Viewer impressions of political candidates are heavily weighted to the content of their speech rather than the body language, a new study published in the *Journal of Communication* has found. The research, conducted by a trio of German scholars, presents a shift from past research showing that nonverbal communication plays a larger role than verbal in presidential debates.

Marcus Maurer (Friedrich-Schiller-Universitaet), Friederike Nagel (Johannes Gutenberg-Universitaet), and Carsten Reinemann (Ludwig-Maxillians-Universitaet) conducted an experiment measuring 72 viewers of a German presidential debate using continuous response measurement (CRM). Each participant was provided a dial that gave second-by-second content analysis of participants' feelings during the debate. They found that the verbal-message elements had the strongest impact on viewers' impressions of each candidate.

Past studies have used experimental designs where audio-only or visual-only versions of a debate were presented to participants. This study gave a more encompassing view of the debate, with its audio and visual elements being presented simultaneously.

"Most political consultants seem to believe that nonverbal communication is the most powerful channel," Maurer said. "Candidates in the US and Germany spend a lot of time training to improve body language. One of the reasons is the 55%/38%/7% rule, which says that 55% of communication is nonverbal with only 7% verbal. This is simply a myth in our eyes. Barack Obama and Mitt Romney should take their cues on improving their verbal communication during the next televised debate. Our results show that politicians should concentrate their efforts on what they say and how they say it."

"The article offers important evidence that content and arguments still matter in politics, even more than body language," said Claes de Vreese, Chair of the Political Communication Division of the International Communication Association. "This finding runs counter to much common wisdom and popular arguments."


Provided by International Communication Association