

MU professor analyzes presidential debates

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Now that the general election debates are over, University of Missouri Professor of Communication William Benoit has analyzed the content of the three encounters between Senators McCain and Obama. He found that, overall, these presidential debates looked much like earlier debates. During the presidential debates, 56 percent of the candidate statements were positive (57 percent in past campaigns' debates), 35 percent were attacks (same as in the past), and 7 percent were defenses or refutations of attacks (8 percent historically).

Overall, the two candidates were very close. Senator Obama had 34 percent attacking statements; Senator McCain had 36 percent. But there were great variations across the debates: McCain attacked in 34 percent of statements in debates one and two, but his attack output increased to 40 percent in the final debate. Obama's percentage of attacks declined steadily: 42 percent in debate one, 35 percent in debate two, and only 24 percent in debate three. These contrasts may well reflect the candidates' positions in the polls and projected Electoral College votes: Obama led during the debates; McCain was unable to catch up during the debates.

The three debates had more consistency in overall topic (policy versus character). In every debate, both candidates discussed policy more than character, but Obama emphasized policy more, and character less, than McCain in every debate. Overall, 74 percent of Obama's statements concerned policy and 26 percent concerned character (about the level of past debates: 75 percent policy, 25 percent character). McCain, on the other hand, addressed policy in 67 percent of his remarks and character in 33 percent.

Differences in the topics of their attacks also emerged during the debates. Overall – for both candidates in all three debates – attacks were more about policy (65 percent) than character (35 percent). However, Obama attacked more on policy (73 percent to 56 percent) and less on character (24 percent to 44 percent) than McCain. Furthermore, Obama's percentages of attacks on character remained at almost the same level in each debate (26 percent, 23 percent, 23 percent), but McCain's attacks on character increased sharply in the third debate (39 percent, 33 percent, 54 percent). Only McCain, and only in the third debate, ever made more attacks on character than policy. McCain stepped up his level of attacks in the final debate, and he attacked more on character than policy in that debate.

It is not clear whether the content of the 2008 debates tend to favor one candidate over the other. Historically, there has been some advantage at the polls to those who attacked more than opponents in debates (McCain attacked more in 2008). On the other hand, election winners tend to discuss policy more, and character less, than losers (Obama stressed policy more, and character less, than McCain). Similarly, winners are likely to focus their attacks more on policy, and less on character, than losers (Obama made more attacks on policy, and less on character, than McCain).

William Benoit is a professor of communication at the University of Missouri. He has written several books on political campaigns, including *Communication in Political Campaigns* (2007). He has a webpage devoted to political campaigns: politicalcampaigns.missouri.edu/

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