kennedy-Nixon Debate		Fourth Kennedy-Nixon Debate		First Obama-Romney Debate		Second Obama-Romney Debate		Third Obama-Romney Debate	
			Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Kennedy	Nixon	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney	Obama	Romney
Attacks	Character	Personal qualities	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-		
		Leadership abilities	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	1	3
		Ideals	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-		
Defenses	Policy	Past deeds	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	2	
		Future plans	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
		General goals	1	-	-	-	3	-	1	-	-	4	-	3		3
	Character	Personal qualities	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		Leadership abilities	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		Ideals	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

Oral rhetoric

The data collected indicates that in 2012, the debaters used acclaims and attacks more often than in 1960. In both years, defenses were employed rarely (see table 2). The study also found that in 2012, policy was discussed more often than in 1960. As for character remarks, attacks occurred more often in 1960 than in 2012, an equal number of acclaims was witnessed, and instances of character defenses were not recorded.

Moving on to the use of subforms, research indicates that in 2012, the debaters acclaimed past deeds, future plans, general goals, and leadership abilities more often than their predecessors in 1960. Furthermore, they acclaimed ideals less frequently, and did not at all acclaim personal qualities. In terms of attacks, the findings suggest that in 2012, the candidates attacked the past deeds, general goals, leadership abilities, and ideals of their opponent more often than in 1960. They also did not attack future plans or personal qualities. Finally, in terms of defenses, the 2012 debaters more often defended general goals, and less often defended past deeds, leadership abilities, and ideals. No defenses of future plans or personal qualities were recorded in either series of debates.

Impact of the Debates

According to Gallup Poll evidence, registered voters gave Republican Richard M. Nixon an advantage of one percentage point over Democrat John F. Kennedy in the period leading up to the first debate. Immediately after the debate, Kennedy was ahead by three percentage points. By the time the fourth debate was held, he was up by four points. While no polls conducted on the basis of registered voters after the second and fourth debates are available, the poll results from November 8, 1960, which indicate that Kennedy won the popular vote by only two-tenths of a percentage point, suggest that the debates did not produce a major shift in the election. It should be noted though that the debate-period boost for Kennedy is considered to have had a significant influence on the election results.

As for the 2012 debates, Gallup Poll reports that in the three days preceding the first debate, registered voters rated Democrat Barack Obama five percentage points higher than Republican Mitt Romney. Surveys conducted throughout the course of the debates, however, showed that Obama was tied with Romney after the first and third debate, and held a one-point lead only after the second debate. Given the 2012 election results, in which Obama won by four percentage points, it can be concluded that the debates did not give Romney an advantage over Obama, though it is clear that his debate performance affected some voters' preferences.

Conclusion

The changes in debate format highlighted in this analysis have important implications for presidential candidates and the public's perception of their performance. The transition from a behind-the-podium debate to a standing and sitting style has

added a greater degree of intimacy to the discussions, allowing for much freer conversation and a more substantive dialogue between candidates. Sitting also provides more options for posture, eye contact, and facial expressions than standing. Indeed, sitting has made body language one of the key components of candidates' performances. Elimination of opening and closing statements, reduction of response time, and introduction of a town-hall style debate has also facilitated discussion. Interaction between candidates has become the most desirable form of discourse, which brings new challenges to debaters regarding image and issue management. Publicizing discussion topics in advance has given candidates the chance to prepare for debates; however, not informing the debaters or their aides of specific questions perpetuates the element of risk. Campaign staff can set the criteria governing the debates and decide how they should be conducted, but it cannot control the event itself. Individuals who moderate the debates have the right to do so by rephrasing questions, broaching new topics, asking follow-up questions, and commenting on either the questions or the answers. Audience members can also ask questions, and have thus become active debate participants who may ask different questions than the ones they said they would. Unlike the rules, guidelines, and format, which have changed over the years, risk is inherent to presidential debates, which invariably provokes direct competition, generates challenge, and adds excitement.

The form and impact of visual rhetoric has also changed. A considerable increase in two shots, as well as the introduction of shots of candidates with the audience and the moderator, contribute to the portrayal of debates as lively discussion forums in which debaters react to the comments of their opponents and the questions of audience members. Instead of just debaters expressing their own views, audience members also play an active role; and instead of being just mute spectators, moderators dynamically react to what is happening. Camera framing and camera angles also affect the overall message, as different shots have their own rhetorical impact. A rise in medium shots implies that more stress is now put on equality among candidates, and that an interactional and conversational style is now appreciated over an intimate one. Next, a decrease in close-up shots and an increase in long/wide shots suggest that the setting of the debate is now considered more important that the debaters. More long/wide shots also indicates that candidates have become only a part of the debates themselves. Similar observations can be made regarding camera angles. While a rise in front views, like middle shots, tends to emphasize the debaters; an increase in rear views, just like that of long/wide shots, tends to move the public's attention away from candidates and towards other debate participants. The tendency to shift emphasis from the debaters to participants is evidenced by changes in the patterns of eye contact. Fewer shots of candidates looking directly at the camera, more shots of debaters maintaining eye contact with the moderator, and the introduction of shots of candidates maintaining eye contact with the audience are clear indicators thereof. Furthermore, an increase in shots of debaters looking down or ahead also suggests a reduction in the prominence of candidates, as well as their direct and explicit connection with the viewers.

In terms of functions and topics, no significant differences in patterns have been found. It seems that acclaims continue to be more common than attacks, indicating that voters still dislike mud-slinging. Instances of defenses also continue to be rare, suggesting that candidates still find defense a less politically advantageous tactic. It

appears that defenses continue to be associated with deviation from official party lines, discussion of potential weaknesses, and reaction to events (as opposed to action that initiates change). The fact that candidates continue to discuss policy more often than character suggests that politicians still consider issues to be more important than personalities. This finding might be surprising, especially since debates are thought to center mostly around image. Cases in which character was addressed – more often in acclaims than in attacks – are evidence that debates themselves, unlike their media coverage, are still intended to form good impressions about candidates, produce positive rhetorical outcomes, and generate enthusiasm for elections.

As for the use of subforms, new trends have been observed and some political implications have been identified. The shift from acclaims and defenses of past deeds to acclaims and defenses of general goals seems to demonstrate that candidates are trying to turn the public's attention away from decisions and actions taken during their political careers towards aims to be achieved when they are elected for the office. A solid record of policy achievements still appears to have a positive impact on voter opinions, but it does not seem to be a prerequisite for a successful debate. Preferences for character acclaims have also changed. Stressing the importance of leadership abilities over the significance of ideals or personal qualities appears to suggest that voters still expect candidates to have a strong moral character; but they are more likely to vote based on their assessment of candidates' experience. The absence of data regarding attacks and defenses on future plans and personal qualities supports the view that promises made during the campaign and human traits have become less of an issue in debates.

The modified debate format, the modern dynamics of visual rhetoric, and the shift in the function of debates may appear to suggest that debates now have more of an impact on election results than before. However, the opposite is the case: modern confrontations between presidential candidates appear to have minimal impact on election results. Whereas the first series of televised debates in 1960 was perceived to have determined the results of the election, the debates in 2012 were just as important to the presidential campaign as the primaries and conventions. Moreover, the high viewership of debates did not seem to directly result in a major change of candidates' ratings in either election. In 2012, 67.2 and 59.2 million people tuned in to watch the first and last debates, respectively. Similar figures were also recorded in 1960; namely, 66.4 and 60.4 million, respectively. Nevertheless, the debates did not change the candidates' ratings overall. A possible explanation for this might be that most viewers were already strong partisans, and watched the debates simply to solidify their perceptions. Weaker partisans, independents, and undecided audience members, with whom the debates had real persuasive power, were in the minority. Issues were thought to be important, but personalities were believed to be the biggest convincing factor. The visual aspect of the debates was also more persuasive than the verbal aspect. The areas on which the debates appeared to have real impact involved political agendas, political socialization (including voting behavior), candidate performance, political issues, and candidates' political education with respect to their positions and the elections in general. Despite their minimal overall impact, debates continue to be seen as an essential element of a successful presidential campaign. Even though they seem to have lost their power to sway the outcome of an election, they still have the potential to influence public perception. They expose

candidates' strengths and weaknesses, either helping or hurting their opinion poll ratings (at least throughout the course of the debates). The fact that presidential candidates still take the time and effort to thoroughly prepare for debates and ensure excellent performance is in itself sufficient evidence that the debates still matter. What has changed is only the extent.

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