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Functional Analysis of 2008 Senate and Gubernatorial TV Spots

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Abstract

Most research on political advertising focuses on television spots aired in the race for the presidency. However, far more political commercials are broadcast in races for other offices. This study applies the Functional Theory of political campaign discourse to 176 gubernatorial spots and 255 U.S. senate spots from the 2008 election campaign. We investigated the functions (acclaims, attacks, and defenses) and topics (policy, character) of these television advertisements. Then we considered the relationship of the functions and topics with other variables: political party affiliation, incumbency, campaign phase (primary, general), sponsor (candidate, party), and outcome of the election (winners, losers).

Key Words: gubernatorial, senate, tv spots, functions, topics, campaign phase, incumbency, party, sponsor, outcome

Consultants and candidates alike believe that political advertising is a vital element component of successful campaigns (Jenkins, 1997; Sinclair, 1995). A meta-analysis (Benoit, Leshner, & Chattopadhyay, 2007) found that televised political advertising increased issue knowledge, influenced perceptions of the candidates' character, altered attitudes, affected candidate preference; influenced agenda-setting, and altered vote likelihood (turnout). The Wisconsin Advertising Project reported that "gubernatorial candidates have spent \$225 million for television ads" by September of 2002 (Terrien, 2002). TNS Media Intelligence (2004) reported that congressional ad spending in 2004 was \$379.4 million on television. The Center for Responsive Politics (2010) reported that the ten most expensive US Senate races in 2008 (Minnesota, Kentucky, North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Colorado, Oregon, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Louisiana) together spent over \$243 million. Meg Whitman established a new record for spending in gubernatorial elections, spending \$27 million in 11 weeks during the primary campaign (Rotheld & McGreevy, 2010). It is not surprising that political campaign spending continues unabated. The huge amount of money spent on gubernatorial and congressional races is not wasted: Research confirms that television spots influence election outcomes at all levels (Joslyn, 1981; Wanat, 1974). However, most research on political advertising focuses at the presidential level: Books on presidential advertising include Benoit (1999), Diamond and Bates (1992), Dover (2006), Jamieson (1996), Kaid and Johnston (2001), and West (2001). Although several books examine both presidential and non-presidential advertising (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991, 1997; Kern, 1989; Nelson & Boynton, 1997; Schultz, 2004; Thurber, Nelson, & Dulio, 2000), few books focus exclusively on non-presidential advertising (e.g., Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Maisel & West, 2004; Nesbit, 1988) and none examine gubernatorial commercials. However, political advertising is arguably more important in non-presidential than presidential races because the news lavishes most attention on the presidential contest. Political advertising, which has been shown to inform the electorate (Benoit, Leshner, & Chattopadhyay, 2005), may have a disproportionate impact in non-presidential races where less information is usually available about these candidates and their issue positions from other sources, such as the news.

Furthermore, there is only one presidential campaign every four years. In sharp contrast, the United States is the scene for thousands of other political campaigns, some of which are held as often as every two years. Clearly, the study of non-presidential political advertising is justified by the large amounts of money spent on this medium, the sheer number of candidates and offices involved, as well as the number of voters who constitute the audience for these messages. This study will investigate television spots from campaigns for governor and the U.S. senate in the 2008 election. First, we begin with a review of the literature on non-presidential television spots. Then we identify the hypothesis and research questions and develop the method, the functional analysis of political discourse. Finally, we will discuss the implications of this study.

Literature Review

Most investigations into the nature of political advertising focus on two variables, tone (function: acclaims, attacks, and defenses) and topic (policy or issue and character or image). First, scholars are concerned with understanding the functions of television commercials (i.e., positive, negative; or acclaims, attacks, defenses). Second, studies have analyzed the topics of political advertisements (i.e., policy versus character, or issue versus image). This section reviews

the existing literature in both areas.

Functions of Political Advertising

Several studies of congressional spot advertising examined the function of political commercials. Negative advertising was used frequently in the North Carolina Senate race between Helms and Hunt (Kern, 1989). Challengers frequently use attack ads, as in the Maryland Senate race between Mikulski and Chavez (Sheckels, 1994) and in the Boschwitz-Wellstone race (Pfau, Parrott, & Lindquist, 1992). Benze and Declerq (1985) found that congressional candidates attacked nearly half the time: 47% for male candidates, and 44% for female candidates. Kahn and Kenney's (1999) study of the 1988, 1990, and 1992 Senate campaigns found that 18% of the ads in their sample criticized the general policy priorities of the opposing candidate, 17% criticized a specific policy position, and 20% blamed an opponent for a negative policy outcome. Weaver-Lariscy and Tinkham (1996) reported a survey of U.S. House candidates: 48% reported that they ran partly or mainly negative campaigns in 1982 whereas 35% said their campaign was partly or mainly negative in 1990. Ansolabehere et al. (1994), who analyzed newspaper coverage rather than ads, indicated that 51% of U.S. Senate campaigns in 1992 were mainly negative. Several studies of specific congressional races in 2002 found more positive than negative ads (Brewer, 2004; Ezra, 2004; Larson, 2004; Petterson, 2004; cf. Busch, 2004. Prysby, 2004). Two studies found that challengers attacked more than incumbents (Petterson, 2004; Shockley, 2004) and four reported that candidate ads were more positive than ads from other sponsors (Brewer, 2004; Larson, 2004; Petterson, 2004; Shockley, 2004). It is unfortunate that none of these studies of the 2002 congressional races reported statistical analyses to indicate whether these differences were significant.

Lau and Pomper (2004), relying on newspaper reports of campaigns (not ads), concluded that about one-third of U.S. Senate races from 1992-2002 were negative. Brazeal and Benoit (2006) examined 744 TV spots from the US Senate and Congress between 1980 and 2004; the themes in these ads used more acclaims (69%) than attacks (31%) and few defenses (0.5%). Benoit (2000), analyzing a variety of races in the state of Missouri in 1998, reported that candidates acclaimed 67% of the time and attacked 31% of the time in their television spots (2% of utterances were defenses against attacks). Airne and Benoit (2005) analyzed 238 U.S. Senate, 121 U.S. House, and 79 gubernatorial ads from the 2000 campaign. Acclaims dominated the ads for all three offices (Senate, 71%; House, 62%, governor, 76%). Attacks were roughly one-quarter to one-third of the ad content (Senate, 29%; House, 37%, governor, 23%) and defenses were again uncommon (Senate, 0.5%; House, 0.7%, governor, 1%). Cooper and Knotts (2004) reported that gubernatorial ads in 2000 were 50% positive, 28% attack, and 22% contrast (combination of positive and negative). Benoit and Airne (2009) found that gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House ads acclaimed more than they attacked (72% to 27%; 1% of the themes were defenses).

It is difficult to summarize this diverse work, in part because articles use different categories when they report result (e.g., Kahn & Kenney [1999] do not report total attacks, but only attacks on various aspects of policy; Cooper & Knotts [2004] report positive, attack, and contrast ads). Still, attacks in non-presidential races seem to range from about 25-50%, with acclaims making up most of the rest of ad content. One important limitation is that most studies focus on US congressional advertising, ignoring gubernatorial advertising. We also lack contrasts

of different kinds of ads (e.g., primary versus general spots or outcome of election).

Topic of Political Advertising

Research has also investigated the occurrence of policy (issues) and character (image) in congressional advertising. Earlier studies seemed to support the contention that character is discussed more often than policy. Joslyn (1980) reported that 24% of Senate spots mentioned policy positions and 40% of those spots mentioned the candidates' character. Benze and Declercq (1985), who analyzed California congressional commercials, found that ads usually discussed policy (68%) but they discussed character even more frequently (82% by female candidates, 90% by male candidates). A study by Payne and Baukus (1988) investigated 81 Republican senate ads. They found roughly equal emphasis of policy and character. Johnston and White (1994) investigated advertising by female candidates in the 1986 senate races, reporting that females tended to emphasize "issues more than image in their ads" (p. 325). Kahn and Kenney (1999) reported that 80% of their ads mentioned, and 36% emphasized, policy. Brazeal and Benoit's study of ads from the Senate and House found that themes in ads were almost equally divided between policy (51%) and character (49%). However, the ads after 1992 stressed policy more than character. Benoit's (2000) analysis of non-presidential television advertising found that 66% of utterances concerned policy and 34% addressed character. Cooper and Knotts' (2004) study of gubernatorial ads from 2000 reported that policy ads predominated (59%), followed by ads discussing both policy and character (31%), and character only (10%). Airne and Benoit (2005) also reported a preference for policy discussion in 2000 political advertising (Senate, 62% to 38%; House, 55% to 45%, governor, 69% to 31%). Benoit and Airne (2009), investigating Senate, House, and gubernatorial ads from 2004, found that the topics were roughly equally addressed in themes (52% policy, 49% character).

Again, summarizing this work is a challenge because of the diverse ways they report results (e.g., some studies report figures for mentioning or emphasizing a topic; Cooper & Knotts, 2004, on the other hand, report figures for policy, character, and both). It appears, though, that research which uses ads as the unit of analysis indicate that character or image ads predominate; studies using themes as the unit of analysis suggest that policy comments can outnumber character remarks. Most of this research focuses on US Senate advertising, neglecting campaign advertising for other offices (and does not inform us about different kinds of ads, such as primary versus general ads).

Functional Theory of Political Discourse

Functional Theory was utilized as the foundation for this analysis. This theory was developed by Benoit and his associates through a series of studies centered primarily on Presidential campaign discourse (see Benoit, 1999, 2000, 2007; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier 1998; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit, Pier, & Blaney, 1997; Benoit, Wells, Pier, & Blaney, 1999). This theory argues that citizens vote for the candidate who appears preferable on whatever criteria are most important to each voter. Candidates can demonstrate their desirability in three ways. First, the candidate can engage in acclaiming or self-praise (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998). The greater the benefits or advantages of one candidate, the more likely that person will appear preferable compared with opponents. Second, candidates can attack their opponents; as voters become aware of more costs or disadvantages to opponents, they should appear less desirable to voters. The candidate who attacks hopes for a net increase in desirability as the attack is intended

to reduce the opponent's preferability. Finally, candidates who have been subjected to attack can defend against those attacks. The smaller the costs or disadvantages, the more likely that candidate will appear preferable to opponents. These three options comprise an informal form of cost-benefit analysis, providing information that can help persuade the voter to prefer one candidate. Notice that characterizing these as a rough form of cost-benefit analysis does not mean we claim that voters systematically quantify the impact of acclaims, attacks, or defenses or perform mathematical calculations to decide their vote choice. Rather, it is meant to indicate that acclaims tend to increase one's benefits, attacks may increase an opponent's costs, and defenses can reduce one's costs.

The three functions (acclaims, attacks, and defenses) can occur on two topics, policy or character. Policy utterances concern governmental action or problems that are amenable to governmental action. Character comments concern the candidates as individuals. We also subdivide the two topics into three forms of policy and three forms of character; this study only reports data on past deeds (which facilitate retrospective judgments) in connection with incumbency.

We propose several hypothesis and research questions to apply the functional analysis on political advertising in the 2008 election campaign. First we will discuss the overall distribution of functions and topics. Then we address the emphasis on policy and character. Next we look into the role of political party affiliation on functions and topics. This is followed by a discussion of the role of incumbency in political advertising. Next we discuss campaign phase (primary, general). Then we take up the question of ad sponsorship (candidate versus political party). Finally, we investigate the relationship between advertising and election outcome.

Overall Distribution of Functions and Topics

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007; see also Airne & Benoit, 2005; Brazeal & Benoit, 2006) predicts that acclaims will be more common than attacks: Acclaims have no (inherent) drawbacks, but because many voters report that 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; finally, attacks may create the undesirable impression that the candidate is reactive rather than proactive.

H1. Political advertisements will acclaim more than they attack and attack more than they defend.

Public opinion polls for both presidential (Benoit, 2003) and congressional (Brazeal & Benoit, 2001) campaigns reveal that a majority of voters report that policy is a more important determinant of their vote than character. Because candidates have an incentive to adapt to voter desires, Functional Theory predicts that policy will receive a heavier emphasis than character in political advertising.

H2. Political advertisements will discuss policy more than character.

Political Party Affiliation

Lau and Pomper (2004), relying on newspaper accounts of campaigns (not ads specifically), observed that Republicans attacked more than Democrats in U.S. Senate campaigns from 1992-2002. Airne and Benoit's (2005) analysis of 2000 non-presidential ads found mixed

results: Democrats attacked more than Republicans in Senate and gubernatorial ads but less than Republicans in House ads. Cooper and Knotts' (2004) study of gubernatorial ads in 2000 reported that Republican attacked more (36% to 25%) and acclaimed less (42% to 54%) than Democrats (Republicans had fewer contrast ads than Democrats: 22% to 28%). Because the literature is mixed, we pose a second research question:

RQ1. Is there a difference in use of the functions by Democrats and Republicans?

Functional Theory (e.g., 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 presidential campaign messages (Benoit, 2004) confirms this expectation. Hence we predict:

H3. Democratic advertising will discuss policy more, and character less, than Republican spots.

Incumbency

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007; see also Airne & Benoit; 2005; Lau & Pomper, 2004) suggests that challengers tend to attack more than incumbents. This is in large part due to the fact that, by definition, incumbents have a record in the office sought; challengers may have records in other elective offices, or in the military, or in business, but none of those other kinds of records are as pertinent as a record in the specific office sought in an election. The incumbent's record is a resource from which incumbents can draw acclaims (highlighting successes) and the challenger can derive attacks (stressing failures).

H4. Incumbents will use more acclaims and fewer attacks than challengers.

H5. Incumbents will acclaim more, and attack less, on past deeds than challengers.

Campaign Phase

Benoit (2007), analyzing presidential television spots, reported that ads from the general election phase of the campaign employed more attacks than primary spots (40% to 27%) (this relationship is true in primary and general presidential debates as well; Benoit, 2007). He explained that, all things being equal, candidates from different political parties (opponents in general elections) were likely to have more policy difference on which to attack, compared with candidates from the same party (primary opponents). Furthermore, the winner of the primary campaign will want to have the support of the candidates he or she defeated in the primary—and, perhaps more importantly, the support of the voters who preferred the other candidates. So, primary candidates have an incentive to moderate the level of attacks in the primary compared with the general campaign. Finally, it is well known that general election candidates sometimes recycle the attacks from the primary, sometimes using video of one candidate attacking another member of the same political party. This could mean that primary candidates may wish to withhold some attacks in the primary to avoid giving “ammunition” to the other political party.

H6. General election advertising will employ more attacks, and fewer acclaims, than primary advertising.

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) suggests that because primary candidates have fewer policy differences to discuss, compared with general opponents, candidates should stress policy more, and character less, in the general than the primary campaign. Another reason to expect

greater emphasis on character in the primary than the general campaign is that, in general, candidates are less well known to voters (and reporters) in the primary, so there is a greater need to introduce the candidates' character in this phase.

H7. General ads will emphasize policy more, and character less, than primary advertisements.

Sponsor

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that candidates and consultants realize that voters say they do not like mudslinging (as noted earlier). Although this does not prevent candidates from attacking, it does mean that surrogate sources (the political parties and other organizations such as PACs and 527 groups) are likely to attack more than candidates. The hope is that if there is a backlash from voters against an attack, it will hurt the sponsor of the ad more than the candidate. Obviously this strategy assumes (1) that voters pay attention to a spot's sponsor and (2) that voters do not take it for granted that the candidate and the sponsors of other ads are coordinating the campaign. Still, it might help to put the most, or worse, attacks in ads from sponsors other than the candidate:

H8. Ads sponsored by candidates will use more acclaims and fewer attacks than ads sponsored by political parties.

There is little guidance about the topic emphases (policy versus character) of political advertisements sponsored by candidates and other groups. Thus, we pose this research question:

RQ2. What is the topic emphasis of political advertisements sponsored by candidates and other groups?

Outcome

Benoit (1999) reported no significant difference in the functions of ads from winners and losers of presidential elections. We pose this Research Question:

RQ3. What is the emphasis of the functions in political advertising of winners and losers?

Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) argues that because most voters report that policy is a more important determinant of their vote than character, there will be a tendency for winners to stress policy more, and character less, than losers. Benoit (2003) found that presidential winners tend to discuss policy more, and character less, than losers. Airne and Benoit (2005) reported that Senate and gubernatorial (but not House) winners discussed policy more, and character less, in spots than losers. So, we predict that:

H9. Winners emphasize policy more, and character less, than losers in their advertising.

These hypotheses and research questions will guide a fairly comprehensive analysis of gubernatorial and senate advertising from the 2008 campaign.

Sample and Method

Television spots in this sample were obtained by downloading transcribed commercials from National Journal's database (www.nationaljournal.com). The sample comprised a total of 431 spots from the 2008 election: 176 gubernatorial ads and 255 US Senate ads. We also identified incumbency, political party affiliation, campaign phase, sponsor, and outcome for each ad included in the sample.

Coding Procedures

Our content analysis employed four steps. First, the advertisements were unitized into themes, or utterances that address a coherent idea. 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 that 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 can vary in length from a short phrase to several sentences, as long as the textual excerpt focuses on a single idea. We used the theme (rather than the entire spot) for the unit of analysis for several reasons. Many political ads are mixtures of acclaims and attacks (and occasional defenses) and/or policy and character. Thus, using themes as the coding unit provides a much more accurate measurement of the content of these messages than using the entire spot.

Furthermore, using the theme as the coding unit for ads facilitates comparisons with other message forms such as campaign debates (would one consider a stump speech as the coding unit just as one codes an entire spot to be one coding unit? would the coding unit in a debate be the entire debate, or the entire response?). Thus, using the theme as the unit of analysis provides a much more precise measure of the functions or topics in an advertisement than coding the entire spot or than reporting results for “mentions” of a topic.

Second, each theme’s function was classified using the following rules:

Acclaims portray the sponsoring candidate favorably.

Attacks portray the opposing candidate unfavorably.

Defenses explicitly respond to a prior attack on the sponsoring candidate.

Virtually all of the utterances in the texts of the advertisements in our sample served one of these functions; the very few other (non-functional) utterances were not analyzed (it appears that candidates wanted their ads to be efficient, not wasting many statements on non-functional utterances, statements that gave no reason to vote for the sponsor [acclaims, defenses] or against the opponent [attacks]).

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 are so infrequent they were not coded by topic. Finally, policy themes were coded into one of the three forms of policy (past deeds, future plans, general goals) in order to test H5.

The two coders analyzed the spots and intercoder reliability was calculated from 20% of each of the five groups of spots. Cohen’s (1960) *kappa* was calculated to control of agreement due to chance (function .91; topic .88; forms of policy .86). Landis and Koch (1977) explain that *kappas* of .81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders.

These procedures generate frequency data; accordingly, we will test differences among these groups with *chi-squares*. For tests of functions and topics overall, we used the *chi-square* goodness of fit test. When contrasting different groups (e.g., functions and incumbency, or topics and political party) we report measures of effect sizes: ϕ when the $df = 1$ and Cramer’s *V* for other cases. The n for gubernatorial spots was 882 (891 with defenses); the power of a *chi-square* with $df = 1$ and $n = 800$ to detect small, medium, and large effects is .72, .99 .99 respectively; the n for Senate spots was 1062 (1077 with defenses); the power of a *chi-square* with $df = 1$ and $n = 1000$ to detect small, medium, and large effects is .82, .99 .99 respectively (Cohen, 1988).

Results

The results for each hypothesis and research question will be presented in the order in which they were developed above. The first hypothesis was confirmed, as acclaims were the most common themes in these spots (68% gubernatorial; 59% Senate), followed by attacks (31% gubernatorial; 40% Senate) and then defenses (1% in each sub-sample). For example, Beverly Perdue (Democratic, general, NC governor, “Health Care”) boasted that “I sponsored the law that gives health care to 115,000 kids.” Most people would agree that is was a good thing to provide health care to children, so this is an acclaim (it also illustrates an acclaim on past deeds or accomplishments, as opposed to proposals [future plans or general goals]). In contrast, a spot from John Kennedy (Republican, general, LA Senate, “Scary Mary”) charged that his opponent, Mary Landrieu “voted to allow illegal immigrants into the Social Security system.” Clearly, this passage criticizes the opponent. Landrieu (Democrat, general, LA Senate, “Garbage”) rejected this attack: “she never voted to give Social Security to illegal immigrants.” This theme defends against the attack leveled by her opponent. This distribution of functions was significant (gubernatorial: $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 128.76, p < .0001$; Senate: $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 38.1, p < .0001$). These data are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. *Functions of 2008 Gubernatorial Spots*

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	χ^2
Democratic	323 (74%)	111 (25%)	3 (1%)	11.1 $p < .001, \phi = .11$
Republican	287 (63%)	161 (35%)	6 (1%)	
Incumbent	194 (85%)	35 (15%)	0	[versus C, O]
Challenger	53 (52%)	44 (44%)	4 (4%)	33.57, $p < .0001, \phi = .32$
Open	195 (67%)	89 (31%)	5 (2%)	17.83, $p < .0001, \phi = .19$
Primary	214 (71%)	88 (29%)	0	<i>ns</i>
General	384 (67%)	177 (31%)	9 (2%)	

Candidate	586 (70%)	245 (29%)	9 (1%)	49.56, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .24$
Party	0	22 (100%)	0	
Winner	429 (65%)	224 (34%)	3 (0.5%)	14.27, $p < .0005$, $\phi = .12$
Loser	181 (53%)	158 (47%)	0	
Total	610 (68%)	272 (31%)	9 (1%)	128.76, $p < .0001$

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding. All *chi-squares* calculated on acclaims versus attacks due to the small *n* of defenses.

Table 2. *Functions of 2008 Senate Spots*

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	χ^2
Democratic	332 (64%)	189 (36%)	10 (2%)	6.1, $p < .05$, $\phi = .08$
Republican	261 (56%)	205 (44%)	4 (1%)	
Incumbent	171 (58%)	117 (40%)	5 (2%)	[versus C, O]
Challenger	143 (55%)	113 (43%)	6 (2%)	<i>ns</i>

Open	146 (70%)	63 (30%)	1 (0.5%)	5.76, $p < .05$, $\phi = .11$
Primary	209 (66%)	107 (34%)	3 (1%)	7.55, $p < .01$, $\phi = .08$
General	423 (56%)	318 (42%)	12 (2%)	
Candidate	297 (58%)	205 (40%)	7 (1%)	<i>ns</i>
Party	57 (55%)	44 (42%)	3 (3%)	
Winner	492 (69%)	208 (29%)	11 (2%)	21.93, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .14$
Loser	224 (56%)	174 (43%)	3 (1%)	
Total	632 (59%)	431 (40%)	15 (1%)	38.1, $p < .0001$

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding. All *chi-squares* calculated on acclaims versus attacks due to the small *n* of defenses.

Hypothesis two predicted that themes about policy would be more common than themes about character. In 2008, gubernatorial candidates discussed policy more than character (61% to 38%), as did Senate candidates (69% to 31%). To illustrate these topics, John Hoeven (Republican, general, ND governor, “Investing in Education, Providing Tax Relief”) noted that “we’ve created thousands of good jobs (30,000 new jobs).” It seems obvious that voters would agree that job creation is desirable, so this illustrates an acclaim. Chris Gregoire (Democrat, WA governor, “Minimum Wage”) said that “we can’t trust him [Dino Rossi] to be for us.” This attacks her opponent’s credibility. The relative emphasis on policy versus character was statistically significant (gubernatorial: $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 39.69$, $p < .0001$; Senate: $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 149.06$,

$p < .0001$). See Tables 3 and 4 for these data.

Table 3. *Topics of 2008 Gubernatorial Spots*

	Policy	Character	χ^2
Democratic	259 (60%)	176 (40%)	<i>ns</i>
Republican	275 (62%)	171 (38%)	
Incumbent	155 (68%)	74 (32%)	[versus C, O]
Challenger	66 (59%)	29 (31%)	<i>ns</i>
Open	170 (59%)	117 (41%)	3.9, $p < .05$, $\phi = .09$
Primary	157 (53%)	141 (47%)	11.11, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .11$
General	363 (64%)	201 (36%)	
Candidate	506 (61%)	324 (39%)	<i>ns</i>
Party	14 (64%)	8 (36%)	
Winner	345 (63%)	199 (37%)	6.05, $p < .05$, $\phi = .08$

Loser	181 (55%)	148 (45%)	
Total	534 (61%)	347 (39%)	39.69, $p < 0001$

Table 4. *Topics of 2008 Senate Spots*

	Policy	Character	χ^2
Democratic	366 (71%)	149 (29%)	24.84, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .16$
Republican	261 (56%)	207 (44%)	
Incumbent	182 (62%)	110 (38%)	
Challenger	168 (68%)	80 (32%)	<i>ns</i>
Open	137 (66%)	72 (34%)	<i>ns</i>
Primary	214 (68%)	101 (32%)	<i>ns</i>
General	505 (69%)	226 (31%)	
Candidate	366 (72%)	138 (27%)	<i>ns</i>

Party	65 (76%)	21 (24%)	
Winner	429 (71%)	172 (29%)	7.65, $p < .01$, $\phi = .09$
Loser	247 (63%)	145 (37%)	
Total	724 (69%)	328 (31%)	149.06, $p < .0001$

Research Question 1 asked if there was a difference in the use of the functions by political party of the candidate. In both samples, the Democratic candidates as a group used more acclaims and fewer attacks than the Republicans (gubernatorial: 74% to 63% acclaims, 25% to 35% attacks; Senate: 64% to 56% acclaims; 36% to 44% attacks). These differences were significant (gubernatorial: $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 11.1, p < .001, \phi = .11$; Senate: $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 6.1, p < .05, \phi = .08$). H3 predicted that Democratic ads would discuss policy more, and character less, than Republican spots. This was confirmed for gubernatorial ads ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 24.84, p < .0001, \phi = .16$). However, no difference occurred for Senate ads.

The fourth hypothesis anticipated that incumbent candidates would acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers. This prediction was confirmed for gubernatorial ads ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 33.571, p < .0001, \phi = .32$) but not for Senate spots. H5 anticipated that when they discussed past deeds (retrospective utterances), incumbent ads would acclaim more and attack less than challengers. For example, an ad for Roger Wicks (Republican, General, Incumbent) in the Mississippi Senate race (“Fighting for Our Coast”) said, “Wicker helped to secure billions to rebuild infrastructure and bring new jobs.” Surely this would be seen as a positive accomplishment by viewers. In contrast, Tom Allen’s ad “Right” (Democratic, General, Challenger) for the Maine Senate race declared: “Susan Collins. . . Voting or the Iraq war. The only senator from Maine to vote for all of President Bush’s economic policies.” Given President Bush’s low popularity, this statement would be seen by many voters as a criticism of Senator Collins’ acts in office. This prediction was confirmed with gubernatorial ads (49.67, $p < .0001, \phi = .62$) and Senate spots approached significance (3.6, $p < .06, \phi = .12$). These data are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. *Incumbency and Functions of Past Deeds in 2008 Gubernatorial and Senate Spots*

	Acclaims	Attacks	χ^2
Gubernatorial			
Incumbent	87 (90%)	10 (10%)	49.67, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .62$
Challenger	9 (27%)	24 (73%)	
Senate			
Incumbent	56 (42%)	76 (58%)	3.6, $p < .06$, $\phi = .12$
Challenger	34 (31%)	77 (69%)	

The next prediction (H6) held that ads in the general phase of the campaign would have more attacks and fewer acclaims, compared with advertisements from the primary election campaign. This hypothesis was confirmed with Senate ads (7.55, $p < .01$, $\phi = .08$) but not gubernatorial spots. H7 expected that general election ads would discuss policy more, and character less, than primary ads. This was the case in gubernatorial ads (11.11, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .11$) but not Senate ads.

Hypothesis 8 predicted that ads sponsored by candidates would use more acclaims, and fewer attacks, than ads sponsored by the political parties. This was the case in gubernatorial (49.56, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .24$) but not Senate ads. No significant difference occurred in the topics of ads from candidates versus parties (RQ2).

The third research question RQ3 investigates the relationship between the function of ads election outcome. Ads from election winners in both samples used more acclaims and fewer attacks than spots from losers (gubernatorial ads: 14.27, $p < .0005$, $\phi = .12$; Senate spots: 21.93, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .14$). The final hypothesis predicted that election winners would stress policy more, and character less, than losers. This expectation was confirmed in both samples (gubernatorial: 6.05, $p < .05$, $\phi = .08$; Senate: 7.65, $p < .01$, $\phi = .09$).

Implications

This study applied Functional Theory to non-presidential television advertisements in the 2008 races for governor and the U.S. Senate. We will note both consistencies and differences in these campaign messages. First, ads for both offices emphasized acclaims over attacks and attacks over defenses. This finding is consistent with past work on presidential campaign messages (Benoit, 2007) and, generally, with the literature on non-presidential ads reviewed

earlier. A focus on acclaims rather than attacks is also consistent with most of the research on non-presidential television advertising reviewed earlier.

All three functions are capable of persuading voters that a candidate is preferable to one's opponent. As noted earlier, acclaims have no disadvantages but most voters report that they dislike mudslinging (Merritt, 1984; Stewart, 1975). This discourages candidates from attacking too heavily (candidates do attack; the point is that attacks have a potential disadvantage which makes them less attractive than acclaims). Defenses, on the other hand, have three potential drawbacks. First, opponents are likely to attack where the opponent is weak, which means that defending against an attack will usually take a candidate "off-message." Second, defenses are likely to sound reactive rather than proactive and candidates may not wish to encourage this impression. Third, a candidate must identify an attack in order to refute it. This means that when a candidate mentions an attack in preparation for the defense he or she may remind or inform voters of a potential weakness. So, it is reasonable to expect that acclaims would be more frequent than attacks and attacks more common than defenses.

Both samples of TV spots stressed policy over character. An emphasis on policy generally is consistent with past research on presidential messages (Benoit, 2007). An emphasis on policy is also consistent with much of the research on non-presidential spots discussed above in the literature review.

As noted earlier, public opinion poll data reveals that, in multiple campaigns, more voters reported that policy was a more important determinant of their vote for president than character (Benoit, 2003). Brazeal and Benoit (2001) located public opinion poll data which indicates that policy is a more important determinant of congressional votes than character as well. Thus, if voters believe policy is more important, this could encourage candidates to emphasize policy more than character in their ads.

In these ads, Democratic spots tended to acclaim more, and attack less, than Republican ads. This is contrary to overall findings in presidential campaigns and; there is no reason to anticipate that this is a consistent effect.

Incumbent candidates have a tendency to acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers. This finding is consistent with previous research on presidential campaign messages (Benoit, 2007). This effect was significant in gubernatorial but not Senate ads. It also appears to be in large part a function of the fact that the incumbent candidate has a record in the office sought. The incumbent's record is a resource for the incumbent to acclaim and the challenger to attack; indeed incumbents do acclaim more, and attack less, on past deeds than challengers. Challengers may have records in other offices, but the most relevant evidence comes from accomplishments or failures in the office being sought. This effect was significant for gubernatorial advertisements and approached significance in Senate ads.

In 2008, Democrats emphasized policy more, and character less, than Republicans in Senate but not gubernatorial ads. A relationship between political party and topic of campaign message has been found in past research on political campaign messages (Benoit, 2004) and with a study of non-presidential ads from 2000 (Airne & Benoit, 2005). It may be that Democrats have some tendency to see governmental solutions to problems whereas Republicans are more likely to prefer private action. These ideological differences incline Democrats to discuss policy somewhat more, and character less, than Republicans.

Primary ads employed more acclaims, and fewer attacks, than general ads in Senate but not gubernatorial ads. A relationship between campaign phase and function has been documented in past research on presidential campaign messages (Benoit, 2007). First, primary opponents, being from the same political party, tend to have fewer policy differences than general election opponents, who are from different parties. Of course, primary candidates do have some differences, just as general candidates have some policy positions in common (who would not be for a safer America?). Nevertheless, in general, there are more policy differences to attack in the general than the primary campaign. Furthermore, the ultimate winner of the primary election (e.g., Kerry in the 2004 presidential race) wants to be endorsed by the losers (e.g., Clark, Dean, Lieberman) and perhaps more importantly, desires the support of the voters who preferred the losers. This may give primary candidates an incentive to moderate their attacks against fellow party members. So, it makes sense that acclaims would be more common, and attacks less common, in primary than general campaigns.

This study found that the topic emphasis varies by campaign phase in the sample of gubernatorial ads. Primary ads stressed policy less, and character more, than general ads. There are fewer policy differences to discuss in the primary than the general campaign phase. Furthermore, most candidates are less well-known in the primary than the general election. First, many candidates in the primary are simply not well known to many voters. Thus, candidates have a greater need to introduce themselves to voters in the primary than the general election. Of course, candidates often run bio spots in the general campaign (particularly in the beginning), but still there is a greater need to discuss character in the primary election phase.

Sponsor of ad influenced the function of political advertising in gubernatorial but not senate ads. Keynote speakers are usually more negative than Acceptance Addresses and political ads from candidates at the presidential level have more attacks than ads from others (Benoit, 2007). Perhaps it is seen as better for a surrogate (i.e., the political party) to be the source of more attacks in a campaign; hoping that if there is a backlash from the attacks it will damage the party or the group and not the candidate. It is not clear whether this assumption is correct (i.e., that there is more backlash against the candidate from attacks in candidate than other ads) – and it is not clear that viewers pay close attention to ad sponsor – but this belief could the content of political ads.

These spots revealed a relationship between function and outcome in both samples of spots: Ads from winners tended to have more acclaims and fewer attacks than ads from losers. This result is consistent with prior research on presidential television spots (Benoit, 1999, 2001). It is possible that voters' dislike for mudslinging could have inclined some of them to vote against candidates who attack frequently.

Winners also display a tendency stress policy more than character (although again the effect size is small). This is consistent with past work on presidential ads (Benoit, 2003). As noted earlier, more voters tend to report that policy is the most important determinant of their vote for president (Benoit, 2003) and for congress (Brazeal & Benoit, 2001). It could be that voters have a tendency to vote for candidates who talk more about the most important topic (policy).

Conclusion

We argue that non-presidential political advertising—in Senate and gubernatorial races—

merits additional scholarly attention. This study investigated ads for these offices in the 20084 campaign. We found both similarities and differences in these advertisements. Future research should extend this work to include multiple races from different election years. This research can also be supplemented with studies of other media, such as debates, direct mail advertising, stump speeches, and Internet campaign websites.

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