

Presidential debates are mostly positive and emphasize policy

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Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain are preparing for their first presidential debate this week. William Benoit, one of the nation's leading experts on political campaigns at the University of Missouri, says presidential debates have become an important part of presidential campaigns since 1960.

Benoit, a communication professor in the MU College of Arts and Science, has analyzed 23 presidential debates since 1960 and found that most statements by candidates in debates are 57 percent positive over time. This level is about the same as in general election TV-spots from candidates, which average 59 percent positive. TV spots do have more attacks than debates, 40 percent to 35 percent, and debates have more defenses (direct refutations of attacks) than ads. About eight percent of the candidate statements in debates are defenses, 1 percent in ads.

According to Benoit, debates are mostly about policy: 75 percent of the candidates' statements are about policy. In TV spots 62 percent of the statements are about policy. In general, newspaper stories have a tendency to emphasize character more, and policy less, than candidates. In newspaper stories about debates specifically, the same tendency occurs. Newspaper stories from 1980-2000 discussed character more (31 percent) than the candidates themselves in debate statements (26 percent).

"If we think debates are mostly negative, that impression is encouraged by news coverage," Benoit said. "News coverage in general is more

negative than statements from the candidates because reporters are more likely to cover attacks in their stories."

Benoit also found newspaper stories have a tendency to emphasize character more and policy less, than candidates. In general, 75 percent of candidates' statements in a debate are mostly about policy, whereas only 62 percent of TV-spot statements are about policy. In newspaper stories about debates specifically, the same tendency occurs. Newspaper stories from 1980-2000 discussed character 31 percent of the time, while candidates referred to character only 26 percent of the time during debates.

In addition, Benoit investigated the topics of questions asked by journalists in debates through 2000, such as inflation, unemployment, Social Security and national defense. The frequency of question topics in each debate was compared with public opinion poll data on the importance of these topics to voters. Only in 1960 did journalists ask more debate questions about the topics that were most important to voters. In other years, the importance of a topic to voters had no impact on the number of questions journalists asked about that topic. This situation improved briefly when citizens were allowed to ask the questions that mattered to them in the 1992 and 1996 town hall debates. However, in 2000, citizen questions were submitted before the debate and the moderator decided which questions would be asked and which topics would be emphasized in the debate.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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