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US presidential TV debates in 2008. Content analysis

Introduction

American presidential elections in 2008 were definitely one of the most crucial international events that year. Not only Americans but people all around the world followed the events and were curious of the future US leader. One reason why the elections were of so much interest was the amount of challenges facing the new president such as the international economic crisis, determining the new security doctrine or the world's changing climate. The presidential campaign debates were viewed by many as a discussion on the most imperative issues for the world. This is why this topic was chosen to be analysed. The focus of this article are the presidential candidates' television debates, the key communication means in the US, as they reflect the major themes of the campaign and its political climate. Analysed here will be the candidates' debates between September 25th and October 15, 2008 between John McCain and Barack Obama (excluding the vice-president candidate debates). The goal is to delineate the subject matters discussed, the confrontation level and to compare the chosen debate formats and the actual course of events.

Debate as a form of political communication has been the subject of extensive research. Surely, the majority of it has been carried out in the US as it is in this country where this form of political communication was created and developed. According to some, it often influences the election's final outcome. Key debate researchers in the US are L. Kaid, R. Perloff, W. Benoit, J. Trent, R. Friedenberg, S. Kraus, D. Nimmo, M. McKinney and D. Carlin. Among the Europeans there are: Ch. Holtz-Bach, E. Godin, T. Chafer and J. Gerstlé. In Poland there has not been a long history of research on the subject matter which is due to the fact that debates are a relatively new form of political communication. We can assume that the recent popularity of election debates in 2005 and 2007 will result in greater interest and, therefore, more research of the subject matter. Presently, we can find materials on this topic by political scientists specializing in American political systems and political marketing such as M. Mazur, T. Płodowski and W. Cwalina. Generally, there are difficulties with access

to literature on the subject since not many libraries possess foreign publications in this area, however, there is the Internet which is an invaluable source of knowledge.

The goal of this analysis is to answer several questions on the topic such as: what issues were discussed during the debates and in what proportions, what was the character of the candidates' answers, what types of answers were dominant (regarding the past or the future) and whether there was a relationship between the topic discussed and the length of answer. Determined needs to be what topics did the different candidates discuss and in what way did they speak about them. Moreover, what needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that not all debates had the same format.

Answers to the above questions should verify the author's research theses. Firstly, it was assumed that the dominant topic of the debates was economy. This is due to the fact that all debates took place right after the onset of the international economic crisis, which became the dominant topic of discussion in many countries and particularly in the US. Secondly, it was presumed that the majority of answers regarded the future, in connection with the economic crisis. Both candidates had to show their plans for taking the country out of the economic crisis as well as for creating new work places, cutting federal expenses, carrying out tax, pension, health and education reforms. All that requires specific action plans. Thirdly, I suppose that the debates were of substantial character for two reasons. The United States are considered a country with high moral standards in politics and media, in which the puritan society does not accept scandalous behavior. It should be noted that this theory is not the author's but a common opinion among Poles and Polish media. Both Obama and McCain often criticized each other but the criticisms were never personal and regarded only the opponent's programme or political activity.

In the analysis used was a method by William Benoit, American researcher of TV debates, the author of *Communication in Political Campaigns*¹ on the topic of standardizing political discourse. Not the entire method was applied but some elements useful in verification of the above hypotheses. According to the method, all statements were divided into sequences. A sequence is a statement on a given topic, of particular character and within a specific time period. For example, a sequence was one candidate's statement on the i.e. the health care system of one character (the character of statements was divided into four types: approving, criticizing, defending and neutral) regarding one time frame (i.e. a month, a year, four years) in the past, present or future. All sequences were then analysed according to an 18

¹ L.W. Benoit, *Communication in Political Campaigns*, New York 2007.

questions categorization key. Lastly, in order to summarize, the sequences were gathered together into a set enabling a detailed analysis of the three debates.

TV debate as a type of political communication

The original American debates are considered to be the seven debates on slavery that took place in 1858 between the influential judge, Stephen Douglas and the less known Abraham Lincoln for a seat in the Senate from the state of Illinois. To this day, those disputes are cited as an ideal example of political debate. In the new century, with the onset of television, in 1960 took place the first ever televised debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Many Americans believe that it was the way JFK presented himself, in contrast to older and tired out Nixon, that won him the election. Even though this debate had the highest ever TV ratings in history in terms of number of viewers, due to legal regulation there were no other TV debates until 1976. Since then, however, TV debates are a must in every election campaign in the US. There is no discussion whether the debates will be televised except for when, where and on what conditions.

Before going on into the analysis of the three debates, it is worth to discuss the different type of debate theories. One of the most popular is the theory of agenda setting. It states that the topics discussed most often and in greatest detail are considered by viewers most important. Proponents of this theory also emphasize the importance of the type of chosen debate format. L. Kaid used the theory of agenda setting in her research on different debate formats chosen for the presidential campaign in 1996. The results indicate that depending on debate format in some cases the issues discussed corresponded to those considered most imperative to society while in other cases – they did not. The theories of usage and benefits were used by researchers such as R. Sears, S. Chaffee, E. Katz and M. Gurevitch. Generally, they point out three basic motives dictating voter decisions; getting to know the candidates' stances on given issues, comparing candidate personalities and obtaining information necessary to make their decisions. Lastly, mentioned should be the democratic theory according to which TV debates have a positive influence on the functioning of the entire political system, ie. they educate voters and result in them making more informed decisions based on rational reasons. The last theory, however, seems over-optimistic. It is undeniable that TV debates have positive cognitive effects, however, the scale, intensity and effectiveness of the processes seem questionable.

Even though an analysis of debate effects is not the subject of this paper, it is impossible to ignore such altogether. What we are witnessing is a great popularity of debates worldwide,

including Poland, naturally. That is why various debate strategies and formats have been constructed. When researching the effects of TV debates, we mustn't forget that they do not function in a vacuum. Aside from what happens in the debates, voters are also influenced by the given campaign's overall climate. Additionally, taken into consideration should be voter characteristics.

The most often cited effect of debates is better voter knowledge about the candidates' stances on different issues. That means that there is also decreased selective absorption of various campaign announcements. Moreover, the competitive character of debates also results in voters' better knowledge about the 'other' candidate, the one they do not favour². Debates provide us information about candidate personalities and traits of character. Nearly all researchers agree that this type of political communication allows for a comparison of opposite programmes and images. Many of them, including D. Nimmo, state that it is image which is dominant, "What the candidates say is less important than how they look. It is style that counts, not content"³. To prove this, a good example is the JFK-Nixon debate which was broadcasted both on television and radio. Following, surveys were conducted. Interestingly, those who saw the debate on TV rated JFK higher than those who listened to the radio. According to researchers, it was JFK's appearance and charisma, in contrast to a tired out, undecided and defensive Nixon that won him the election. M. Mazur mentions one other significant debate effect – that of equalizing chances. By taking part in a debate, the candidates become even opponents, even though one of them is the current president. As S. Michalczyk noticed, "the candidate who is less known, has lower ratings or position by taking part in the debate generally gains in the eyes of voters"⁴.

There is also a relationship between debate format and its effects. Debate format is a set of rules according to which a debate is conducted such as the number of journalists taking part and their role. There are several different debate formats which will be discussed below.

Press conference format is the oldest and most popular debate format in which journalists ask the candidates a series of questions. The criticism of this format is that it discusses too many issues, not always considered imperative by voters. Moreover, as Benoit indicates, in this type of debate format journalists are not always interested in providing viewers more insight on a given issue but instead form their questions with a goal to

² M.S. McKinney, D.B. Carlin, *Political Campaign Debates*, [in:] *Handbook of Political Communication Research*, ed. L.L. Kaid, Mahwah 2004, p. 212.

³ D. Nimmo, *Political Persuaders. The Techniques of Modern Elections Campaigns*, New Brunswick–London 2001, p. 184.

⁴ M. Mazur, *Telewizyjne debaty prezydenckie na przykładzie USA i Polski*, [in:] *Media i komunikowanie w społeczeństwie demokratycznym*, pod red. S. Michalczyka, Sosnowiec 2006, p. 160–161.

embarrass or expose a politician's weakness⁵. All that has led to increasing opposition to this format as it is considered as discouraging to voters. On the other hand, worth mentioning are journalists' exemplary preparedness as well as a confrontational in style discussion with candidates having a specific time limit for their answers. Since early 1990s, the American Press Debate Committee has opted to prefer other debate formats. This trend was visible in 2008 when there were four debates, all in different than press conference format.

Single moderator format is a debate lead by one journalist (usually an acclaimed one such as Jim Lehrer in the US). This format is advantageous as is it less chaotic (one instead of many journalists) and it allows for a more focused discussion on relevant issues. Also, both candidates answer the same questions as the moderator asks them to compare their stances. This format, however, requires a lot of work from the host since he has to make sure that the candidates answer the questions asked and not voluntarily change the subject.

Town hall meeting (talk show) was the format in which the second debate in 2008 was organized. It is characterized by regular people in the studio or from the Internet asking questions. Usually, this group of people, chosen by the Centre of Public Opinion Research, is considered to be undecided about their votes. One advantage of this format is that it engages ordinary people in the political process as a result of which increases people's involvement in politics. They feel like their votes can make a difference and they feel less helpless, one criticism often cited by Polish voters, among all the political cynicism. Another plus is that it discusses issues which voters want to talk about. On the other hand, it is often said that this format is less confrontational and that the discussion boils down to images. Candidates are asked different questions and there is no comparison of their stances. Additionally, candidates not wanting to disappoint voters often use attack as a strategy. The main criticism of this format is a low level of questions asked by the audience.

The discussed above formats do not always take place in pure form. There is also one other format, not very popular in the US, but quite common in Europe. It is based on a conversation between candidates and journalists all sitting at a table where candidates can freely express themselves and focus on their strengths without strict time constraints. This format is popular in France and Spain.

The choice of format is only one of the subjects negotiated by the candidates' committees. Other issues are technical elements such as lighting, camera angles, size and height of podium, etc. It is obvious that a taller politician will prefer a standing debate while a

⁵ W.L. Benoit, *Communication...*, p. 74.

communicative one – the talk show format. The number of issues that needs to be prepared requires the candidates to cooperate with a team of experts. Generally, it is a group of people different from those taking part in the general election campaign. At a time, famous became the 50 people group of experts that helped R. Reagan prepare for a debate with J. Carter in 1980. Experts, aside from preparing a set of issues to be discussed, also focus on opponent's weaknesses, become familiar with his stanced on different issues and probable argumentation. Additionally, they work on getting their candidate used to specific debate conditions. Usually, a trail debate is staged, with similar lighting, furniture and cameras to look much like the real debate. S. Kraus compares the practical exercises, allowing the candidates to test various debate aspects. The conversations take place in front of a focus group whose reactions and remarks are later analysed⁶.

Debate quantity and quality analysis

The data presented in this part of the paper is the result of analysis of the three presidential candidate debates between Obama and McCain, overall lasting 4 hours and 38 minutes. The research distinguished 466 sequences. According to Benoit's method, they were divided into two categories, referring to policy or character. Despite the usefulness of statements regarding a candidate's character, policy statements are considered to be more substantial and they do make up the great majority of sequences analysed (chart 1⁷). Even though the results of the three debates are similar to an extent, some differences can also be noted, especially between the first (single moderator) and second (talk show) debate. During the first debate, there were only 10 sequences regarding character, with most of them on gen. D. Petraeus's (the chief commander of forces in Afghanistan and Iraq) leadership skills. It can be said that nearly all sequences regarded policy. During the second debate, there were more sequences on character (chart 2).

Chart 1. Statement themes

⁶ S. Kraus, *Televised Debates. Marketing Presidential Candidates*, [in:] *Handbook of Political Marketing*, ed. B.J. Newman, Thousand Oaks–London–New Delhi 1999, p. 397.

⁷ All charts and tables were created by the author.

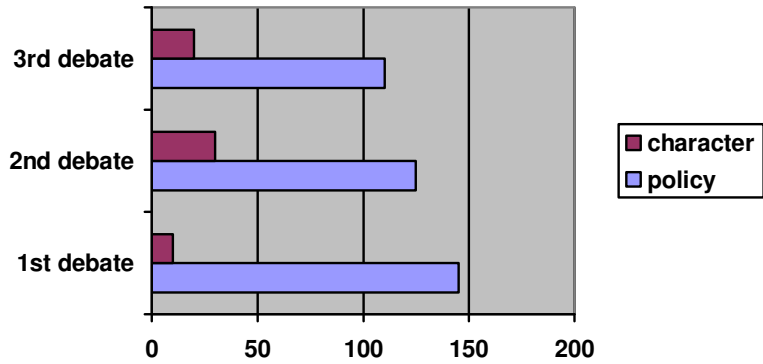
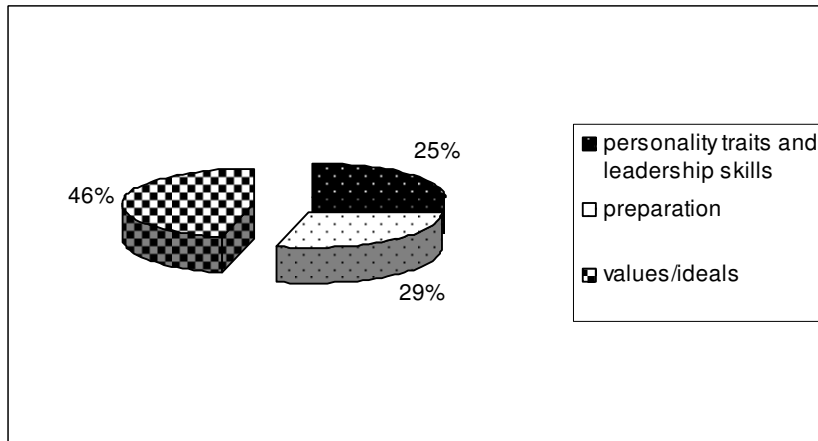


Chart 2. Character categories in the 2nd debate



Topics discussed

Theoretically, the debates were divided thematically; the first was to focus on economy and foreign policy, the second – on all key issues and the third – on domestic policy. As can be seen in chart 3, the predominant topic of discussion during the first debate was not economy (44 sequences/30%) but international policy (79/53%). This trend can also be observed in the candidates' presented issues. The democratic candidate devoted 55% of his statements to it, while the Republican – 53%, and regarding economy – 28% and 29% correspondingly. These results do not support our theory, however, in defense it can be said

that nearly all economic issues were directly tied to the international economic crisis. Issues such as taxation, the creation of new workplaces, savings, budget and loan cuts are all strictly connected to the present economic situation. In order to ensure debate attractiveness, both journalist and candidates had to diversify the issues discussed. If we take a look at the situation from a different angle and treat the economic crisis as part of the ‘international policy’ category, we will obtain different results. Table 1 lists the subjects with the greatest amount of sequences. As we can see, the economic crisis is at the top (41 sequences), following are other international policy issues such as relations with other countries (25 sequences, predominantly Iran and Russia), the war in Iraq (21), war in Afghanistan (16) and international security (10).

Chart 3. Issues discussed during the 1st debate

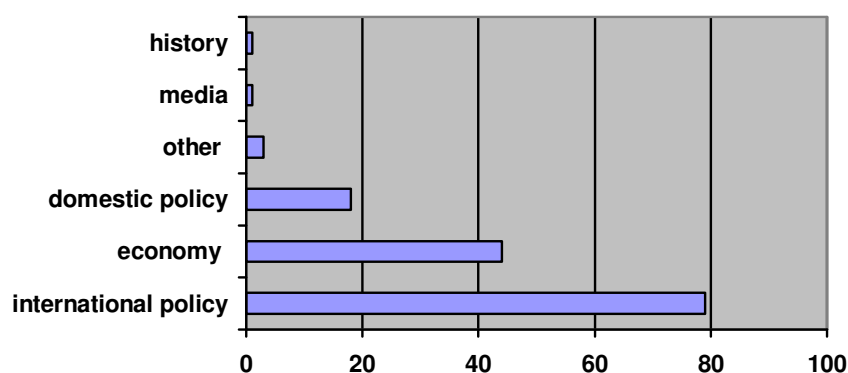


Table 1. Most popular issues of the 1st debate and number of sequences

Issues	Sequences
Economic crisis	41
Relations with other countries	25
War in Iraq	21
War in Afganistan	16

International security	10
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The second debate was arranged in the town hall meeting format. According to literature on the subject, this type of debate is most interesting to people as it is they who ask the questions. It needs to be noted, though, that it is journalists who choose the most interesting questions. This means that what is discussed may not necessarily be representative of the overall questions formulated by the audience. Another thing that should be considered is the fact that this debate did not have a theme assigned to it, as was the case with the other two. The analysis shows that Americans are mostly interested in economy (chart 4), with 54 sequences (40%). Following were: international policy – 41 sequences (30%) and domestic policy – 22 sequences (16%).

Chart 4. Issues discussed during the 2nd debate

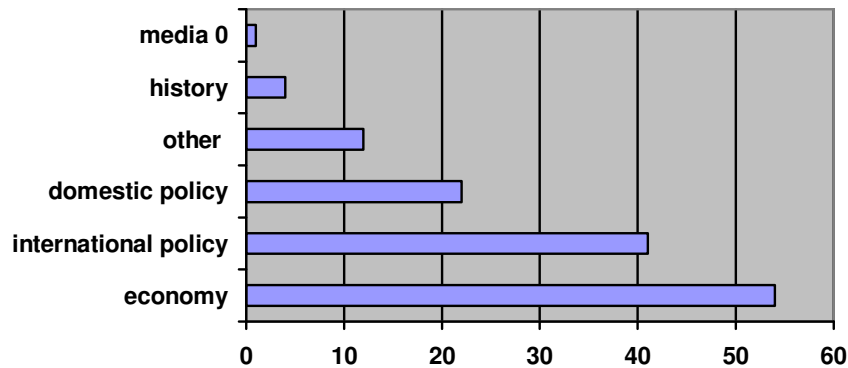


Table 2. Most popular issues of the 2nd debate and number of sequences

Issues	Sequences
Economic crisis	38
Relations with other countries	20
Health and pension benefis	19
Energy	10

Also, during the second debate the predominant topic of discussion was the economic crisis (table 2), with 38 sequences. Interestingly, energy issues were high on the list of subjects (10 sequences). It should be noted that energy is an issue which is extremely hard to classify as it can be considered part of domestic policy (security aspect), international policy (dependence on resources from the Middle East) and economy (in two aspects – saving energy in connection with the economic crisis and environment protection). The classification of sequences is largely dependent on the context of the statement. Similarly to the first debate, high on the list were also relations with other countries (20 sequences). This time, aside from Russia and Iran, much time was devoted to relations with Pakistan, in connection with the war in Afghanistan. Health and pension benefits (19 sequences) are one issue which was not discussed during the first debate. In the US, in contrast to European countries, these benefits are partly privatized which would mean that they should be treated as part of the ‘economy’ category. All in all, the analysis shows that economy was the principal topic of discussion during the second debate, which affirms the earlier proposed thesis.

Chart 5. Issues discussed in the 3rd debate

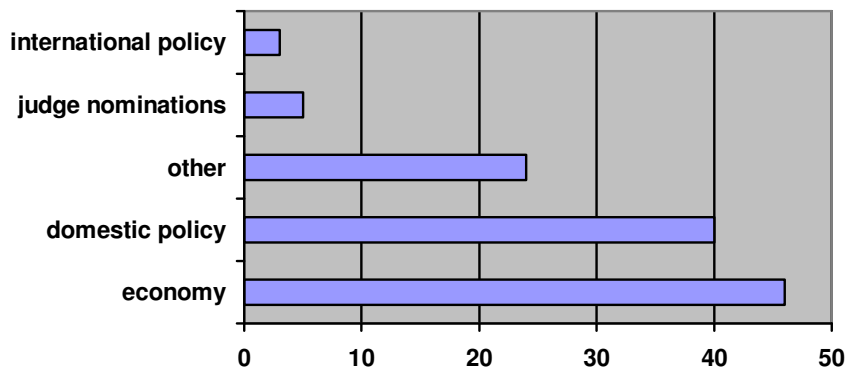


Table 3. Most popular issues of the 3rd debate and number of sequences

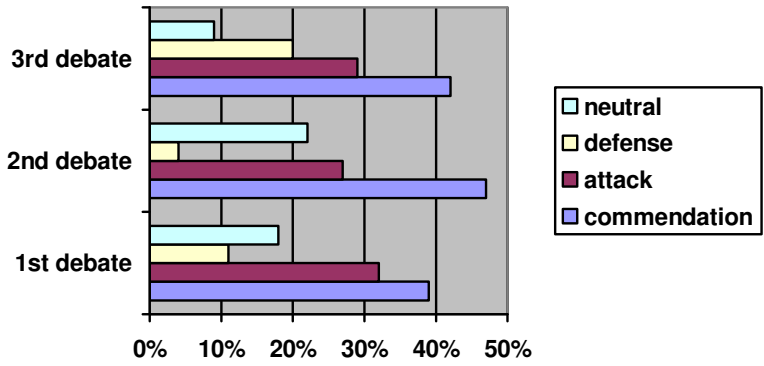
Issues	Sequences
Economic crisis	31
Education	18
Heath and pension benefis	16

Even though the third debate was to be devoted to domestic policy, the number one issue discussed was economy (46 sequences/39%), domestic policy, however, was in second place (41 sequences/34%). What should also be noted is that during this debate there were many issues discussed which were not included in the categorization key, such as the campaign itself, abortion and the average voter, plumber Joe. Table 3 shows the key issues discussed, with one new one – education. The reason why there were new, not previously discussed issues, was that it was a last chance for the candidates to present their programmes on air. Additionally, both candidates as well as the host journalist made sure that the this debate differed from the earlier two.

Character of statements

An analysis of the character of statements should aid us in confirming the thesis on the substantiality of the debates. All candidate statements were divided into four categories – commending, attacking, defensive and neutral. The formats which should dominate are commendations and attacks. Defense is used less often as it is considered weak. Additionally, the popular saying states that attack is the best form of defense. It also needs to be noted that we should not be judgmental of the attack format as it is not a worse or less ethical format than others in a debate. Clashes of arguments are key in a debate and for that attack is a necessity. It is imperative, though, that it is substantial in character. The more ironic, offensive or ridiculing attacks, the lower the level of the discussion. Let's first take an overall look at the different categories of the statements' character (chart 6).

Chart 6. Character of statements



In all three debates commendation was the dominant character of statements while attack was second most popular. In the first debate there was a somewhat similar number of commendations and attacks. One reason for this could be the chosen debate format. Above discussed was the confrontation level of the three different formats. The analysis of results affirms the earlier proposed thesis regarding those since the highest percentage of attacks and lowest of commendations took place during the first debate (single moderator format), 32 and 39% correspondingly. Opposite was the situation in the second debate (town hall meeting format) – 27% of attacks and 47% of commendations. The results prove to what extent the different formats are confrontational. Following was an analysis of the substantiality of the various statements (commendations and attacks), as shown in charts 7 and 8.

Chart 7. Subject of commendations in the 1st debate

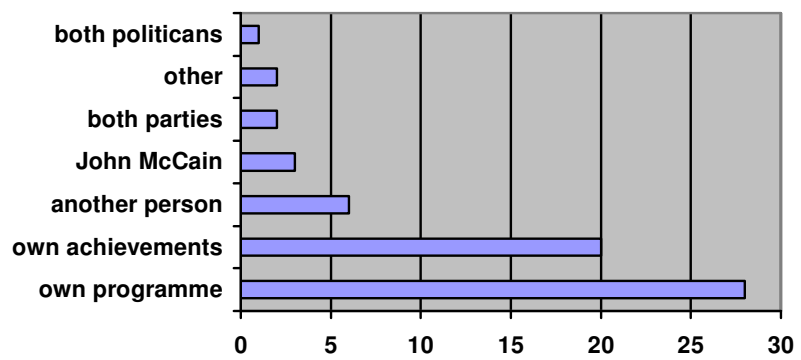
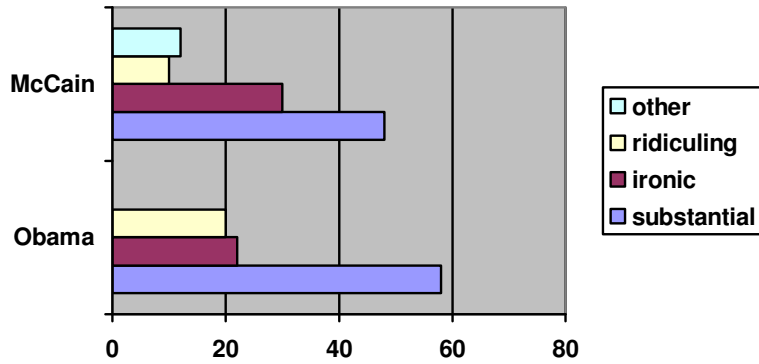


Chart 8. Types of attacks in the 1st debate



The results of research show that candidates' programmes were the most popular subject of commending statements (28 sequences/45%), followed by their achievements (20 sequences/32%). The types of commendations show that this character of statements was substantial. The chart also includes the name McCain which means that he was the subject of also Obama's commendations (3 sequences). As far as attacks, it can also be said that the majority of them were substantial in character (especially Obama's), that it increasing viewers knowledge on the candidates' activities and programmes. Such attacks can be considered a positive trend in the way of communication between politicians. Noteworthy is also the fact that there were no offensive attacks (a category in the categorization key) which proves the high level of political and personal culture presented by both candidates.

The above observations are even more evident in the analysis of the second debate (charts 9 and 10). There were as many as 42 sequences (55%) on programmes and 25 sequences (32%) on achievements. Once again, it can be stated that the results correspond to debate format as they are characteristic to town hall meeting debate format. If we take a look at attacks, they are, for the most part, substantial attacks with Obama at 19 sequences/86% and McCain at 10 sequences/53%. We can conclude that it was largely the Democratic candidate who was responsible for the high level of the discussion.

Chart 9. Subject of commendations in the 2nd debate

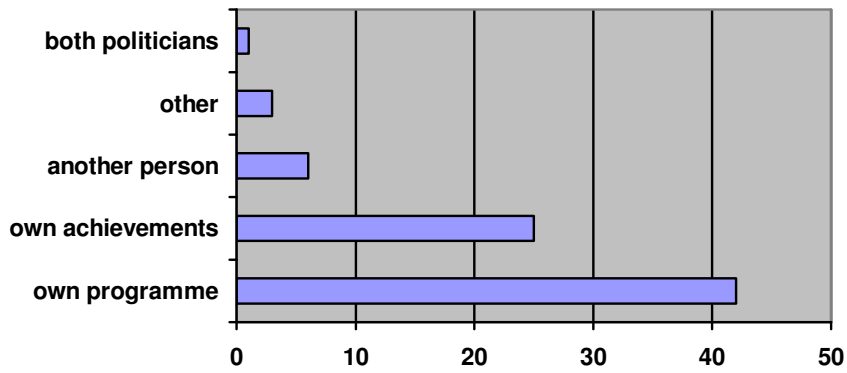


Chart 10. Types of attacks in the 2nd debate

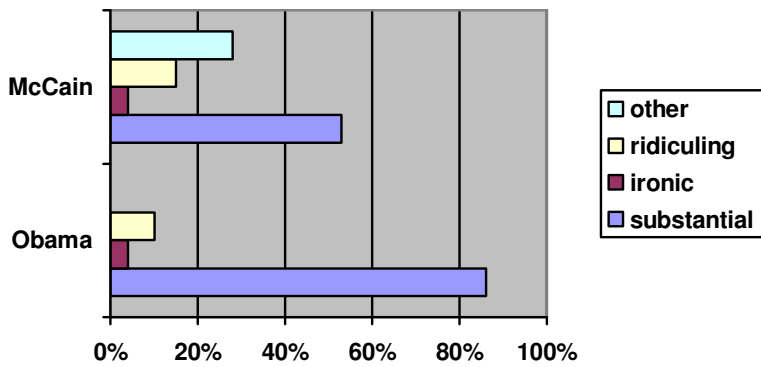


Chart 11. Subject of commendations in the 1st debate

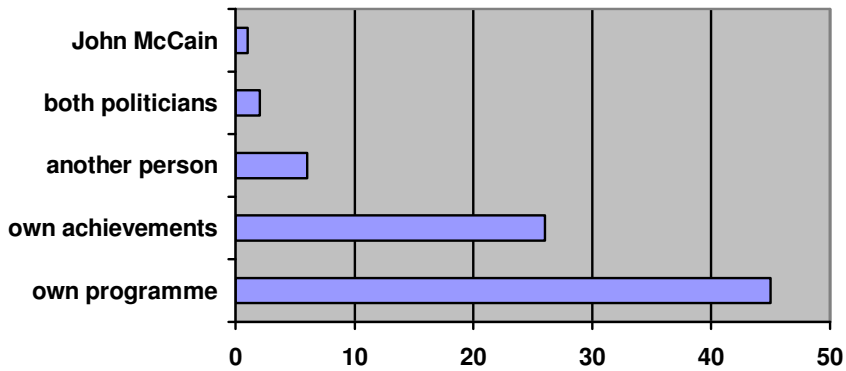
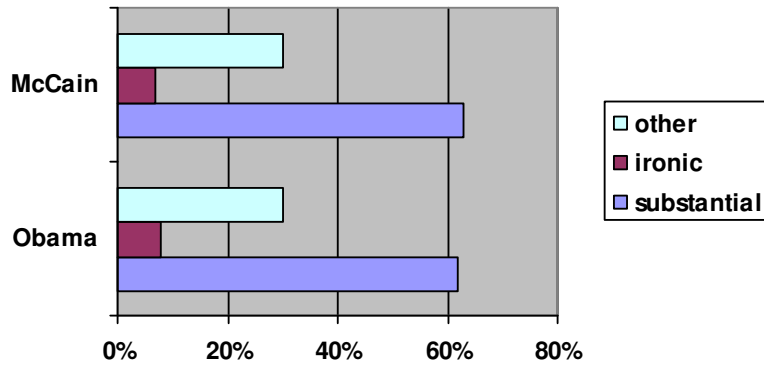


Chart 12. Types of attacks in the 3rd debate



The last debate affirms the earlier reached conclusions. The majority of commendations regarded the candidates’ programmes – 45 sequence/70%. As far as attacks, both politicians have almost identical results, with McCain delivering one substantial sequence more than Obama (26/68%). Moreover, there were no attacks of ridiculing character. On the other hand, there were a lot of attacks difficult to categorize and therefore placed in the ‘other’ category. These regarded the character of the election campaign itself. Both politicians mentioned dubious attacks by the other candidate, his campaign team or supporters such as W. Ayers’ alleged terrorist activity or the ACORN misappropriations. Lastly, one more point should be emphasized. With G.W. Bush’s great unpopularity, it would be easy to lay responsibility for this term in office on the Republicans. Even though Obama numerously reminded voters that McCain supported Bush’s legislative initiatives, the majority of his attacks were directly tied to his opponent’s activity or programme. This is another proof that American debates have substantiality.

Statement time reference

The new president of the US will have to focus his efforts on overcoming the economic crisis and establishing a new strategy for fighting terrorism among other issues. Due to this, the near future for the US and the world will require the creation of a comprehensive plan of action. As a result, the majority of statements during the debates regarded the future.

Chart 13. Statement time reference

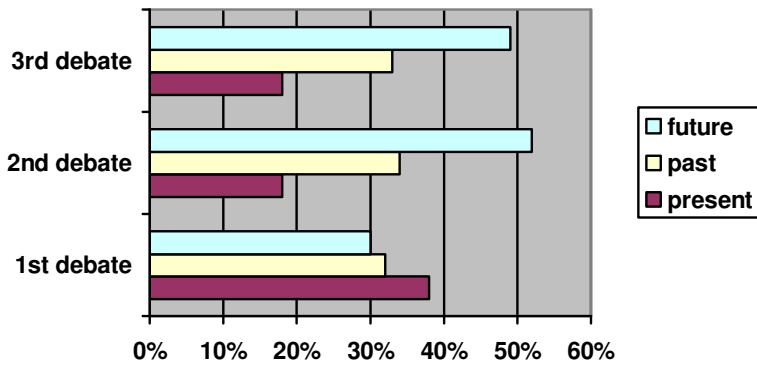


Chart 13 proves the assumptions with regard to the future. The only exception was the first debate. This was due to its theme. According to the analysis, the majority of issues discussed then were international affairs. The host, Jim Lehrer asked the candidates about the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Questions formulated this way required answers with reference to the past. Additionally, other issues discussed were events in Georgia, relations with Russia and the present administration's economic policy.

Chart 13. McCain's statements time reference

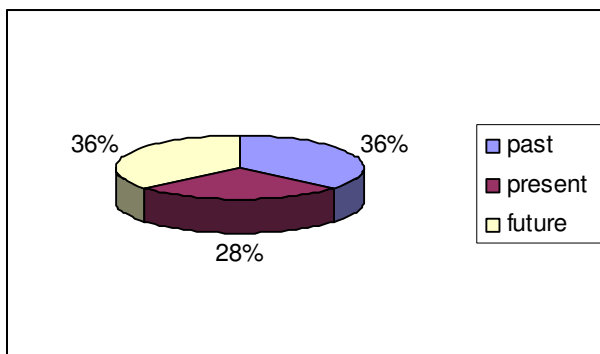
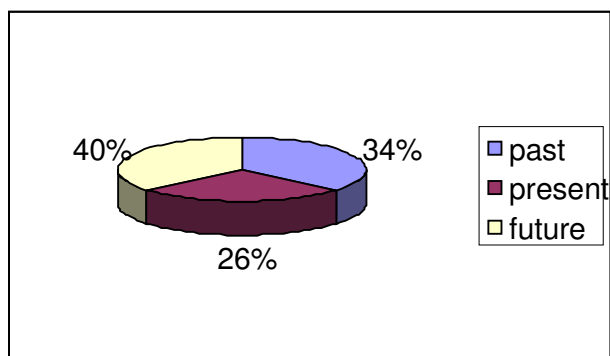


Chart 14. Obama's statements time reference



Charts 14 and 15 show the both candidates' statement time reference, either referring to the past, the present or the future. As can be seen, there are only slight percentage differences between the different categories, with future being the most frequently discussed time frame. The fact that both candidates achieved similar percentages shows that the politicians did their best to answer the questions by referring to reality. This way they were easier understood by voters who could compare their political programmes.

Conclusions

During the three debates, discussed was a wide range of issues. Among the dominant ones were economy and topics related to the economic crisis, international policy in terms of relations with other countries and national security and domestic policy – predominantly health and pension benefits. In two of the debates the main subject of discussion was economy, in one – the economic crisis. The analysis results confirm the thesis proposed at the onset – that economy would be the chief subject of the deliberations. Especially the town hall meeting format favoured discussion on this issue. This format also resulted in less confrontational style of debates. The second thesis, regarding debate substantiality, was also positively verified. Among the statements, the majority were commendations on the candidates' programmes or activities and 65% of attacks were substantial. There were no offensive attacks which proves the politicians' high political and personal culture. The last thesis proposed, about the majority of statements referring to future, was also true but since the differences between the time frames were so minimal, no far reaching conclusions should be made.

The analysis also confirms the cited opinions on the characteristics of various debate formats. There are some dependences between the issues discussed and the referred time

frames. One example is international policy regarding which the politicians used the past time frame. It should be noted, however, that the 2008 debates took place in very specific conditions; with current president's great unpopularity, the economic crisis and national security issues. Therefore, the results obtained this time may be different from those in the following campaign.