

A Functional Analysis of the 2012 London Mayor Debate

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Abstract

In April of 2012, three candidates (Boris Johnson, Conservative; Ken Livingstone, Labour; Brian Paddick, Liberal-Democrat) participated in a debate for the office of the Mayor of London. This study applied the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to this important campaign event. In this debate, acclaims (53%) outnumbered attacks (40%) whereas defences were the least common function (7%). Attacks were only directed toward the two leading candidates and the incumbent (Johnson) was attacked much more than the leading challenger (Livingstone). The incumbent acclaimed more (64% to 46%) and attacked less (24% to 51%) than the challengers. This relationship was particularly sharp when they discussed past deeds or record in office (75% of the incumbents statements on past deeds were acclaims, 25% were attacks; the incumbents attacked much more than they acclaimed, 91% to 9%, when they discussed record in office). These candidates discussed policy (77%) more often than character (23%). These results are compared with results of other studies of political leader's debates in the literature.

Keywords: Functions; Topics; London Mayor; 2012; Incumbent; Challenger

Introduction

The office of the Mayor of London was created in May of 2000 (there is also a purely ceremonial office called the Lord Mayor of the City of London). The first mayor was Ken Livingstone, a member of the Labour Party who was forced to run as an Independent in 2000 when his party nominated Frank Dobson for this office. After Livingstone won the first London mayoral election, he re-joined the Labour Party and was re-elected to this office in 2004. In 2008 Livingstone ran for re-election (representing the Labour Party for a second time) but was defeated by Boris Johnson, the standard bearer for the Conservative Party. Three candidates participated in a debate for this office held on April 19, 2012: Boris Johnson (Conservative Party), Ken Livingstone (Labour Party), and Brian Paddick (Liberal-Democrat Party). Johnson won his quest for re-election in 2012, defeating Livingstone again (and Paddick). London is the capital of England and the United Kingdom, which is comprised of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. It is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world and a global center for business and culture. The campaign for the chief executive of this city merits scholarly attention. This study applies the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to this key element of the campaign, the 2012 London mayoral debate. Political election debates are becoming commonplace in political campaigns. It might be more accurate (albeit somewhat less interesting) to call this particular institution a "joint press conference" [1,2] rather than a "debate." Still, debates are an extremely important component of the campaign and deserve scholarly attention. One reason debates matter is that viewers have the opportunity to watch and compare the leading candidates who for the most part address the same questions. This direct confrontation of facilitates citizens vote choice. The presence of opposing candidates provides an opportunity to correct misstatements (or false statements) from opponents, an advantage of the direct clash possible in debates. Debates are most often 60-90 minutes long, longer than TV spots (which are limited or prohibited in many countries [3]) or other campaign messages and full of information for voters. Meta-analysis confirms that American televised election debates have significant effects on those who watch them [4]. Debates are capable of reinforcing existing attitudes and of changing them. Lanoue [5] found that the 1984 Canadian prime minister debates affected the voting behaviour of viewers. Blais and Boyer [6] indicated that the 1988 Canadian debates

had effects on vote choice and voters' perceptions. Maier and Faas [7] reported that the 2002 German debates influenced candidates' images. Blais et al. [8] argued that the 2003 Canadian debates as "critical in the Conservative surge" (p. 49). Blais and Perrella [9] found that Canadian and American debates produced effects on viewers. A study of German television campaign debates from 2002-2009 indicated that those events had the greatest effects on party choice for independent voters and that the largest mobilizing effect occurred for those with less political interest [10]. Survey data collected following the 2010 British Prime Minister debates [11] revealed that two-thirds of survey respondents said that they had learnt something from the debate; three-quarters felt that they knew more about: "the qualities of the party leaders" after the debates; and large majorities... felt that they knew more about the policies of each party. Nagel, Maurer and Reinemann [12] found that the 2005 German chancellor's debate (particularly the verbal component) had effects on impressions of the candidates. So, studies of political leaders debates around the world has established that these campaign events do have effects on those who watch them. Furthermore, election debates are watched by large audiences, extending their reach. Millions watch American presidential general and primary debates [13]. 68% of the people watched the 2000 German chancellor debate and 57% tuned in for the 1983 chancellor debates [14], half of Canadian voters watched the 1979 prime minister debate [15], 59% of citizens saw the Israeli prime minister debate in 1996 [16], and 65% viewed one of the German chancellor debates in 2002 [17]. Maier and Fass [10] reported that over 15 million watched each of the two German chancellor debates of 2002; 21 million tuned in for the debate in 2005, and over 14 million, over 40% of the electorate, saw the chancellor debate in 2009. This widespread exposure of the debates means that these events have a substantial potential to inform and influence voters. Election debates deserve scholarly attention without any doubt.

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Literature Review

Coleman's [18] volume compiles historical and conceptual essays about international debates. Galasinski [19] investigated rule breaking in the 1995 Polish debates. Matsaganis and Weingarten [20] looked at issues, strategy, and style in a 2000 Greek prime minister debate. Research by Khang [21] applied Kaid and Johnston's [22] theory of video-style to South Korean and U.S. debates. Baker and Norpoth [23] found that the 1972 West German debates focused more on issues than ethics (character). Gomard and Krogstad [24] compiled a text looking at discourse and gender in televised election debates in Denmark, Finland, Norway. Jalilifar and Alvi-Nia [25] investigated hedges (reservations) and boosters (intensifying words) in debate utterances from the winners of the most recent Iranian (Amadinejad) and American (Obama) election winners. Research has also investigated the functions (acclaims, attacks, defenses) and topics (policy, character) in political leader's debates. Benoit [13] reports the results of several studies of political leader's debates in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, the Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Overall, acclaims were more common than attacks and defenses were the least frequent function (in two cases, Spain and the Ukraine, attacks were somewhat more common than acclaims). In each country, policy was discussed more frequently than character. When candidates in these debates discussed general goals and ideals, acclaims were more common than attacks. Isotalus [26] studied a 2006 presidential debate in Finland. He found that defenses were the most common utterance, followed by attacks and then acclaims. Isotalus explains that in these debates, the candidates had to defend themselves from the moderators' questions as well as from attacks by one's opponent. He also suggested that in Finnish culture, direct attacking of an opponent and acclaiming of self "are often avoided" (p. 41). He also found that policy was more common than character. Cmeciu and Patrut [27] analyzed the 2009 Romanian presidential debates. They found that attacks were most common, followed by defenses and then acclaims; they also reported that character occurred more frequently than policy. Dudek and Partacz [28] analyzed presidential debates in Poland in 2007. Candidates attacked more than they acclaimed and acclaimed more than they defended; policy was discussed more than character. So, although some exceptions have occurred, acclaims are the most common function, policy is addressed more than character, and acclaims are more common than attacks on general goals and ideals. Two studies investigated mayoral debates specifically. Benoit et al. [29] content analyzed ten U.S. mayoral debates held between 2005 and 2007; 28 candidates participated in these events. Acclaims (75%) were more common than attacks (19%); defenses were the least common function (7%). Incumbents acclaimed more (76% to 71%) and attacked less (7% to 26%) than challengers. When discussing their records in office (past deeds), incumbents acclaimed more and attacked less than challengers. These candidates for mayor addressed policy more often than character (70% to 30%). When discussing policy, general goals (56%) were most common, followed by past deeds (33%) and future plans (11%). More acclaims than attacks addressed general goals. A greater percentage of attacks occurred on future plans than general goals. The most common form of character in these debates was personal qualities (51%), then leadership ability (33%), and then ideals (16%). More acclaims than attacks concerned ideals. Hwang and Benoit [30] investigated six debates for the mayor of Seoul in 2006. The candidates acclaimed (50%) more than they attacked (28%) or defended (21%). The incumbent party candidate acclaimed less, attacked less, and defended more than the other candidates. When discussing past deeds, the incumbent party candidate acclaimed more (79% to 10%) and attacked less (21% to

90%) than the challengers. These candidates stressed policy more than character, 80% to 20%). The candidates devoted more comments to future plans (63%) than general goals (23%) or past deeds (14%). When discussing general goals, these candidates acclaimed more frequently than they attacked. When discussing character, personal qualities (62%) were addressed more often than ideals (19%) or leadership ability (18%). The candidates acclaimed more than they attacked when discussing ideals. The study reported here extends our understanding of political leader's debates by content analyzing the 2012 London mayoral debate using Functional Theory.

Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

Functional Theory [13,31] concerns political election campaigns. Candidates for office must distinguish themselves from opponents; they need not differ on every point of comparison but there must be some differences between candidates for voters to have a reason to choose one over another. Furthermore, candidates are obligated to create the impression that they are not simply different from, but preferable to, opponents. They need not persuade every citizen, but they must persuade enough voters to win the election. Three functions work together to create this impression of preferability: acclaims, which proclaim the candidate's strengths, attacks, which identify an opponent's weaknesses, and defenses, which refute attacks from the opponent. These three functions can occur on two topics: policy (governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action) and character (personality of the candidate). These two topics are further subdivided: Policy is comprised of past deeds (record in office), future plans (means to an end), and general goals (ends); character consists of personal qualities (personal traits), leadership ability (experience or competence in governing), and ideals (principles or values). Based on Functional Theory [31] and the existing research in this area [13], I propose five hypotheses and three research questions for this investigation of the 2012 London mayoral debate. First, the three functions are not expected to be used with the same frequency. Acclaims have no inherent drawbacks (although this does not mean they are automatically persuasive). Attacks can create backlash against the attacker because so many voters dislike mudslinging [32,33]. Defenses have three drawbacks [13,31] and therefore should be the least common function. Attacks are more likely to occur on a candidate's weaknesses, so responding to an attack is likely to take a candidate off message. Second, responding to an attack could create the impression that a candidate is reactive instead of proactive. Finally, a candidate must identify an attack before defending against it; doing so could inform or remind some voters of a potential weakness. Reinemann and Maurer [34] studied German political leader's debates: Acclaims generated general support in the audience whereas attacks tended to polarize the audience H1. Acclaims will be more common than attacks and attacks will be more common than defenses. Theory and research [13,31] indicate that incumbents are likely to acclaim less, and attack more, than challengers. Arguably, a candidate's record in the office sought is the best evidence of how a candidate will do if elected or re-elected. Both incumbents and challengers are inclined to discuss the incumbent's record more often than the challengers' record. Of course, incumbents acclaim when they discuss their own record whereas challengers attack when they discuss the incumbent's record H2. The incumbent will acclaim more and attack less than the challengers. The contrast between incumbents and challengers is particularly crisp when the candidates address their record in office. Typically, only the incumbent has a record in the office sought (some candidates have experience in other offices). Record in office is operationalized in

Functional Theory as acclaims or attacks on past deeds. Incumbent are likely to acclaim more and attack less than challengers when talking about a candidate’s record in office: H3. The incumbent candidate will acclaim more and attack less than challengers when discussing past deeds. When more than two candidates participate in a debate, the question arises of how the attacks are distributed among the candidates. The first research question concerns the distribution of attacks in this debate. RQ1. Is there a difference in the number of attacks directed toward each candidate? A president, prime minister, or chancellor can be viewed as a policy implementer and as a role model. Rountree [35], for example, distinguishes between actus (behavior, action) or what we do and status (nature) or who we are in political campaign discourse. Functional Theory argues that for most voters policy is more important than character [13,31]. King [36] summarized the results of multiple studies of the role of character in 51 elections held in 6 countries between 1960 and 2001: It is quite unusual for leaders’ and candidates’ personality and other personal traits to determine election outcomes. The almost universal belief that leaders’ and candidates’ personalities are almost invariably hugely important in determining the outcomes of elections is simply wrong. (p. 216) For these reasons, Functional Theory predicts that: H3. Policy will be more common than character. Functional Theory sub-divides policy and character utterances into three forms of policy (past deeds, future plans, and general goals) and three forms of character (personal qualities, leadership ability, ideals). The following research questions investigate the relative frequency of these forms RQ2. What are the relative frequencies of the three forms of policy? RQ3. What are the relative frequencies of the three forms of character? Functional Theory [13,31] argues that most general goals and ideals are easier to acclaim than to attack. For example, who could disagree with an opponent’s goal of creating jobs? How would a candidate argue against ideals such as equality or justice? The final two predictions we test in this theory are: H4. General goals will be used more often to attack than to acclaim. H5. Ideals will be used more often to attack than to acclaim. Testing these hypotheses and answering these research questions with data from the 2012 London mayoral debate will extend our understanding of political election debates.

Method

In order to assure that the data generated here are comparable with previous research, this study followed the content analytic procedures developed for the Functional Theory [13,31]. The first step was to unitize the text of this debate into themes, the coding unit employed in this study. Themes are arguments (argument 1 in O’Keefe’s [37] terminology), claims, or ideas; a single theme can vary in length from one phrase to an entire paragraph. Second, each theme was categorized by function: acclaim, attack or defense. The target of each attack [38] was identified. Next, the topic of each theme was categorized as policy or character. Finally, the form of policy or character for each theme was determined (defenses are relatively rare so they are not categorized by topic). Examples of acclaims and attacks on the three forms of policy and of character can be found in Benoit [13].

Inter-coder reliability was calculated with Cohen’s [39] kappa. About 10% of the transcript was employed to calculate inter-coder reliability. Kappa was 0.92 for functions, 0.97 for target of attack, 0.88 for topics, 0.93 for forms of policy, and 0.86 for forms of character. Landis and Koch [40] explain that kappa values of 0.81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders, so these data have good reliability. Two forms of chi-square tests are used in this study which is based on frequency data generated by content analysis. Some predictions (e.g. policy is more common than character) have one variable with

two levels (topic: policy and character). For these analyses a chi-square goodness-of-fit test is used. Other analyses concern two variables, such as incumbents acclaim more and attack less than challengers: The two variables here are function and incumbency status. In this situation, a chi-square test of cross-classification is used. Because effect size measures the impact of one variable on another variable, no effect size can be reported with a goodness-of-fit test, which has only one variable.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that acclaims would be the most common function in this debate, followed by attacks and then by defenses. In this debate, acclaims comprised 53% of statements, attacks were 40%, and defenses were 7%. Johnson illustrated an acclaim when he boasted that “crime on the Tube has come down 20% since I’ve been the Mayor” [35]. Livingstone provided an example of an attack when he declared that “Where I think the Mayor has failed is not tackle the growing abuses of the private rented sector, about a third of the landlords are really abusing their position and they get, the cost of a two bedroom private rented flat is over half the average take home pay in this city”. When chided by Johnson for not publishing his tax return, Livingstone defended by arguing that “I pay three times the average rate of tax of an ordinary person in this city”. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that these frequencies were significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 2] = 95.52, p < 0.0001$) (Table 1).

H2 anticipated that incumbents would acclaim more, and attack less, than challengers. In this debate the incumbent acclaimed more (64% to 46%) and attacked less (24% to 51%) than the challengers (an example of an acclaim by the incumbent and an attack by a challenger are provided in the previous paragraph). A chi-square test of cross classification confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 16.63, p < 0.0001, \phi = 0.26$). These data are also displayed in Table 1. Note that the challengers attacked more often than they acclaimed (although not significantly more). Functional theory expects that generally candidates acclaim more than they attack; however, in some cases other factors, such as being a challenger, may give them a reason to step up their attacks. Hypothesis three expected that the contrast in the functions used by incumbents versus challengers would be particularly sharp when candidates discuss record in office or past deeds. The incumbent was more likely to acclaim than attack on past deeds (75% to 25%) whereas challengers attacked more than they acclaimed on past deeds (91% to 9%). The examples provided in the paragraph on H1 illustrated an acclaim on past deeds by the incumbent and an attack on past deeds by the challengers. A chi-square test of cross classification confirmed that these differences were significant ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 41.46, p < 0.0001, \phi = 0.67$) (Table 2).

The first research question concerned the distribution of attacks across these three candidates. 73% of the attacks were directed at the incumbent (Johnson) and 27% to the leading challenger (Livingstone); no attacks targeted the other challenger, Paddick. Johnson was criticized when Livingstone argued that “there are 1,700 less police

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Incumbent	73 (64%)	27 (24%)	14 (12%)
Challengers	72 (46%)	81 (51%)	5 (3%)
Total	145 (53%)	108 (40%)	19 (7%)

Total functions: $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 95.52, p < 0.0001$

Acclaims versus attacks for incumbent versus challengers: $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 16.63, p < 0.0001, \phi = 0.26$

Table 1: Functions of 2012 London Mayoral Debate.

today than there was [sic] two years ago.” Johnson criticized former mayor Livingstone when he observed that “under you I think violent offences went up like 521% on the Tube.” A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that these frequencies were different ($\chi^2 [df = 2] = 88.72, p < 0.0001$) (Table 3).

The third hypothesis expected that policy would be discussed more often than character. In this debate policy was discussed much more frequently than character, 77% to 23%. An utterance on policy was offered by Paddick when he argued “We’ve got 350,000 families on the council waiting list [for housing] across London.” Paddick also illustrated a character theme when he declared “I’m going to give it to you straight,” acclaiming his modesty. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed that these frequencies were significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 75.28, p < 0.0001$) (Table 4).

RQ2 concerned the distribution of the three forms of policy. In these debates past deeds accounted for 46% of policy themes, future plans were 12% and general goals were 41%. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that these frequencies were different ($\chi^2 [df = 2] = 39.99, p < 0.0001$) (Table 5).

The third research question addressed the relative frequency of the three forms of character in this debate. Personal qualities accounted for 68% of character utterances, 26% were about leadership ability, and 5% addressed ideals. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that these frequencies were different ($\chi^2 [df = 2] = 35.37, p < 0.0001$) (Table 6).

	Acclaims	Attacks
Incumbent	27 (75%)	9 (25%)
Challengers	5 (9%)	50 (91%)

$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 41.46, p < 0.0001, \phi = 67$

Table 2: Functions of past deeds by incumbency in 2012 London Mayoral Debate.

	Attacks Against Candidate
Johnson (I)	79 (73%)
Livingstone (C)	29 (27%)
Paddick (C)	0

$\chi^2 (df = 2) = 88.72, p < 0.0001$

Table 3: Target of attack in 2012 London Mayoral Debate.

	Frequency
Policy	196 (77%)
Character	57 (23%)

$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 75.28, p < 0.0001$

Table 4: Topics of 2012 London Mayoral Debate.

Past Deeds			Future Plans			General Goals		
Acclaims	Attacks	Total	Acclaims	Attacks	Total	Acclaims	Attacks	Total
32	59	91 (46%)	16	8	24 (12%)	75	6	81 (41%)

Forms of policy: $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 39.99, p < 0.0001$

Functions of general goals: $\chi^2 (df = 1) = 57.08, p < 0.0001$

Table 5: Forms of policy in 2012 London Mayoral Debate.

Personal Qualities			Leadership Ability			Ideals		
Acclaims	Attacks	Total	Acclaims	Attacks	Total	Acclaims	Attacks	Total
14	25	39 (68%)	8	7	15 (26%)	0	3	3 (5%)

Forms of character $\chi^2 (df = 2) = 35.37, p < 0.0001$

Table 6: Forms of character in 2012 London Mayoral Debate.

H4 expected that when candidates discussed general goals they would acclaim more often than they attacked. In this debate, 93% of themes on general goals were acclaims whereas 7% were attacks. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that this difference was significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 57.08, p < 0.0001$). These data are reported in Table 5. The final prediction held that ideals would be used more for acclaims than attacks. In this debate only three utterances in this debate addressed ideals and all of them were attacks. Therefore, this prediction was not confirmed (Table 6).

Discussion

Overall, acclaims were the most common function and defenses the least common. As anticipated the challengers attacked more and acclaimed less than the incumbent. This contrast was particularly strong when the candidates discussed record in office. The two leading candidates, Johnson and Livingstone, were the only target of attacks and the incumbent Johnson received the bulk of the attacks. Given the fact that Livingstone had served two terms as mayor of London, it is a little surprising that he rarely acclaimed his record (only 9% of his statements on past deeds were acclaims) and the current incumbent rarely attacked Livingstone’s record (25% of Johnson’s themes on past deeds were attacks). Perhaps Livingstone’s record as mayor was discussed infrequently in part because it was relatively dated in 2012 (he served as mayor from 2000 to 2008). Policy was addressed more often than character by the candidates in this debate. As expected, when using general goals the candidates used acclaims were often than attacks. The corresponding prediction for ideals was not confirmed. Perhaps this was not confirmed because ideals were very rare in this debate: Only three instances of this form of character occurred. These results are generally consistent with previous research on political leader’s debates around the world [9] and on mayoral debates in particular [25,26].

Conclusion

Political election debates are an important message form in contemporary campaigns. They allow voters to compare leading candidates and considerable research shows that debates have significant effects on viewers. Debates in countries around the world and at different levels of government. This study extends our understanding of political election debates by analyzing the 2012 London mayoral debate. The data are consistent with previous research on political leaders debates generally and mayoral debates in particular (except where the functions of rarely used ideals are concerned). The general consistency of data reported here and in other studies using the Functional Approach make it clear that some features of election campaign messages transcend country and culture as well as level of

office. For example, consistent differences emerge between debate discourse of incumbents versus challengers. Of course, Functional Theory does not address every possible variable – for example, it does not discuss the use of metaphor or evidence in election messages – but it does address some of the key aspects of campaign messages.

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