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Application of Functional Theory of Political Discourse in Chilean presidential debates to determine the influence of journalists in the contents

Abstract

Within the growing academic interest over electoral debates, the role of the journalists who conduct the debates in determining the tenor of the answers has not been sufficiently studied. We used Chile as an extreme case, given the predominant role that the debate moderators receive here, thanks to the “journalistic panel” format utilized in them, where they take turns to interview the candidates. As a framework to describe these contents, we used Functional Theory of Political Discourse by William Benoit. Our data show that, indeed, the candidates use different combinations of said functions, depending on the different frameworks established by the rules for each debate. Clearly, the candidates tend to defend themselves from the attacks of the journalists, rather than their rivals’; and they use other strategies when the rules allow them more freedom.

Keywords

Electoral debates, role of journalists, watchdog, attacks-defenses, Functional Theory of Political Discourse, Chile.

1. Introduction

Televised presidential debates have become a major event for most political campaigns around the world, increasing the academic interest in them (Quinta-Froufe *et al.*, 2020). These programs have demonstrated a significant advantage over other kinds of political communication, and they hold high rating numbers (García Marín, 2015). Thanks to their

format and length, the public can optimize the gathering of information from each position and contrast them (Zamora & Rebolledo, 2017), observing, as well, the character of each candidate and their spontaneous reactions (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014). In addition, debates receive large media coverage, which augments their repercussions (Maier & Jansen, 2015). For this reason, the study of their effects on the public has concentrated large amounts of attention (McKinney, Rill & Thorson, 2013; van der Meer, Walter & Aelst, 2016).

Nevertheless, any effect will be caused by the content, which is given by the interactions that take place during the debate. Therefore, a focus must be placed on the behavior of their journalists and the rules that structure them, which will impose the limits and opportunities to developed discussions.

The study of the journalist's participation in debates started hand in hand with the implementation of the "panel of journalists" in the United States in 1960. In this format, interviewers are the ones who lead the discussion, introduce topics, and question the candidates, who –in some of their variations– are only allowed to speak when interpellated by the journalists (Eveland, McLeod & Nathanson, 1994). This format was eventually abandoned in the United States in the late 1980s (Lehrer, 2011). The panel was replaced by a single moderator, who introduces the topic and asks counter-questions. Part of the aim was a more direct exchange between the contenders (cf. Turcotte, 2015).

This evolution has been to the detriment of the study of the role journalists play because a large part of the accumulated knowledge about electoral debates was centered in the experience of the United States (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), and while in the last ten years, some literature has emerged about other cases around the world, the preeminence of the United States model is still present (e.g., Birdsell, 2017). These biases entail the danger of having only analysis schemes founded in a format with two candidates and one moderator, which end up hiding important variations in their development in different environments, for instance, in multi-party parliamentary systems (Anstead, 2016), or in less confrontational political cultures (Isotalus, 2011).

From the evidence that can be extracted from the United States literature of the 90s onwards, we can see the interest in contrasting the moderators' questions with those that come from the citizens, in the format of a town-hall. McKinney and Carlin (2004, p. 221) did a review of the forementioned literature, and among their findings, they highlight the work of Eveland *et al.*, (1994), who found that the journalists tend to make more argumentative and accusatory questions. As for the topic, the citizens tend to focus largely on the policies, while journalists aim the candidate's character. For their part, Benoit and Wells (1996) conclude that the town-hall format reduces the number of attacks on the side of the candidates.

McKinney and Carlin (2004) also report, based on Lamoureux, Entekin, and McKinney (1994) that on many occasions, politicians, rather than debating their opponents, end up arguing with the journalist that moderates the debate, getting involved in a game of *gotcha*, or in questions considered intricate or irrelevant by the public (p. 219). And Matera and Salwen (1996) noted that the interventions of the journalists on the panel delimit and frame the candidates' responses.

As it can be observed, all these studies are centered on the United States experience. As for Europe, most of the studies are focused on the candidates' interventions content and their different strategies, and, as we already mentioned, on the effects (e.g., Hopmann *et al.*, 2017). Definitively, according to Ben-Porath (2007), the literature about the role of the journalist's interventions is relatively scarce (p. 376). There is a lack of studies that specifically analyze the interaction produced between the journalists and their interviewees –in particular– and what strategies the candidates take when the journalist assumes a more inquisitive role, which is our purpose.

So far, the most widely used model to analyze the content of the debates has been the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse by William Benoit (Benoit, 2007), which describes and analyzes the answers from the candidates, but this model has not been applied to the questions from the journalists, nor has had sufficient studies on how the questions can propitiate that the candidates answer with acclamations, attacks, or defenses, as Benoit proposes.

This is why we intend to study the interaction between the moderators, acting as interviewers, and the candidates, trying to apply their functional strategy of political discourse. This will manifest the impact that the former has on the discourse of the latter, considering the specific rules that regulate the interactions between both actors, and which gives more or less freedom to the journalists, and which also varies from debate to debate in the case of Chile.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *The role of the journalists in setting the agenda for the debate and attack journalism*¹

Stromer-Galley and Bryant (2011) analyze the control of the agenda for the debate in the interaction between candidates, journalists, and the public that asks questions in the town-hall format. The authors demonstrate that the most important factor to reach a direct answer from the politician is the type or form of the question, concluding that journalists are better prepared for asking.

Turcotte (2015, 2017) is also focused on the issue of the debate agenda. The first study compares the frequency of questions about hard news and public policies issues proposed by the public in a town-hall format with those asked by the debates moderators, differentiating between those which came from commercial channels or public service channels. He concludes that the format and the moderator have an influence over the content of the questions. In the second study, he concludes that the journalists from local media and those who work in commercial media tend to emphasize, more than the others, questions about public policies.

Nguyen *et al.* (2014), when contrasting the questions from the journalists with those from the candidates, concludes that the capacity of each journalist to fixate the topics in the agenda is unquestionable. Schroeder (2016) recognizes that, depending on the decision from the moderator, he or she can deviate from its neutral role, and deliberately appear as more aggressive.

In other –more specific– studies, Coleman and Ross (2010) argue that it is important to evaluate the questions of the journalists in relation to their sources since they give visibility to minor actors within the campaign. Morello (2005) proposes another factor that determines the final content of the debate: if the questions are directed towards the past, present, or future of the candidate; as according to this, the politicians will have to answer and justify their past actions or could elaborate on their plans and government programs proposals.

On the other hand, the debates participants are impacted by the journalistic coverage of political campaigns that have grown more focus on the personal characteristics and image of the candidates (Zeh & Hopmann, 2013), and even on their private lives (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). As well as the journalistic interest centered in campaign strategy, with coverages of the “strategic game” or “horse race” type (Schmuck *et al.*, 2017), which may affect them (see Rowland, 2013; Echeverría, 2019).

While one could expect that debates could be apart from the daily routines of journalistic coverage, as they are media events that interrupt this normal news routine (Davan & Katz, 1992; Schroeder, 2000), in the recent studies of debates and mediatization, the evidence is divided and reduced. For instance, the study of the case from López-García *et al.* (2017) suggests that debates are the exception to media logic, for Lladó and Pérez Tornero (2020), their character as a televised ritual transforms them into the main examples of mediatization for political communication. This fact demonstrates the necessity of summing evidence to the discussion.

Therefore, the interactions between journalists and candidates could not extricate themselves from the mediatization that imposes the media logic in political communication, as a consequence of the commercial competition (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). The media are confronted with the dilemma between contributing to the functioning of democratic debate, while at the same time being commercially successful (Gerth *et al.*, 2009), or being an important watchdog institution, against becoming a “scandal

¹ See also our discussion on this in Núñez-Mussa and Porath (2021).

machine” (Allern & von Sikorski, 2018), who in their attempts of making politics entertaining, have trivialized it, abandoning relevant topics (see Mazzoleni & Shulz, 1999).

This is why it is of utmost interest to understand the journalists’ utilization of the attacks inside the debates since, for being mechanisms of interpellation, they can contain both dimensions: being a regulating tool, or a polemic-generator device through negativism to capture the attention of the public (see Maier & Jansen, 2015, p. 550). Following the possibilities proposed by Mazzoleni (2010), with an attack, a journalist could be a watchdog, advocating for the citizens in front of the powers-that-be, or an adversary that approaches politicians with “disgust” and “cynicism,” propitiating sensationalism (Mazzoleni, 2010, p. 96).

This last attitude would be a distortion of the original conception of the watchdog (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Patterson, 1996), following the commercial logic of media, which would lead journalists to take advantage of them confronting a politician to acquire professional recognition (see Iyengar, 2011; Lehrer, 2011). This derives from what Patterson (1996) calls “attack journalism,” where the candidate is defied without taking the citizens into consideration. Before, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) described a model of adversarial journalism, which does indeed explain the attempts from journalism to place itself in a symmetrical level to the symbolic level presented in the candidate’s figures. The journalist, then, becomes a part of the news, when putting him or herself at the same level of the candidate in what can be called “institutionalized hostility” (Blumer, 2018, p. 86).

Mellado (2015) postulates a model to analyze the role assumed by journalists according to their performances, that is, what is published or broadcasted. The author proposes six roles: intervention or disseminator, watchdog, loyal facilitator, service, infotainment, civic. In the role of the intervention, if the journalist opts for using an active voice that demands from the authorities it can be translated into “attack.”

A similar situation can occur with the “watchdog” since, in this role, the journalist criticizes, questions, and denounces, with the conflict being an inherent ingredient in their journalistic performance. Therefore, if we consider the watchdog-adversary role proposed by Mazzoleni and the one suggested by Mellado, when applied to the journalist in a debate, both can present attacks without them having a negative connotation; they would be additions to the democratic conversation. However, there is always a possibility of finding a cynical journalist, who assumes relevance attacking others for professional recognition, or seeking scandal and sensationalism.

2.2. Benoit’s model for understanding the content of the debates

According to Benoit’s theory (2007), the candidates execute three different functions with their messages to achieve being electorally attractive and distinguishing themselves from their adversaries: *acclaims* (or praises), which are positive affirmations about the qualities, achievements, or desirable proposals from a candidate (or a party); *attacks*, which identify the weaknesses or limitations of an opponent (negative allusions); and *defenses*, which attempt to refute an attack. These three functions are combined in an informal analysis of costs and benefits, trying to increase the benefit net in front of the citizens, as they trespass costs to their rivals.

The empirical applications on debates conclude that acclamations are the most common function in them. The attacks are less utilized, being more frequent for the challengers. The defenses have low frequencies, generally from the incumbent candidates, who must defend their work, and from the candidates who are in first place in the polls. These would be less used due to three limitations: they can inform the voting public of a possible weakness of their candidate; they create a sensation of being reactive rather than proactive; and they happen –in general– in topics where the adversary has an advantage (Choi & Benoit, 2013; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014; Benoit, 2007).

Benoit's methodology was first applied to United States politics, but it was extended to debates in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (in the English-speaking world); France, Germany, and Ukraine (in Europe); South Korea, Taiwan, and Israel (in Asia), concluding that the results largely coincide with those from the United States (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014, p. 656). Other authors have applied it to Finland (Isotalus, 2011), Poland (Dudek & Partacz, 2009), Slovakia (Hrbková & Zagraban, 2014), Romania (Dragan, 2016), and Nigeria (Ajilore, 2015). In the Spanish-speaking world, it was applied to Spain (Herrero & Benoit, 2009) and to México (Téllez, Muñiz & Ramírez, 2010). We selected this model since it is the only one that has been applied globally and specifically to televised electoral debates.

In most of the cases analyzed by Benoit, debates have been executed between two or three candidates, though there are some with four candidates (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014). In addition to the study about the primaries in the United States, with around eight and twelve candidates (Glantz, Benoit & Airne, 2013). As for their format, most of those debates have used a similar model to the United States, with one or two moderators. Most literature does not dwell deep when discussing the degree of protagonism of the journalists.

At this point, it is convenient to consider the critical reflection made by Hrbková and Zagraban (2014) when analyzing Slovak debates of 2012. They found that more than 30% of the content could not be classified according to Benoit's functions. The authors conclude that multi-party systems (as in the case of Chile) make it hard to adapt concepts and theories developed in the United States to other political cultures. The same is concluded by Isotalus (2011), who, for the Finnish case, also discovered more defenses than attacks, and more attacks than acclamations; as well as 21% of the material that could not be classified into the three categories of Functional Theory. This author asks to pay attention to the dialectic of *attacks from journalists/defense from candidates*, to explain the almost 18% use of defenses found (p. 41). This percentage of defense is as high as that found in Romanian debates and superior to the 10% maximum found in most cases (Dragan, 2016, p. 45). In addition, in Ukraine, there were more attacks than acclamations (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006), with Dragan (2016) having similar findings in Romania.

In general terms, the limits and applicability in Latin America of models developed in Europe, or the United States has been a topic of permanent discussion in the region. In most Latin American countries, debates include all the candidates, as in many parliamentary democracies, which include the leaders of all the relevant parties, as it happens nowadays in Spain, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. But, unlike in Europe, the political systems in Latin America are presidential, with weak political parties.

Therefore, cultural differences would cause certain variations in the applicability, as well as limiting in part the generalization of the main hypothesis of Functional Theory (Isotalus, 2011, p. 32; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2014, p. 656). This framework definitely allows us to compare how the candidates construct their discourse among different political cultures if we are careful with its application. But, overall, there is a lack of a similar scheme to characterize and compare the role played by journalists in constructing the content of debates.

2.3. The debates in Chile

Since in Chile the format of a "panel of journalists" is still applied, its study can give us more insights into the interaction between journalists and politicians, because it increases the diversity of attitudes that the journalist can take when interrogating a candidate. In addition, it allows us –from the evidence– to measure the weight of their function, under the assumption that the debates give a certain advantage to politicians, being a relatively more direct means of communication with the public (Maier & Jansen, 2015, p. 449).

Due to this, Chile constitutes a potentially prototypical case, since it is expected that the active role of the journalist is the maximum that can be expected in a debate, with the

advantage that this study considers the debates from 1989 to 2017, allowing us to establish a chronological comparison between cases in the same national context. In this way, the Chilean case serves to establish an analytical framework over how much can effectively a journalist influence the answers from the candidates, following the logic of the most likely case (Levy, 2008). And, above all, to establish parameters of comparison with other models or countries outside of the United States.

Studying this case gives us some additional particularities to our understanding on the topic. In the first place, it is a country that already counts with a long tradition of presidential debates, which are held regularly for each presidential election since the return to democracy in 1989. Second, Chile does not only maintain the model of the panel of journalists, but since 2005, four or more presidential candidates participate, a strange configuration in the analyzed literature. In the third place, Chile has the characteristic of being a presidential system, as is the United States, but at the same time counts with a multi-party system, one of the most stables in Latin America, and where the parties are more structured than in the United States, which makes it more similar to their peers in the European parliamentary regimes (Porath *et al.*, 2015).

As we maintained in previous work (Porath, Ortega-Gunckel & Rojas-Soto, 2019), the main format for debates in Chile, despite the constant use of the panel of journalists, has suffered a series of transformations, especially regarding freedom and exclusivity of journalists to pose their questions, versus the freedom of politicians to structure their message or refute their rival. We are discussing here the debates organized by ANATEL (National Association of Television, which groups all the free television channels in Chile), since –from 1993– they are broadcasted simultaneously by all its affiliates, whose results are the most significative and with the highest ratings.

If we focus on the journalists, in 1993 and 1999, they could not exclusively pose the questions, since in addition to the panel of journalists, a format similar to the US town-hall was used, to allow questions from the audience. As for their freedom, they went from relative flexibility in the first debate (1989) to being successively more limited, as in 1999, when they could only make the same question (common question) to both participating candidates, without the right to counter-question. In 2005, the right to counter-question was established, but most of the debate was dedicated to common questions. Only in 2013, this common question was reestablished but reduced to a minimum.

The rules regulating the behavior of the candidates also vary greatly from campaign to campaign. For instance, the right to reply on their opponents' interventions has been regulated differently, and, in fact, was not allowed in two occasions (2005 and 2013), while in 1989 and 2009 it was a central part of the program. In 1989, there was no closing statement, which permitted a free intervention from each candidate. On the contrary, in 2013 this was permitted at the end of every block. The debates moderators, proposed by ANATEL, have had different roles in each one. Even in 2009, they had to pose a common question at the beginning of each block. In the last analyzed debate, in 2017, there was no moderator, and therefore, the journalists themselves oversaw managing the time and had more freedom to question and counter-question, as well as managing interventions and the right to reply.

Although in our 2019 thesis, we sustained that the format of the debates in Chile began to evolve in 2005, when for the first time all the officially registered candidates were invited, we believe that it is 2009 that marks the turning point of the return of freedom for the journalists to handle their times in the way they wanted and be at the center of the debate. In this context, the time used by the candidates to answer personalized questions in the three following debates dropped from 62% in 1989 to 46% (1993), 33% (1999), and 26% (2005). In 2009 it went abruptly up to 54% and varied to 48% (2013) and 87% (2017) in the following debates. For this reason, in this paper, we will distinguish between two periods: 1989–2005 and 2009–2017.

Another motive for this periodization is that in 2009, for the first time, most of the questions started being asked by journalists from commercial channels.

2.4. Journalism in Chile

The available data shows that Chilean journalism is more cautious about its critiques in front of the current government or in front of the more powerful political groups (Gronemeyer & Porath, 2017), which is consistent with the characterization created by Hanitzsch (2011), where Chilean journalism was defined as “opportunistic facilitator” or “populist disseminator,” and not as much as a “detached watchdog.” On their part, Mellado and Lagos (2014) maintain that the most relevant role of Chilean media is “passive disseminator,” which is a journalism that gives news, but does not take part in them with an active voice. This combination is attributed altogether to the structure of the Chilean media system, the neoliberal economic system, and the journalistic practices inherited from the dictatorship (1973–1989) (Otano Garde & Sunkel, 2003).

In the evolution path taken by political communication in Chile, it is clearly appreciated the process described by Strömbäck (2008) for mediatization, which currently determines to a large degree the acting of political actors (Ponce, 2020). After Pinochet’s dictatorship, which massively controlled most media, the media system has been characterized for its concentration (Mönckeberg, 2009), nowadays developed through holdings, which account for an industry rather than a public service (Godoy, 2016). This can be seen through what has happened in television, which used to have universities as central actors; due to their impossibility of financing these channels, they were sold to larger companies (Acuña, Gutiérrez & Puente, 2007). The most telling fact of the situation is that the public TV channel was added to this commercial model having publicity as its largest source of financing. In this environment of increasing commercial competition, the content of news in television has tended to prioritize scandal or human interest, sensationalism, and dramatic language (Porath, Mujica & Maldonado, 2009; Mujica & Bachmann, 2013).

This evolution determines a change, in which politicians begin to become media figures, and media figures turn into politicians. Journalism is also becoming more complex, winning independence from power, at the same time as civil society is distancing from the political system. Once Pinochet left the scene (in 2000), and the constitution was reformed (2005), a series of social movements started, beginning with a massive movement of secondary students in 2006, which represented an increasing crisis in social trust in political institutions, and which culminated with the social upheaval in October 2019 (Mayol, 2019). For their part, the media had been winning more independence through time, and started covering, and then revealing political scandals.

3. The proposed study

With the purpose of knowing more about the impact of the function of the journalists in the construction of the content of televised presidential debates, in the framework of a case in which this role can represent the largest possible intervention over the content of the debate, we propose the following research hypotheses:

H1. The interventions of the journalists during the development of a televised electoral debate would produce a variation in the type of function utilized by the candidates, increasing the number of defenses and deviating thus from the logic proposed by the Functional Theory of Political Discourse.

H1.1. Inasmuch as the journalists include attacks in their questioning, the politicians will increase the space in their answers for the defense function.

If both are proven correct, a second hypothesis can be proposed:

H1.2. To an extent that the candidates answer questions from the public, state a closing argument, or confront each other, they will use different functions in their discourse strategy to the ones they use to confront the journalists.

For example, in the line of Functional Theory, when politicians have more freedom to structure their discourse, we should observe what we have proposed: they will tend to acclaim rather than attack, and attack rather than defend themselves. Therefore, the interactions between candidates should give space for more attacks and defenses, as can be deduced from Dragan (2016).

As for the journalists' disposition to attack, considering the periodization established here, and the fact that in the second period the journalists had more freedom, coinciding with a larger mediatization of Chilean politics, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Starting from 2009, one should observe a higher disposition of the journalists to include attacks to the candidates in their interventions.

In this context, we are also interested in knowing which topics are associated to the journalists' disposition to include attacks, since the tendency towards mediatization of politics in Chile would lead to a change in the campaign coverage agenda, going from substantial issues to topics like personalization, the candidate's character, or their campaign strategies.

3.1. *Methodology*

Seven televised presidential debates performed during the respective presidential campaigns since 1989 were analyzed. In a directed sample, we only considered those debates organized by ANATEL since 1993, and for 1989 the only one organized by Canal 13. We also point out that since 2009, there had been debates organized by radio associations in the country, as well as the press (which have a limited television coverage), and on some occasions, the individual channels have organized their debates, with much lower ratings. Since 1999, some channels have presented debates linked to primaries for each coalition. We only considered the debates for the election's first round.

The journalists who compose the panel in the analyzed debates are designed by each channel of ANATEL that has a press department. This selection establishes extra pressure on the journalists, since the debates are broadcasted on the national television network, and each one of them acts as "representative" or "face" of the channel, in an environment of high commercial competition. For instance, each station sells advertisements separately, for the slots broadcasted during breaks in the debate. The number of journalists in the panel has fluctuated between four (in 1989, 2005, and 2017), and six (1999).

Two different content analyses were carried out. On the one hand, the content of 757 questions, counter-questions, or any intervention by journalists was recorded, and on the other hand, the candidates' answers. Following the recommendations of Benoit 2007 (cf. Choi & Benoit, 2013), recorded content was divided into thematic units, so that each recording unit represented a "complete argument," understood as the smallest unit of discourse that is capable of fully expressing an idea, and can therefore vary in length (from a sentence to a paragraph). It is thus assumed that, in response, the candidate can apply different discourse functions in each segment. A total of 1,583 recording units were obtained.

To determine the type of function that each candidate's topic represents, we used Benoit's classic definitions (see, for example, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002, pp. 222-224), mentioned in the theoretical framework. The reliability test for this variable, carried out on a subsample of 156 cases, showed a Holsti index of 0.917.

In the case of the journalists' interventions, and consistency with Benoit's model, it was classified as an attack on the candidate if in their intervention they identified the interviewee as responsible for being associated with some wrongdoing or pointed out his or her weaknesses. Also, if the interventions were directed against the candidate's party or coalition,

or against a government of which the candidate was a member, they were considered to be attacks. This happened regardless of whether the journalist was merely quoting an attack made by a third party, or was taking part in the attack as the result of a journalistic investigation or personal opinion. An inter-coder reliability test for this variable was used on a subsample of 97 cases, showing a Holsti index of 0.895.

4. Main results

While in all the analyzed debates, acclamations were the most used function by the candidates (Table 1), the number of defenses equals or surpasses the attacks on many occasions, contradicting thus the functional logic of a political campaign, according to Benoit's proposal. What is proposed by this theory is exactly corroborated only in three years (1989, 1999, and 2005). Hence, and according to our suggested periodization after 1989, the three following debates are those with the highest number of acclamations. 1999 and 2005, two debates with restrictions for the freedoms of the journalists, have the lowest number of defenses. The following period (2009–2017) is characterized by a lower number of acclamations and a high number of defenses. 1989 is a special situation, starting from the fact that the debate was held during what was technically a dictatorship, after 16 years without elections, which already could explain a high level of confrontation. The rules obliged every candidate to comment on the answers from their contenders, who in return had another minute to reply. This favored the notable increase in the attacks by those candidates, who reached 30.8%, and the following defenses, which reached 19.2%. Both numbers are the highest obtained every year in their respective categories.

Table 1: Functions utilized by candidates for each debate year.

		1989	1993	1999	2005	2009	2013	2017	Total
Others	n	0 _a	1 _{a, b}	0 _a	1 _{a, b}	9 _b	8 _{a, b}	7 _{a, b}	26
	% col.	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	0.7%	3.8%	1.6%	2.1%	1.6%
Acclaims	n	73 _a	105 _b	91 _b	106 _{b, c}	141 _d	339 _{c, e}	232 _{d, e}	1087
	% col.	50.0%	80.8%	84.3%	77.9%	60.3%	69.5%	68.0%	68.7%
Attacks	n	45 _a	8 _b	14 _{b, c, d}	22 _{c, d}	41 _d	59 _{b, c}	46 _{c, d}	235
	% col.	30.8%	6.2%	13.0%	16.2%	17.5%	12.1%	13.5%	14.8%
Defenses	n	28 _a	16 _a	3 _b	7 _b	43 _a	82 _a	56 _a	235
	% col.	19.2%	12.3%	2.8%	5.1%	18.4%	16.8%	16.4%	14.8%
	N	146	130	108	136	234	488	341	1583

Each letter of the subscript denotes a subset of categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level
 $\chi^2 = 92.513; p < 0.000$

Source: Own elaboration.

When observing the frequency of the journalist's questions that contained attacks (Table 2), we realized that the lowest frequency happened in 2009 (13.9%), and the highest in the following campaign in 2013 (24.1%). Besides this, it is not possible to establish statistical differences, which is why we must reject our second hypothesis: the presence of attacks did not increase with the passing of time with larger freedom for the journalist's interventions. It seems that a better explanation could be found in the circumstances that surrounded the particular developments of each electoral campaign and those surrounding the broadcast.

For example, in 1993 (15.9% of attacks) there was a campaign with low levels of confrontation, because of the security in the fact that the incumbent coalition candidate would win in the first round. In 2017 there was also a low number of attacks (16.7%). That year, a debate for the right-wing coalition's primaries was held, in which all the candidates behaved very aggressively towards each other, and that provoked a negative reaction from the public

opinion. This led the ANATEL debate organizers to promote the avoidance of unnecessary confrontation, which probably also influenced the journalists. It is also very interesting to observe 1999, when the journalists were only allowed to pose one common question, but despite this restriction, they could include attacks in a similar proportion to other debates.

Table 2: Presence of attacks in the journalist's interventions, according to debate year.

		1989	1993	1999	2005	2009	2013	2017	Total
Contains	n	12 _{a, b}	10 _{a, b}	4 _{a, b}	9 _{a, b}	15 _b	57 _a	37 _{a, b}	144
attacks	% col.	24.0%	15.9%	25.0%	21.4%	13.9%	24.1%	16.7%	19.5%
	N total	50	63	16	42	108	237	222	738

Each letter of the subscript denotes a subset of categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level

Source: Own elaboration.

When we differentiate between the interventions of the candidates according to the circumstances², the results show that the politicians have used a different configuration of these functions for each of them, independently of the analyzed period (Table 3). The defenses increase substantially when the politicians answer to an intervention of the interviewing journalist, reaching 18.1% between 1989–2005, and 21.5% in the second period. These are the highest numbers for defenses in the five situations analyzed in both periods, surpassing attacks, which contradicts part of the central hypothesis for Functional Theory. However, when the candidates face questions from the audience, the politician takes advantage of the circumstance almost exclusively to praise, that is, to highlight positive aspects of his or her candidacy. This partly confirms what is held by Stromer-Galler and Bryant (2011) about the differences between journalists and the public when asking questions. And it may explain why in Chilean debates this option was finally rejected, as it only facilitated the candidate's self-promotion.

Table 3: Functions utilized by the candidates according to the circumstances of their intervention³.

			Question from the public	Reply to the journalist	Interaction between candidates	Free closure	Common question	Total
1989-2005	Acclaims	n	50 _a	175 _b	46 _c	22 _{a, b}	82 _b	375
		% col.	96.2%	70.6%	49.5%	88.0%	80.4%	72.1%
	Attacks	n	1 _a	28 _b	40 _c	3 _{a, b}	17 _b	89
		% col.	1.9%	11.3%	43.0%	12.0%	16.7%	17.1%
	Defenses	n	0 _a	45 _b	7 _c	0 _{a, c}	2 _{a, c}	54
		% col.	0.0%	18.1%	7.5%	0.0%	2.0%	10.4%
	N	52	248	93	25	102	520	
$\chi^2 = 97.0; p < 0.000$								
2009-2017	Acclaims	n		519 _a	45 _b	104 _c	44 _{a, c}	712
		% col.		67.3%	42.1%	80.6%	78.6%	67.0%
	Attacks	n		64 _a	45 _b	25 _c	12 _c	146
		% col.		8.3%	42.1%	19.4%	21.4%	13.7%
	Defenses	n		166 _a	15 _a	0 _b	0 _b	181
		% col.		21.5%	14.0%	0.0%	0.0%	17.0%
	N		771	107	129	56	1063	
$\chi^2 = 145.82; p < 0.000$								

Each letter of the subscript denotes a subset of categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level

Source: Own elaboration.

²The reliability test for this variable, done in a sub-sample of 200 cases, gave a Holsti index of 0.963.

³The category "others" was excluded.

When the candidates enjoy the freedom given by the opportunity of a closing statement, defenses also disappear and acclaims fill the space, though here the candidates save some time to attack some of their rivals (12% of attacks in the first period, and 19.4% in the second one). A similar configuration of functions happens when facing a common question. This shows that the common question limits the possibilities of the journalists of being more inquisitive or showing themselves as more aggressive in front of the audiences, favoring the candidates with higher levels of freedom. In addition, they, or their teams, can intuit the questions that will be made in the frame of the pre-determined topics for each block of questions, prefabricating thus their answers in the same way as they do in their free closing argument.

Finally, in the process of interaction between the candidates, the attack function reaches its peak in the sample and gets to 43% in the first period and 42.1% in the second one, when it equals the use of acclamations. Despite this number of attacks, the defenses are always lower than when they confront the journalists (this is more evident in the first period). This reaffirms our point that a freer intervention from the journalists establishes a pattern of behaviors in the candidates that differs both from when the candidate has the initiative to address the public with less mediation, and when the candidates have the option of interacting among them.

The results here discussed do confirm the validity of hypotheses 1 and 1.2: the politicians who participate in a televised electoral debate use in different ways the three functions described by Benoit for political discourse, depending on the circumstances they are facing and, at the same time, it is clear that is during the interventions of the journalists when they have the possibility of personally interrogating a candidate, which lead the politician to the need to increase their use of defenses.

In this regard, our hypothesis 1.1 sustains that the journalists resort to including attacks on the candidates in some of their questioning. To verify this, we united the base of the questions from the journalists, with the base that analyzes the responses from the candidates. To determine whether the candidates increase the time of their intervention dedicated to defenses when they respond a question from the journalist that contains an attack, we averaged this base for the duration of the answer (Table 4).

Table 4: Functions utilized by the candidates according to attacks in the questions from the journalists, by campaign year⁴.

		1989		1993		1999		2005		2009		2013		2017	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Acclaims	n	4,057 _a	1,092 _b	2,534 _a	51 _b	3,036 _a	1,118 _b	8,371 _a	600 _b	4,187 _a	472 _b	13,991 _a	2,038 _b	9,465 _a	2,010 _b
	% col.	65.8%	46.1%	79.9%	5.6%	92.3%	77.8%	79.7%	65.6%	81.5%	53.8%	76.9%	60.2%	78.9%	60.1%
Attacks	n	1,272 _a	562 _b	242 _a	379 _b	98 _a	265 _b	1,880 _a	47 _b	229 _a	141 _b	2,342 _a	104 _b	1,486 _a	395 _a
	% col.	20.6%	23.7%	7.6%	42.0%	3.0%	18.4%	17.9%	5.1%	4.5%	16.1%	12.9%	3.1%	12.4%	11.8%
Defenses	n	832 _a	716 _b	394 _a	473 _b	154 _a	54 _a	175 _a	267 _b	700 _a	254 _b	1,802 _a	1,244 _b	1,029 _a	932 _b
	% col.	13.5%	30.2%	12.4%	52.4%	4.7%	3.8%	1.7%	29.2%	13.6%	29.0%	9.9%	36.7%	8.6%	27.9%
N		6,161	2,370	3,170	903	3,288	1,437	10,506	914	5,135	877	18,190	3,386	11,996	3,344

Each letter of the subscript denotes a subset of categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.
Note: the data is weighted by the length of the answer (in number of words)

Source: Own elaboration.

The result shows that in all the campaigns except for 1999, the space that the candidates dedicate to defend themselves when the question contains an attack increases significantly in relation to when it does not, largely surpassing, also, the proportion dedicated to the attacks. The situation for 1999 has already been explained and shows that even when the journalists were allowed to include attacks, the fact of it being a common question that must be answered

⁴ The presentation of the category “other” was eliminated, which was 167 words (0.3% of the total). For all the campaigns, the value of χ^2 presented a probability <0.000.

in turn by every candidate, makes it easier for the politicians to deviate the attention of the attack in their answers. Despite this exception, we can confirm Hypothesis 1.1., although warning that it might occur with individual questions and not with shared (common) ones.

If the journalists did not include attacks in their questions, the profile for the functions utilized by the candidates tends to be as proposed by Functional Theory for Political Discourse by Benoit. It occurred in at least four campaigns (1989, 2005, 2012 and 2017). What happened in 1993 and 2009, should be explained by studying the interactions between candidates (as seen in the table above). This situation confirms again the fact that to understand and study the content of the televised debates, one must analyze both the rules of the debates and the behavior of the journalists that conduct them.

Finally, we are interested in seeing if the attacks are concentrated in one specific topic. For this, we also averaged the interventions of the journalists for their extension in words, this way, we can account for their importance focus. As we discussed in the theoretical framework, the interest of the journalists when covering a campaign is not only the topic of public policies proposal and government programs, but in recent years the focus is also concentrated on the candidates themselves (their character, in the language of Functional Theory) and their campaign strategies. According to this typology, one could observe (Table 5) that in Chile there is no dominant combination: in two occasions (1999 and 2005), the higher proportion of the questions that contained attacks was concentrated in the strategies; in three occasions in the characters of the candidates (1993, 2009, and 2013); and in two occasions, in their policies (1989 and 2017).

Table 5: Presence and absence of attacks in the issues treated by journalists in their interventions, by campaign year⁵.

		1989		1993		1999		2005		2009		2013		2017	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
The policies	n	705 _a	638 _b	766 _a	194 _a	810 _a	88 _b	1,290 _a	152 _b	1,118 _a	106 _b	3,934 _a	564 _b	3,671 _a	1,391 _b
	% col.	41.2%	50.8%	42.7%	39.4%	70.6%	23.5%	64.3%	34.5%	39.8%	15.5%	57.5%	17.1%	58.6%	55.8%
Character	n	309 _a	266 _b	706 _a	233 _b	245 _a	40 _b	502 _a	0 _b	517 _a	352 _b	1,247 _a	1,812 _b	1,032 _a	906 _b
	% col.	18.0%	21.2%	39.4%	47.4%	21.4%	10.7%	25.0%	0.0%	18.4%	51.3%	18.2%	54.8%	16.5%	36.3%
Strategies	n	61 _a	140 _b	282 _a	65 _a	84 _a	247 _b	172 _a	201 _b	649 _a	217 _b	682 _a	657 _b	644 _a	182 _b
	% col.	3.6%	11.1%	15.7%	13.2%	7.3%	65.9%	8.6%	45.7%	23.1%	31.6%	10.0%	19.9%	10.3%	7.3%
Others	n	637 _a	213 _b	39 _a	0 _b	8 _a	0 _a	41 _a	87 _b	528 _a	11 _b	979 _a	272 _b	915 _a	15 _b
	% col.	37.2%	16.9%	2.2%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	2.0%	19.8%	18.8%	1.6%	14.3%	8.2%	14.6%	0.6%
N		1,712	1,257	1,793	492	1,147	375	2,005	440	2,812	686	6,842	3,305	6,262	2,494

Each letter of the subscript denotes a subset of categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level
Note: the data is weighted by the length of the answer (in number of words)

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Conclusions

Our work has demonstrated that the presidential candidates who intervene in a televised debate turn to different strategies for the combination of functions in their speeches, depending on the rules of the debate that frame their intervention. In the case of Chile, this affirmation backed up by the historical moment when the debate happened, and the level of mediatization of political communication. According to the Functional Theory for Political Discourse exposed here, one would expect that acclamations would be the majority of findings, and that attacks would be second, being the defenses the less used function. However, we observe that these theses need certain precisions when applied to debates where the journalists have an active participation as interviewers, who can insist on a question, or when there are interaction moments between the candidates. Our data show that said rationality is only valid when the politicians enjoy more freedom to structure their message.

⁵ For every campaign, the value of χ^2 presented a probability < 0.000. The reliability test for this variable was a Holsti index 0.773, which decreases its generalization value.

The use of defenses is a consequence of the intervention of the journalists when they interrogate the candidate with more freedom, especially when, in their intervention, the journalist includes attacks towards the politician. This way, as Isotalus (2011) suggested, it is demonstrated that considering the behavior of the journalists in the conduction of the debates is a necessary factor to understand the dynamic of attack-defenses and its effects in the construction of the content in the debates.

We propose that the decision of the journalists of including attacks in their questioning is linked to their conception of professionalism in front of the political actors, and, therefore, responds to a journalistic culture and the media system for each country, as shown by the studies of the international project *World of Journalism* (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2019). But this disposition –and especially its effects on the politicians– is facilitated or complicated according to the specific rules agreed upon for the conducting of each individual debate. The specific context of each campaign can also lead journalists to measure their aggressivity in front of the politicians.

For these reasons, we believe that determining whether the journalist includes or not attacks to the candidate in his or her intervention is a key factor when comparing or analyzing televised electoral debates around the world. Of course, among other aspects that could reveal the level of freedom that politicians have for interacting among them. The political culture of the country must also be considered, where attacks may be more or less legitimate (Dragan, 2016).

The decision of each journalist of including or not attacks is also a professional decision, considering the context of the debate, their style, and personality, and certain characteristic of the specific campaign where they are framed. But this does not change the fact that Functional Theory for the Political Discourse and its capacity to compare debates across borders requires the precision to determine both the degree of freedom for each journalist to include attacks in their interventions, versus the degree of freedom that each politician has for articulating their messages or interacting with their rivals.

Our research opens the door to a dimension that was not originally considered. In the analyzed case, the specific rules that regulate the intervention of the journalists, their interaction with the candidates, and the interactions between candidates have diverged from campaign to campaign, in accordance with the degrees of freedom of the journalists to interrogate the participants, and for the latter to construct the messages. For this situation, one may add another variable that should be studied to comprehend all the factors that influence how the content of a debate is structured: the previous negotiations that finally establish rules that limit or increase the freedom with which the candidates can structure their messages, as suggested by Gris Legorreta (2018). This dimension has been little developed in the analyzed literature (a current exception is Gómez, Allende & García, 2020).

Going further into these discussion points would need larger research, both qualitative and quantitative, and should be part of a research agenda regarding the content of the debates and the possibility of comparing them internationally. It is very possible that finally both the format and the rules of the debate, as the negotiating process before them, could be a good indicator of the level of mediatization that a country has since they account for the dominant logic: giving more freedom to the politicians, versus giving more autonomy to the journalists.

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