Abstract

This paper examines the minimally researched area of television spots of failed presidential candidates. It applies the functional theory of political campaign discourse. An interesting finding: contrary to conventional wisdom, some failed Democratic Party presidential candidates acclaimed more than they attacked in their political spots. Further analysis reveal that having served as president or vice president, these candidates may have conformed with the general position that incumbents acclaim more and attack less in their political spots. Other vital findings include minimum discussion of future plans and leadership ability by candidates who turn out to be losers in their bid for the presidency.

Introduction

Voter enlightenment and persuasion are increasingly becoming contingent upon the effective use of political advertisements in contemporary electioneering campaign process (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995; Benoit, Pier & Blaney, 1997; Benoit, 1999, 2001; Freedman & Goldstein, 2002).

Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) further extend this position in their argument that there exists a very high level of reliance on the instrumentality of political spots by political office contestants in the process of marketing themselves and their campaign promises to the electorate. This use of political advertisements has also been demonstrated to cut across international frontiers and cultures, as shown in the study of elections in South Korea (Lee & Benoit, 2004).

The nature and inherent powers of the presidency across political climes tend to dictate that a great deal of studies on election campaigns and the use of political advertisements dwell on the presidential elections. As Lau and Pomper (2001), and Brazeal and Benoit (2001) show, presidential elections are at the commanding heights of research on the use of political spots.

However, these studies have generally dealt with issues such as knowledge gap in presidential campaigns (Holbrook, 2002), impact of candidate and political party
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advertising on the voters (Pfau, Park, Holbert and Cho, 2001), negative advertisements and
demobilizing the electorate (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon and Valentino, 1994), and
public mood, political cynicism and voting (Leshner & Thorson, 2000).

What can be deciphered as the undercurrent linking most of these studies together
is their connection with political advertisements and electoral outcomes vis-à-vis potential
victory at the polls. In other words, they invariably or inadvertently focus on winners at
elections. How about the use of political advertisements that resulted in failed electoral
ambitions? Very scanty, if any, research exists in their area. As the aphorism goes, success
has numerous putative parents; failure is an orphan.

Consequently, this paper shall pay attention to television spots used by U.S.
presidential candidates (1952 – 2004) whose electoral hopes were not realized at the polls.
In it, concentration shall not be on why the political advertisements did not bring desired
success; rather the focus shall be on examining the advertisements to see if there is a
pattern in the various spots used by these failed presidential candidates. This examination
shall be done by comparing political spots used across political party lines. In a nutshell,
this paper is about unsuccessful presidential candidates and noticeable trends in the
political advertisements they used for their campaigns.

Research Purpose, Question and Hypotheses

Overall, this study is aimed at making some contribution to the development of
literature in this marginally researched area of failed presidential candidates and the types
of political advertisements they used in their campaign efforts, doing so on the basis of
their political party affiliation.
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For the realization of this goal therefore, the basic research question that shall guide this study can be framed as follows: what trends do failed candidates of either political party affiliation in U.S. presidential elections have in their political advertisement spots?

In order to provide reasoned and verifiable answers to this research endeavor, the following hypotheses shall be examined:

1. Democratic party presidential election losers discuss more character issues than future plans in their political spots
2. Republican party presidential election losers discuss more character issues than future plans in their political spots
3. Democratic party presidential election losers discuss more policy issues than leadership ability in their political spots
4. Republican party presidential election losers discuss more policy issues than leadership ability in their political spots
5. Democratic party presidential election losers acclaim more than they attack in their political spots
6. Republican party presidential election losers acclaim more than they attack in their political spots

In examining these hypotheses, this study shall extensively rely on, but modify a previous study done by Benoit (1999, 2001) in the assessment of political advertisements used in presidential elections in the U.S.

Theoretical framework

The functional theory of political campaign discourse shall serve as the theoretical lighthouse for this presentation. Developed by Benoit (1999), the theory basically assumes
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that elections are inherently competitive, hence the candidate who commands more appeal to the electorate wins their mandate. Arising from these interlocking elements of electoral competitiveness and candidate preference amongst voters, the functional theory of political campaign discourse makes the point that political advertising spots have three fundamental functions: acclaims, attacks and defenses on the topics of policy and character (Benoit, 1999).

Acclaims, according to Benoit (2001) “are utterances that are intended to enhance the reputation of the speaker” (p.114). For instance, in one of his 1964 presidential campaign spots, Barry Goldwater proclaimed: “We must attract trained men and women who will dedicate their careers to the military services. And we'll attract them with good pay, good career opportunities, and real security for their families.”

On the other hand, attacks “are negative utterances that emphasize an opponent’s disadvantages” (Lee & Benoit, 2004, p. 69) or weak points. An example is when, in the 1968 presidential campaign, the eventual loser, Huber Humphrey had this to say about Richard Nixon in his political spot: “Do you want Castro to have the bomb, now? Do you want any country that doesn't have the bomb to get it? Of course you don't. Wheredoes Richard Nixon stand on the UN treaty to stop the spread of nuclear weapons? He says he's in no hurry to pass it.”

Defenses are utterances that are used to refute attacks (Benoit, Stein & Hansen, 2005). Essentially, defenses are for image restoration.

In Benoit, Pier and Blaney (1997), and Benoit (1999), there is a further exposition that these three basic functions of political spots are applied to topics; where topics are defined as policy and character. Policy matters are what a candidate has done or envisages
accomplishing. Here is an example of policy: “I refuse to make your family pay more so that millionaires can pay less” (Walter Mondale, 1984). In this regard, policy could refer to past deeds, future plans and general goals of the candidate.

Character, on the other hand, is what a person is perceived to be. Essentially, it deals with leadership ability, personal qualities and ideals. An example: “suddenly, the words President Quayle even make me nervous” (Mike Dukakis’ political advertisement, 1988). This is an indictment on the character of candidate Dan Quayle.

The functional theory of political campaign discourse further posits that attacks, acclaims or defenses can be on policy or character or any of their attributes. For instance, one of the campaign spots in this study says: “I know Barry Goldwater's voting record on Social Security. He has voted time and again for Social Security legislation, including the one that increased Social Security payments” (Goldwater, 1964). This is an acclaim on policy (past deed). In another instance, a man says this about Jimmy Carter in a Ford-sponsored political spot: “I don't think Carter's got the, ah, background and experience to run the country. I don't, I just can't figure him being president” This is an attack on character (personal quality).

Overall, the functional theory of political campaign discourse states that acclaims in general are more commonly used than attacks because the latter has a drawback in the sense that voters generally detest mudslinging. Defenses, on the other hand are the least used essentially because they tend to take a candidate off his or her message (Lee & Benoit, 2004) as he or she spends considerable time and energy in responding to what was said about the candidate.
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Literature Review

One of the predominant and pervasive truisms of political communication is that political advertising, especially on television, is a potent instrument for the transmission of campaign messages from candidates for political office to prospective voters (Joslyn, 1980), with the obvious aim of explaining choices to voters (Herrnson & Patterson, 2000).

To underscore the importance and prevalence of this form of electronic advertising, the 2000 presidential elections in the U.S. gulped some $240 million, and by 2004 a whopping collective expenditure of $620 million had been used on political spots in the next presidential election (Devlin, 2001, 2005) as the candidates tried to outdo each other in ensuring that their messages were effectively ferried across to the electorate.

These messages straddle across issues associated with the candidates as well as their images (Johnston & Kaid, 2002), all leading to the formation of opinions about the political contestants and their suitability for political office (Mulder, 1979; Benoit, 1999). Even more compelling is the report that when it comes to where potential voters obtain their information about the candidates and what they propose as policies, studies such as West (1993) conclude that voters put political advertisements above news sources.

One of the confounding paradoxes of political advertising lies in the apparent positive power of negative advertisements. Kahn and Kenney (2000) observe that “negative advertisements actually serve as a resource for challengers. When people are presented with more negative commercials, they become significantly more aware of the challenger’s name, even controlling for a host of rival forces” (p. 78). Lau and Pomper (2001) tend to support this contention. They note in their study of Senate elections between 1988 and
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1998 that “negative campaigning is clearly evident, although not predominant” (p.80). In their study, Lau and Sigelman (2000) reiterate the widely held opinion that attack (negative) ads have pervasive effects, primarily because they are easily noticed, processed and recalled than advocacy ads. Nevertheless they challenge the samethinking by stating that their research shows that “political attack ads are no more effective than advocacy ads” (p.36).

What types of political advertisement dominate the literature? In the theory section of this paper, there is the explanation that the ads are either attacking or acclaiming candidates (Benoit, 1999) on their policies and, or, character. Diamond and Bates (1993) hold similar opinion. However, they go on to assert that in addition, there are biographical and argument advertising spots. The former is used especially at the initial stage of the campaign, to introduce and reinforce a candidate’s identity. The latter is used to explain a candidate’s position on issues.

With reference to the focus of this research enterprise on political advertisement spots, it is worth repeating that existing body of research is skewed in favor of the presidency. Brazeal and Benoit (2001) note this in their submission that “despite the importance of congressional television advertising, this message form has received scant attention” (p.437) possibly as a result of what they describeas the routine excitement which presidential elections generate in comparison to others. However, Lau and Pomper (2001) call attention to the need to investigate non presidential political advertising, and went ahead to examine US senate negative election campaigns between 1988 and 1998.

Research into political advertising reveal quite a number of fascinating conclusions. Petrocik (1996), for instance articulates the idea that political parties have issues they are
identified with over time. Consequently his issue ownership theory states that the issue ownership theory “expects candidates to emphasize issues on which they are advantaged and their opponents are less well regarded” for the empirically tested reasons that “voters support candidates with a party and performance based reputation for greater competence on handing the issues about which the voter is concerned” (p. 825).

Benoit (2001) observes that overall, presidential candidates discuss policy more than character in their political spots; that incumbents tend to acclaim whereas challengers attack in their political spots. Tak, Kaid and Lee (1997) found that South Korean political ads are less negative than ads in the U.S., a finding that has roots in cultural differences between both nation-states.

As opined earlier, what happens in the camp of losing candidates attracts little or no research. Suffice it to mention that Benoit (2001) asserts hat losers highlight character or personality more than winners.

Method

The functional theory of political campaign discourse was used in this study, content analysis being the method used to examine the data. A chi-square analysis was also used to test the hypotheses embedded in this paper.

Sample

This paper examined 105 presidential political spots which were downloaded from the internet sites http://web.missouri.edu/~benoitw/TVSpots%201952-1972.htm and http://web.missouri.edu/~benoitw/TVSpots%201976-2004.htm. These are “Texts of Selected Presidential TV Spots” from 1952 to 2004. Eight political spots that belong to candidates George C. Wallace (1968), John Anderson (1980), and Ross Perot (1992) were
excluded from this analysis for the simple reason that politicians ran as independent candidates, whereas this paper is focused on party representation.

This sample covers a fifty-two year period which witnessed fourteen U.S. presidential elections, with the Republican and Democratic parties having five and nine failed presidential candidates respectively.

As texts of “selected” political spots, the implication is that not all possible political spots that were used in this period were studied. This makes the data a convenience sample. However, the authors made ample effort to include all the political spots that featured in the presidential elections of that era.

Despite this possible non-inclusion of all texts in the population, this sample largely depicts the complexities of U.S. presidential election outcomes. Included are elections where three incumbent presidents George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford (Republican), and Jimmy Carter (Democrat) lost their reelection bids. On the other hand, three vice presidents, all Democrats, equally lost (Hubert H. Humphrey, Walter F. Mondale, and Al Gore).

Coding Procedure

A typical political advertisement may contain a variety of utterances or themes. Here, a theme refers to “a claim, a statement, or an argument and can range in length from a phrase to more than one sentence” (Lee & Benoit, 2004, p. 73). These themes therefore form the units of analysis for this study.

The themes were then classified by functions: acclaims show the candidate in favorable light; attacks are unfavorable utterances against a candidate; defense is the response to a specific attack. These themes were then applied to topics they address, namely policy or character. Thus, themes that refer to action taken or envisaged belong to
the policy category, while those that address personality and related attributes come under the umbrella of character.

In line with the specifications of the functional theory of political campaign discourse the policy category has utterances or themes that address past deeds, future plans and general goals; the character category deals with themes concerning personal quality, leadership ability and ideals. These were discussed in more details in the theory section of this paper.

Two coders were recruited, trained and content-analyzed the presidential political spots, and Cohen’s kappa which corrects for agreement by chance was used to assess inter-coder reliability. The following results were obtained from this exercise: functions .82 (attack), .81 (acclaim) and .80 (defense); policy – .81 (past deeds), .79 (future plans) and .80 (general goals); character - .81 (personal quality), .80 (leadership ability) and .77 (ideals). Overall, the result for inter-coder reliability was .79.

Results

The first hypothesis in this study predicted that losers in presidential elections who belong to the Democratic Party discuss more character than future plans in their political advertising spots. Results on Table 1 below support this prediction with a chi-square test showing significant differences in the use of both variables, $\chi^2(df=8)=45.63, p<.001$. The figures show that character issues were discussed 81 times or 58% of the presidential spots, whereas those on future plans were discussed 58 times, representing 42% of the advertisements.

Table 1
The second hypothesis asserts that failed Republican Party presidential candidates discuss more character issues than those on future plans in their political advertisement spots. Figures on Table 2 below show that this hypothesis is supported, with a chi-square analysis result of $\chi^2(df=4)=33.15, p<.001$. There is therefore a significant difference in the discussion of character (72%) and future plans (28%) issues in the spots used by these Republican Party candidates.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Future Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldwater</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dole</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73(72%)</td>
<td>28(28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ²(df=4)=33.15, p<.001

The third hypothesis in this paper asserts that unsuccessful Democratic Party presidential candidates discuss more policy issues than leadership ability in their advertising campaign slots. A chi-square analysis of data used in this research lend support to this hypothesis, χ²(df=8)=49.04, p<.001. Table 3 below shows a significant difference in the discussion of policy (83%) and leadership ability (17%) by the candidates.

Table 3
### Democratic Party presidential elections losers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphrey</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGovern</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mondale</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dukakis</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gore</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>137(83%)</td>
<td>29(17%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \chi^2(df=8)=49.04, p<.001 \]

In the fourth hypothesis of this study, the claim is made that losing Republican Party presidential candidates deal with policy issues more than leadership acumen in their political spots. Results documented in Table 4 show this assertion to be supported. With policy and leadership abilities attracting 77% and 23% of issues discussed in their political advertisements going to policy and leadership respectively, there is therefore a significant difference in the use of both variables by the candidates. The \( \chi^2 \) analysis for this significance is \( \chi^2(df=4)=30.41, p<.001 \)
Table 4
Republican Party presidential elections losers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldwater</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dole</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>79(77%)</td>
<td>21(23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ²(df=4)=30.41, p<.001

The fifth hypothesis contends that democrats who lose presidential elections acclaim more than they attack in their political spots. Data for this aspect the research in Table 5 below show that candidates in this genre appear to acclaim and attack on equal pedestal (50% each). However, a chi-square analysis indicate a significant difference in the distribution between both variables, χ²(df=8)=40.47, p<.001.

Table 5
Democratic Party presidential elections losers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Acclaim</th>
<th>Attack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphrey</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGovern</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Carter 13 6
Mondale 9 17
Dukakis 10 27
Gore 27 6
Kerry 23 13
Total 111(50%) 111(50%)

χ²(df=8)=40.47, p<.001

The nature of this result triggered further analysis as shown on Table 5a and Table 5b. In the former, the candidates were redistributed according to their incumbency experience, for reasons that shall be elaborated upon in the discussion segment of this work. The result is as follows:

Table 5a

Democratic Party presidential elections losers
(as incumbent/former president or vice president)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Acclaim</th>
<th>Attack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humphrey</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mondale</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gore</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66(58%)</td>
<td>47(42%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ²(df=3)=15.68, p<.01.

This table (5a) has information on the Democratic Party candidates who had served as president or vice president and were contesting for another chance in office. Results from this data show a significant difference in the use of acclaims (58%) and attacks (42%)
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among the ex-president/vice president candidates. *A chi-square* text reaffirms this

significance with $\chi^2(df=3)=15.68, p<.01$. This supports the fifth hypothesis, that losing

Democrats acclaim more than they attack in their political spots. This issue shall be
discussed later in this work.

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Table 5b

Democratic Party presidential elections losers
(challengers without incumbency experience)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Acclaim</th>
<th>Attack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGovern</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dukakis</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>45(41%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>64(59%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2(df=4)=19.31, p<.001$

Table 5b isolates candidates with no incumbency experience from the main list in

Table 5. Results from data show that a significant difference exists in the use of acclaims

(41%) and attacks (59%), and the chi-square analysis confirms that, $\chi^2(df=4)=19.31,
Thus, the original hypothesis in Table 5 is not supported by Table 5b. As indicated earlier, this issue shall receive more attention in the discussion section of this work.

The sixth hypothesis in this work claims that Republican Party candidates acclaim more than they attack in their presidential political spots. Results from Table 6 below demonstrate this to be true, with 72% recorded for acclaims and 28% for attacks. The chi-square analysis supports this with $\chi^2(df=4)=25.06, p<.001$. The hypothesis is therefore upheld.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Acclaim</th>
<th>Attack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldwater</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dole</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>97(72%)</td>
<td>51(28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2(df=4)=25.06, p<.001$

Discussion
Essentially, this paper set out to examine the marginally researched area of failed presidential candidates across political party persuasions vis-à-vis the content of their political campaign advertisements. The theory employed in this study is the functional theory of political campaign discourse developed by Benoit (1999). Overall, there is evidence that both Republicans and Democrats who lost their bid for the presidency had political spots which they used to woo voters, just as the winners did.

While this study does not pretend to present a compelling or iron-cast recipe for the failure of presidential ambitions, it attempts to demonstrate that among the candidates who could not actualize their presidential dreams are some similarities in the content of the political advertisements they used in the process of electioneering campaigns.

One of the results of this research is that losers of presidential elections are high on character issues and low on future plans in their political spots irrespective of their political party affiliation. Results from this research (Tables 1 and 2) show that Democrats had 58% on character issues, while the Republicans recorded 72%, while on the other hand the candidates’ future plans attracted 42% and 28% between Democrats and Republicans respectively. This finding is further buttressed by Benoit (2001) who found out that “losers dwell more on character or personality than winners” in their political spots (p.120). Kaid and Johnston (2000) partially support this finding in their assertion that overall, Republicans discuss character more than Democrats. The figures above show that Republicans who lose (72%) still have more character discussions than their Democratic counterparts (58%).

Even from mere commonsensical standpoint, it is not out of place to expect voters to want to learn more about what a candidate intends to do as against being inundated with
his or her sterling characteristics. If, by doing the opposite, a candidate loses an election, then that outcome is not to be completely unexpected.

Tables 3 and 4 bring up another important point from this research effort. Both show that losers of either political party affiliation put heavy emphasis on policy in contrast to leadership ability. Democrats score 83% on policy whereas they have 17% for leadership, which is a character trait. On their part, Republicans have 77% for policy and 23% on leadership. There is no doubt that the literature affirms that presidential candidates generally discuss more policy than character issues, although Lee and Benoit (2004) report that in South Korea, the reverse is the case.

A great deal of research in the policy-character debate just dwells on these broad categories. In this study, an attempt was made to pit policy against leadership which is a sub-set of character, according to the functional theory of campaign discourse. What emerges is a rather wide gap between policy and leadership (83%-17%, for Democrats; 77%-23% for Republicans). Could this chronicling of policies to the near neglect of the leadership ability to translate words into action, have affected voters’ perception of the candidates? This research did not delve into this issue but it is worth mentioning as food for thought.

Nevertheless, leadership is an important issue for any candidate for political office. President Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign was largely run on effective leadership in the fight against international terrorism. Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s 2008 bid for the presidency is expected to be run on leadership - the type he demonstrated in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. Added to all this is the fact that Benoit (1999) for instance, found that from 1952 to
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2000, the policy-character gap was 60%-40% (closer than what this study found in a little longer period).

What this research shows is that losers in both political parties place minimum premium on the leadership issue in their political spots, a trend which apparently goes against the tide of how paramount leadership skills are, in the process of convincing voters of a candidate’s eligibility for the presidential office.

The fifth hypothesis presents a more interpretative difficulty. The hypothesis assumes that Democratic Party presidential election losers do more acclaiming than attacking in their political spots. But, Table 5 shows evenness in acclaiming and attacking (50%-50%). Ordinarily, this would have meant that the hypothesis is not supported. However, the chi-square analysis showed that significant differences exist in the use of both variables. It was therefore necessary to “resolve” this apparent anomaly through further dissection of the data available. Consequently, by controlling for the incumbency variable among the candidates, the data showed on Table 5a that acclaims (58%) outweigh attacks (42%) in a statistically significant manner.

This supports the fifth hypothesis but raises another issue: Republicans generally acclaim more than Democrats in political advertising research (Benoit, 1999, 2001). However, this important question is moderated by the incumbency factor. A noticeable pattern across cultures is that incumbents acclaim more than they attack because of the reason that as former office holders, they have quite some accomplishments to acclaim (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995), and the temptation to acclaim is somewhat difficult to ignore or resist.
Without this incumbency factor, as shown in Table 5b, the hypothesis is not supported. The data show that Democratic Party candidates who lost the presidential election attacked (59%) more than they acclaimed (41%) in their political spots.

The claim in the sixth hypothesis is that Republican Party candidates who fail to win the presidency discuss more acclaim than attacks in their political spots. This is affirmed in Table 6, with acclaims being 72% whereas attacks are 28%.

This discussion would be incomplete without going back to the research question that was posed at the outset of this paper. The question deals with the establishment of trends in the political advertisement spots for failed presidential contenders in the US, irrespective of political party affiliation.

What this paper has shown in this regard is that unsuccessful presidential contenders appear to discuss more character related issues than putting emphasis on future plans in the political spots they use; candidates from both parties also appear to discuss more policy issues than leadership matters in their ads, but the gap between both variables is quite wide to the disadvantage of the leadership quality; presidential election losers belonging to the Republican Party appear to acclaim more than they attack in their political spots. However, when it comes to the Democrats, candidates with an incumbency experience tend to acclaim more than they attack, whereas those who had never served in office appear to attack more than they acclaim.

Conclusion

This study applied the functional theory of political campaign discourse in the examination of political spots used by unsuccessful presidential contenders in the U.S.,
Analysis of TV spots of failed presidential candidates

from 1952 to 2004. It examined 105 political spots across fourteen presidential elections, nine of which were lost by Democrats and five by Republicans.

Among the trends that emerged from this exercise, perhaps the most exciting is that candidates of the Democratic Party, with a tradition of attacking more than acclaiming in presidential elections, did the opposite. This study analyzed the situation and came up with the suggestion, with evidence, that such candidates might have done so against the backdrop of their previous experience as former presidents or vice presidents. Research has demonstrated that overall, incumbents acclaim more than they attack (Benoit, 1999).

Nevertheless, this study did not set out to prove causality. Indeed, one of its greatest handicaps relates to the convenience data used in the analysis. Although the data source was quite comprehensive, the use of convenience data has inherent limitations. Another limitation is that failure to win the presidency cannot be attributed to the use of political spots alone. A wide variety of factors act as catalysts for failure.

This study opens up more opportunities for further research. For instance, more work needs to be done in establishing voter response to political adverts of failed presidential contenders, or doing a more direct comparison between the spots used by winners and losers over time. What was done in this research is to look at what failed candidates did.

Another area of possible study lies in doing more comparisons between the variables offered by the functional theory of political campaign discourse. As it is, most of the work done in this regard look at the broad outlines, for instance, on policy versus character. An examination of a specific aspect of policy like “past deeds” could be compared with a specific aspect of character, like “leadership ability”, and then assess
which has more impact on voters. Such researched combinations could offer more insights into the impact television spots on the election of candidates for political office.

Above all, researching the political spots used in what turn out to be failed campaigns for the presidency will offer added value to political communication generally, perhaps as much as the current trend of largely examining the more general structure of political spots used in elections.

References


