

Welcome the Women:

A Functional Analysis of the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary Debates

By

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### **Abstract**

With more women currently running for president than in any other previous presidential election in American history (Chappell, 2019), the 2020 Democratic primary will be a special area of focus in academic research for years to come. I conducted a content analysis of nine of the 2020 Democratic Primary's Presidential Debates from June 2019-January 2020 using The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse as a lens through which to view and code the candidates' rhetoric. There were two main areas of focus within this content analysis of the primary debates; first, to provide insight into the uses of functions, topics, and forms, as outlined by Functional Theory. And, second, to highlight the differences between those uses of functions, topics, and forms between male and female candidates on the debate stage. The full-text manuscript of each debate was obtained online, printed, and then coded. Results indicated that the 2020 presidential candidates preferred to acclaim about twice as often as attacking (65%-33%), with women acclaiming slightly more than men (66%-64%). Rhetoric centered more on policy rather than character (60%-40%), with both sexes focusing more on policy than character. Both males and females more heavily focused on the form of general goals, which highlights the candidates' messages of radical change and systematic reform.

*Keywords:* Benoit, Presidential Debates, Functional Theory, 2020 Election

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**Signature Page**

I certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Professional Communication

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(Kevin Stein), Capstone Chair & MAPC Graduate Director

**Table of Contents**

Introduction/Rationale.....6

Literature Review.....8

    Political Messages..... 8

    Presidential Debates.....9

    Women in Politics.....12

    Research Questions.....14

Method.....15

Analysis.....17

Discussion.....35

Conclusion.....38

Reference Page.....39

### **Rationale**

With the 2020 election currently underway candidates for the office of president of the United States are in the process of proclaiming their message, creating a political identity, and attempting to win favor with voters. The primary process is a slow and steady one; one where candidates must plan for the long haul rather than short highs. And, with deadlines approaching quickly and no solid front runner established, Democrats are starting to feel the pressure of picking one candidate who is able to take on President Donald Trump next November. As Lauren Leatherby (2019) writes: “It’s an election that, for Democrats, has a sense of urgency...It’s a historic election. The sense of the risks of a second Trump term are great, so that’s going to inspire more Democrats than usual to go through what’s a brutal process: running for president.” (p. 5).

With this increased number of candidates also brings an increased number of racial, religious, and gender diversity. In American’s long history of presidential politics, both in terms of elected presidents and candidates running for president, the focus of academic research has been on those who have been able to participate, which usually meant caucasian men. For example, all 45 Presidents of The United States have been white males and the primaries have been dominated by them, too. Historically, women have had many barriers keeping them from participating in politics, most obviously with the lack of the right to vote until 1920 and other societal pressures throughout the 20th century. As Li Zhou (2019), an author from Vox stated, “Throughout America’s nearly 243-year history, there have only been five women candidates who’ve participated in a presidential debate, writes advocate Barbara Lee for NBC News. In this cycle [2020] alone, there will be six women doing so” (p. 3). Therefore, the first reason why this

topic is important to study is that with more women than ever running for president, we must include them in our research in order to properly capture a wider perspective on the uses of political discourse.

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse has been used to analyze many different types of political messages (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2013; Benoit, 2007; and Airne, 2013). However, very few, if any, of the above-mentioned studies have used functional theory to analyze the communication differences between male and female Presidential candidates, not because of ignorance, but perhaps due to the lack of female Presidential candidates. The second major reason this topic is important is that in the Presidential elections of 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 there were only a handful of female candidates (Bohanan, 2017). However, in the 2020 Presidential election primaries alone, there are six women running. Therefore, this study was necessary in order to examine the differences, if any, in the debate rhetoric of female presidential candidates compared to male ones. This was achieved by using functional theory to analyze the nine 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates that occurred in June 2019 through January 2020.

In this paper, I first provide an overview of some of the most important published research on the topics of the functional theory of political campaign discourse, political rhetoric, presidential messages, and women in politics. This literature review focuses on the research of Dr. William Benoit, as he is the creator of functional theory and has published numerous articles using the theory to analyze political rhetoric in the form of print, tv, radio, and more. The review also includes brief overviews of other researchers who have used functional theory and also those who have done similar types of research on previous election cycles. Next, I will discuss

the results from the analysis of the text and layout which themes emerged from it. Then, I will provide a discussion of the implications from the themes which emerged during the coding process. And, finally, I will conclude with a summary of the importance of women in politics and why the results of this analysis are significant to the field.

### **Literature Review**

This review of the literature on political rhetoric contains several main themes including the major studies published using functional theory applied to several different types of rhetorical artifacts, an explanation of the importance of presidential debates, a brief overview of women in politics, an identification of a gap in the current knowledge in the field, and my justification for the research questions guiding this study.

### **Political Messages**

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse has been used to analyze numerous forms of political rhetoric, no matter what form it might take. For example, dozens of published articles have used functional theory to analyze a diverse array of political messages including television advertisements, posters, paper mail advertisements, and radio messages (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, 2019; Henson & Benoit, 2010; Benoit, Delbert, & Sudbrock, 2010; Brazil & Benoit, 2006; Brazeal & Benoit, 2006; and Benoit & Stein, 2005). These studies examined the use of the functions, topics, and forms as outlined by functional theory. Results indicated that acclaiming was the most popular function in these political messages, followed by attacking, and defending. I will now discuss two of the most interesting findings from two different articles.



First, an interesting finding came from Brazeal and Benoit's (2006) article in which they analyzed television advertisements for congressional candidates from 1980-2004. They found that while acclaiming was much more common than attacking overall, there was a difference in the percentage of usage when it came down to Republicans and Democrats. Democratic congressional advertisements were found to use the attacking function more and focused more on the topic of policy, compared to Republicans who acclaimed and discussed character more (Brazeal & Benoit, 2006).

In particular, Benoit and Stein's (2005) research focused on paper mail political advertisements and found that acclaiming was the most common function. Results from using functional theory to analyze print and spoken political rhetoric both found acclaiming to be the most common function. It is important to recognize that their study found that primary campaign printed advertisements had more acclaims than general election ones. And, the topic of policy was discussed more the mail advertisements than character, as is predicted by functional theory.

Thus, we see that functional theory's assumptions hold true in general, but there are differences when it comes to primary versus general elections, and Democrats versus Republicans. Therefore, it is safe to assume that there may be some sort of difference in the use of functions, topics, and forms in female versus male presidential candidates. This makes the 2020 election even more important to study because of the record number of female candidates running at the same time.

### **Presidential Debates**

Debates have become a focal point in American Presidential elections as they provide the American public the perfect opportunity to compare the candidates' performances, personalities,

and appearances side-by-side. Presidential debates also offer researchers ample opportunities to analyze many different aspects of communication theory. There have been many studies that have analyzed the discourse in Presidential debates (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Glantz, Benoit, & Airne, 2013; Sudbrock, 2011; Boydston, Glazier, & Pietryka, 2013; Benoit, 2007; Demeter, 2017; Isotalus, 2011; and Airne, 2013). Several of these studies have specifically used The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to study the functions and topics of communication in the Presidential debates, both in primary and general elections (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2013; Glantz, Benoit, & Airne, 2013; Benoit, 2007; Rill, 2013; and Airne, 2013).

Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock's (2011) research found that acclaims were by far the most common function in the 2008 primary debates. Their research focused on both Republican and Democratic debates and found that while both parties acclaimed more, republicans were more willing to attack. Also, the results showed that, in general, policy was discussed much more than character by about 40%. Also, it is important to note that Democrats were more likely to discuss policy, while Republicans were more likely to discuss character, as was found in Brazeal & Benoit's (2006) study on congressional television advertisements, too (2011).

Glantz, Benoit, and Airne's (2013) research focused on the 2012 Republican presidential primary debates, which only included one woman, Representative Michele Bachmann (R-MN). Results of this study also supported the assumptions of functional theory by showcasing the heavy use of acclaiming in comparison to attacking by a difference of 37%, along with a large focus on policy in comparison to character by a difference of 44% (Glantz, Benoit, & Airne, 2013). Both of these findings from the 2012 Republican presidential primary debates remain true

to the assumptions and predictions of functional theory, however, there was only one female candidate that was included in the study.

There are also differences in results when applying functional theory to different political rhetoric around the world. Isotalus (2011) found functional theory to be somewhat inaccurate in its predictions and assumptions when used to analyze the Finnish presidential debate that was televised in 2006. Results from this analysis reported that the most common function was defenses. The next most commonly used function was attacking. And, then, acclaims were the least commonly used function at only 16% (2011). These results are the exact opposite of what functional theory predicts in terms of the most common functions.

Previous research has focused on presidential debates that have included women (Airne & Benoit, 2005), but the female candidate was not the focal point of the analysis, with Geraldine Ferraro, the vice-presidential nominee, only being mentioned by name one time in Arine and Benoit's (2005) article. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct additional research from the perspective of female usage of the functions, topics, and forms, since the research that they have been included in they were not the center of attention. I could not find any research using functional theory that has been published on the 2016 presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, therefore data from the uses of functions, topics, and forms by a female candidate for a major American political party can not be used yet.

The shortage of women included and focused on in these four studies is also a major limitation of the research because of the potential differences in the use of functions, topics, and forms between male and female presidential candidates. Results from the above-mentioned studies have indicated that there are some substantial differences in the uses of functions, topics,

and forms when compared to different political parties, whether the presidential debate is a primary or a general election one, and which country's politics are being analyzed. Therefore, this again highlights the need for additional research to focus on more diverse situations and candidates, with a special emphasis on female candidates from multiple parties in different countries.

### **Women in Politics**

Laustsen and Petersen's (2016) conducted an experiment in which participants were shown the faces of candidates for public office from the Republican and Democratic parties, and were asked to pick which candidate they would vote for based solely on the look of their faces. The authors explained that there are certain nonverbal cues that voters value and look for within the candidates running for public office. These nonverbal cues are subconsciously detected by the voters and subconsciously used to decide which candidate to vote for in the election. Results from the study indicated that the more 'dominant' or masculine-looking faces are favored by Republican voters and the more 'non-dominant' faces are more favored by Democratic voters (Laustsen and Peterson, 2016). Thinking in terms of tradition, it is usually males who express more dominant or masculine-looking physical features, while females express the opposite. This could present an additional difficulty for female politicians when attempting to garner support from more centrist and conservatives groups of people. As Laustsen and Peterson (2016) state: "If the faces of politicians do not match the ideology of their constituency, they are more likely to lose in the competition for votes and policy support" (p. 188).

In addition to the research done on voters' desires for different facial features and physical appearances, there is literature to support the idea that voters also prefer certain types

and tones of voices in political candidates (Klofstad, Anderson, & Peters, 2012). Results from their study support the idea that “...men and women select female [and male] leaders with lower voices, probably because both men and women perceive lower-pitched female [and male] voices to be more competent, stronger and more trustworthy, attributes that are probably correlated with perceptions of leadership capacity” (p. 5). According to multiple academic research studies, male and female political candidates also communicate differently on the debate stage, both nonverbally and verbally (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Bdolach, 2017; Grebelsky-Lichtman & Katz, 2019). Furthermore, the research indicates that there are certain gender structures that confine males and females to stay within their expected communication patterns.

It is safe to say that members of different political parties value different things, such as beliefs, priorities, and ideologies, so it is interesting to see research that supports the idea that different physical appearances, facial features, and voices of political candidates might be a large deciding factor in who to vote/support. Valuing different qualities and characteristics, and expecting different things from political and business leaders leads to a large gap in priorities between males and females. So, when choosing to support a particular political leader, especially a Presidential one, not only are voters subconsciously looking for a candidate that matches their values and beliefs, but also their preferred physical and vocal aspects, too (Klofstad, Anderson, & Peters, 2012; Laustsen and Peterson, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative to apply the functional theory of political campaign discourse to analyze female candidates' communication to provide insight into the differences, if any, of the uses of rhetoric as outlined in the assumptions of functional theory.

**Research Questions**

The overview of this published literature on functional theory and political messages has indicated that while there are many similarities in the results of different studies involving functional theory, there are also some major differences. These differences include the differing uses of functions, topics, and forms between political parties, the incumbent factor, the types of debates (whether they were a primary or general election), and the country whose political rhetoric is being examined. It is necessary to study the ways in which functional theory differs in additional areas, which obviously need to include the differences in male and female presidential candidates. Also, realizing that no research has been published on the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary debates yet, it leaves the field wide open for new research to be conducted during this unique election. Therefore, because of these gaps in the published literature in regards to a lack of focus on functional theory and female candidates, I propose the following research questions to guide my study:

**RQ1:** What are the most common functions used by male and female candidates in the 2020 Democratic Primary election debates?

**RQ2:** What topic is most commonly discussed by male and female candidates in the 2020 Democratic Primary election debates?

**RQ3:** What forms are most commonly discussed by male and female candidates in the 2020 Democratic Primary election debates?

### **Method**

I applied the functional theory of political campaign discourse as a lens through which to view the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates. The nine primary debates which occurred from June 2019-January 2020 were included in this analysis. The transcripts for the nine debates were obtained from The Washington Post website. Functional theory was created by Dr. William Benoit (2014) as a lens through which to analyze political rhetoric. Functional theory has three main parts with which it is able to be used to code political rhetoric. These three main parts are functions, topics, and forms. I will now provide a summary of each of these three main parts and show how each statement goes through the coding process.

The first main element of functional theory is assigning a function to political rhetoric. Functional theory predicts that all political messages can be categorized into three different functions which are acclaiming, attacking, and defending. Acclaiming is the most commonly used function and it is assigned to statements that relate to any achievements, accomplishments, good things a person or group of people have done, or any other positive statements. Functional theory explains that acclaiming will be the most used function because it is the least risky, most positive, and most likely to highlight personal achievements.

The next function is attacking, which is used to bring attention to an opponent's flaws, shortcomings, mistakes, or weaknesses. Attacking is predicted by the theory to be the second most commonly used function. The theory explains that attacking is less commonly used than acclaiming because the audience can perceive the attacks as rude, unwarranted, or too aggressive. However, there are situations in which attacking is necessary, such as when it is necessary to point out a difference in belief or goals or to show the contrast between candidates.

The final and least commonly used function, defending, is used in response to an attack. For example, if a political candidate tells the media that their opponent is lying about their policy record that would be warranted as an attack and would necessitate a defense on the account of the opponent. The opponent might address the issue by confirming or denying the alleged lying accusation, but the theory explains that defending is rarely used because it makes the political candidate or party appear guilty, weak, or powerless.

The second main element of functional theory is assigning a topic to political rhetoric. The topic is assigned after a function has been assigned to a particular statement. Benoit (2014) explains after assigning a function, functional theory assumes that every statement in the political world can also be assigned a topic; either about policy or character. The topic of policy includes anything that is said that is related to anything including public policy, laws, policy decisions, and positions on policy. The topic of character includes anything said about the personality or nature of someone, whether it is of the speaker, one of their opponents, voters, supporters, etc.

The third and final main element of functional theory is assigning a form. Once the topic has been assigned, it will be further assigned a sub-topic or form in relation to the topic assigned. For example, if a statement is assigned the topic of policy, their possible sub-topics include future plans, past deeds, and general goals. If the statement is assigned the topic of character, then the possible subtopics or forms include personal qualities, leadership ability, and general ideals. Therefore, each statement will be assigned a function (Acclaiming, attacking, or defending), then a topic (policy or character), then a form (future plans, past deeds, general goals, personal qualities, leadership ability, and general ideals). For example, during the coding process, a particular statement could receive a code of acclaiming-policy-past deeds. This



particular assigned code would mean that that certain statement was a positive one that related to policy that has already been accomplished/passed.

I will now provide an example by giving a quote and then coding it using functional theory. In the 3rd Democratic Primary debate in September 2019, Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) stated: “There’s one point we’re really missing on the stage right now, which is the fact that Donald Trump’s America first policy is actually an America isolated, an America alone policy”. This statement would be assigned the function of attack, the topic of policy, and the form of past deeds because Senator Booker is implying that President Trump’s domestic and foreign policies are cutting us off from our allies and the rest of the world.

### **Analysis**

In the open-coding stage of my analysis of the nine 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates from June 2019 - January 2020, I found 4,576 statements/ideas that highlighted the different functions, topics, and forms that functional theory provides. Overall, the analysis revealed that acclaims were the most common function (65%), then attacks (33%), then defenses (2%). The 2020 Democratic presidential candidates’ rhetoric focused more on policy (60%) than character (40%). The results indicated that the candidates’ most common forms of policy were general goals (40%), future plans (32%), past deeds (28%). Finally, the most common forms of character were ideals (36%), leadership ability (34%), and personal qualities (29%), (See table 1.1). This data provides answers to all four of my research questions, with acclaiming being the most common function, policy being discussed more than character, general goals being the most frequent form, and with a near-identical use of functions, topic, and forms between male and female candidates (see table 1.2)

**Table 1.1** Overall Frequencies

<b>Function</b>	
Acclaim	2973 (65%)
Attack	1507 (33%)
Defense	96 (2%)
<b>Topic</b>	
Policy	2743 (60%)
Character	1810 (40%)
<b>Form of Policy</b>	
General goals	1091 (40%)
Future plans	875 (32%)
Past deeds	777 (28%)
<b>Form of Character</b>	
Ideals	674 (36%)
Leadership ability	618 (34%)
Personal Qualities	518 (29%)

**Table 1.2** Frequencies Male v. Female

<b>Male Candidates</b>		<b>Female Candidates</b>	
<b>Function</b>		<b>Function</b>	
Acclaim	1948 (64%)	Acclaim	1025 (66%)
Attack	1000 (33%)	Attack	507 (32%)
Defense	81 (3%)	Defense	15 (2%)
<b>Topic</b>		<b>Topic</b>	
Policy	1901 (63%)	Policy	842 (54%)
Character	1112 (37%)	Character	698 (46%)
<b>Form of Policy</b>		<b>Form of Policy</b>	
General goals	762 (40%)	General goals	329 (39%)
Future plans	593 (31%)	Future plans	282 (33%)
Past deeds	546 (28%)	Past deeds	231 (27%)
<b>Form of Character</b>		<b>Form of Character</b>	
Ideals	407 (36%)	Ideals	267 (38%)
Leadership ability	384 (34%)	Leadership ability	234 (34%)
Personal qualities	321 (29%)	Personal qualities	197 (28%)

Results between male and female candidates were nearly identical in every category, except one, topic. The difference in the emphasis of policy versus character in female candidates'

rhetoric, while still favoring policy over character (54%-46%), was much smaller than compared to the male candidates (63%-37%), a ratio of about 3 to 1.

In my analysis of the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates using functional theory, three main themes emerged from the candidates' use of political rhetoric. These three themes, as outlined by functional theory, are functions, topics, and forms. The key theme of functions includes any statement that praises (acclaims), smears (attacks), or deflects (defends) someone or something. The key theme of functions included any statement that dealt with policy or character. And, the final key theme, forms, included any statement that related to policy or character but was even further coded into subcategories that included future plans, past deeds, general goals, personal qualities, leadership ability, and general ideals.

### **Functions**

This category included statements that related to the basic function of each statement in the text. Overall, the most common functions were acclaiming (65%), attacking (32%) and defending (2%). The results in the males' and females' usage of functions were nearly identical. Here is the breakdown by sex for functions: Male candidates (Acclaiming (64%), attacking(33%), defending (3%) and female candidates (Acclaiming (66%), attacking(32%), defending (2%). For context, if a statement included one of the three functions (acclaiming, attacking, or defending) it was included in this theme. Acclaim statements were anything that was praising the self or others, bragging, or anything else positive. Attack statements were anything negative that smeared other people or things. And, lastly, defense statements were anything that deflected an attack from someone else to repair or minimize the damage brought on from the attack.

*Acclaiming*

I will now provide some data and example statements to justify the first subcategory of the functions theme, acclaiming. The 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates were full of acclaims, with almost twice as many as attacks, as predicted by functional theory. Acclaiming was the most common function (65%) within the debates, with women acclaiming slightly more than men (66%-64%). The first example of an acclaim statement is when Senator Kamala Harris was highlighting her leadership ability by saying “I took on --- as the attorney general of California, I ran the second-largest department of justice in the United States, second only to the United States Department of Justice.” This statement is a strong example of an acclaim because she is putting herself in a positive light by talking about how she led the largest department of justice in all of the 50 states. Senator Harris is implying that she is able to lead large government organizations and is painting a positive picture of herself and her experience as a leader.

The second example statement of an acclaim statement was when Entrepreneur Andrew Yang was explaining his goal of raising teachers’ salaries by saying “So, we need to pay teachers more because the data clearly shows that a good teacher is worth his or her weight in gold.” This statement praises teachers and illustrates how valuable Mr. Yang believes teachers are to our society. Yang cites data to back up his idealization of teachers, too, which helps strengthen his praise of the profession.

The third and final example of an acclaim statement was when Senator Kamala Harris said: “I have offered in this campaign a proposal to deal with this [low female teacher pay], which will be the first in the nation, federal investment, in closing the teacher pay gap, which is \$13,500 a year.” This statement is an acclaim because Senator Harris is showing that she cares

about teachers because she is proposing the first in the national policy proposal to closing the teacher pay gap, which she calls an investment, which implies that she cares about teachers and believes that they are worthy of receiving attention and assistance from the federal government. She is bragging about her policy proposal and framing it in a positive way. This statement also paints Senator Harris in a positive way because it shows she cares about inequality in teachers' pay.

### *Attacking*

The second subcategory within the key theme of functions was attacking. I will now provide some data and example statements to justify the attacking subcategory. The 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates contained many attacks, but much less than acclaims as predicted by functional theory. Overall, attacking was the second most common function (33%) within the debates, with men attacking slightly more than women (33%-32%). The first example statement of an attack was when Senator Harris was when she said: "Well, first of all, I have no criticism of that more than just looking where we are now, which is we've got a guy in the White House who has been erratic on trade policy". This is an attack on President Donald Trump, as Senator Harris is implying that he has no clear strategy on or does not understand trade policy. She paints a negative light on President Trump's foreign policy and agreements with other nations. This statement is an attempt to smear Trump's leadership.

The second example of an attacking statement was when Entrepreneur Andrew Yang stated: "So, the imbalances are real, but we have to let the Chinese know that we recognize that President Trump has pursued an arbitrary and haphazard trade policy that has had victims on both sides." This smears the Trump Administration with negativity and characterizes them as a

stupid and incompetent group of leaders who know nothing about trade policy. This is one of the most obvious kinds of attacks; one that directly strikes against President Trump saying that his policies hurt not only the Chinese but Americans, too.

The third and final example from the attack statements was when Senator Bernie Sanders said: “But what I understood from right away in the terms of the war in Iraq, the difference here is that the war in Iraq turned out to be the worst foreign policy blunder in the modern history of this country.” Bernie Sanders is attacking the decision of the Bush Administration and Congress to engage in war with the country of Iraq. Bernie calls it a “policy blunder”, which implies that the leaders who made the decision for war were careless and stupid.

### ***Defending***

The third and final subcategory within the key theme of functions was defending. I will now provide some data and example statements to justify the defending subcategory. The 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates contained few instances of defense, but the results match the predictions of functional theory, which states that defenses will be the least common function by far. Overall, defense statements appeared very infrequently (2%) of all functions within the debates, with men defending slightly more than women (3%-2%).

The first example statement of defense was when Mayor Pete Buttigieg was responding to an attack from billionaire Tom Steyer when Steyer implied that Buttigieg had mixed up priorities because he was not focused heavily enough on fighting climate change if he were to win the presidency. Mayor Buttigieg defends himself by replying, “Well, I’ve made clear that this [fighting climate change] will be a topic of day one action”. This statement from Buttigieg

deflects the attack from Tom Steyer by explaining that Buttigieg will actually be tackling the issue of climate change on the first day in office as the president of the United States.

The second example of a defense statement was when Amna Nawaz, a debate moderator from PBS, softly attacked Former Vice President Joe Biden by saying that he implied that things would return back to normal when Trump leaves or is removed from the Oval Office. Vice President Joe Biden defends himself saying, “Look, I didn’t say return to normal, Normal’s not enough.” This statement is obviously an attempt by Biden to backtrack his original comments and deflect the impending danger he could have been in had he not clarified his statement with a defense. It’s obvious that he is defending himself because he is explaining that he didn’t say something which the moderator alleges he did.

The third and final example of a defense statement was when Senator Elizabeth Warren was attacking Pete Buttigieg for agreeing to meet with wealthy donors in an expensive restaurant and for accepting their big campaign donations. Warren is accusing Buttigieg of being too cozy with the wealthy ruling class and therefore not able to understand the financial plights of the working class. Mayor Buttigieg replies, “You know, according to Forbes magazine, I am literally the only person on this stage who is not a millionaire or billionaire.” Mayor Buttigieg defends his economic class membership and his ability to understand the difficult situations of the poor, working class.

### **Topic**

The second main theme, topic, included statements that related to the topic of each statement in the text. For example, if a statement included one of the three functions (acclaiming, attacking, or defending) it was then further coded for a topic, either policy or character.



Statements of policy included anything that related to future plans, past deeds, or general goals related to public policy, policy positions, and the creation of laws. Statements of character were anything related to the personal qualities, leadership ability, or general values or ideals of a person, group, or organization. Character relates to traits, values, and ideals.

### *Policy*

I will now provide some data and examples to justify the policy statements within the topic theme. Overall, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates were more heavily focused on the topic of policy (60%), with men favoring the topic, even more than women (63%-54%). The first example of a policy statement is when Senator Warren was discussing her desire for higher taxes on the wealthy in order to fund universal college education by saying “I want a billionaire to pay enough to cover tuition for all of our kids because that’s how we build a future.” This statement is a good example of the policy topic because it outlines specific things she is proposing to implement when/if she becomes president. She would implement a new law to raise taxes on the wealthy people in order to fund her policy proposals.

The second example of a statement on the topic of policy was, again, when Senator Warren was listing out plans that she will focus on if she becomes president by saying “My housing plan is about investing in more housing across this country, in rural America, in urban America, in small-town America, but it’s also about making sure that people who want to live independently, people who have disabilities, will have housing available to them. This is a perfect illustration of a policy statement because Senator Warren is talking about policies concerning affordable housing in all regions in America.

The third and final example of a policy statement was when Senator Bernie Sanders was outlining some of his visions for the country by saying “We need a vision which says that in our great country, all of our people should be able to earn a decent standard of living, have health care, have the ability to send their kids to college, regardless of their income.” This statement is clearly centered on the topic of policy because Senator Sanders is discussing the goals of his presidency by saying he will make pass laws to give everyone a good wage, healthcare, and a college education, all of which are policy desires/proposals.

### *Character*

I will now provide some data and examples to justify the policy statements within the topic theme. Overall, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates were less focused on the topic of character (40%), with women favoring the topic, even more than men (46%-37%). The first example of a statement about character was when Mayor Pete Buttigieg was describing his vision for the political process and the values of the Democratic Party by saying “That means building up a politics that is defined not by who we exclude, not by who we reject, but by how many people we can call to this side.” This statement illustrates Buttigieg’s vision for the values he would emphasize as President. He would focus on welcoming as many people into the fold as possible, not excluding people and rejecting them based on arbitrary things. This statement is about character because it has everything to do with how Buttigieg believes he and his party should treat people, which showcases his values and ideals.

The second example of a series of character statements was when Senator Elizabeth Warren was highlighting her leadership ability and a woman’s ability to win the election by saying “Look at the men on this stage. Collectively, they have lost ten elections, the only people

on this stage who have won every single election that they've been in are the women. The only person on this stage who has beaten an incumbent Republican anytime in the past 30 years is me..." Senator Warren is implying that since the men on the stage have lost elections in the past, they won't be guaranteed a win against President Donald Trump, which also attacks their leadership ability or their ability to lead and win, which falls under the topic of character. She is boasting of her and the other women's ability to win elections, which implies they have strong leadership abilities, which, again, aligns with the topic of character.

The third and final example of a character statement was when Former Vice President Joe Biden was highlighting the need for a nominee who can beat President Trump by saying "But the real issue is who can bring the whole party together and represent all elements of the party, African Americans, brown, black, women, men, gay, straight? The fact of the matter is that I would argue that, in terms of endorsements around the country, endorsements wherever we go, I am the one who has the broadest coalition of anyone running up here in this race." This statement is clearly centered on the topic of character because Joe Biden is highlighting his ability to bring the entire party together, which implies a high level of leadership ability, and his number of endorsements, which also implies that other people view him as a good leader, which falls under the topic of character. This statement illustrates his wide support, which is due to his self-described ability to appeal to all types of people, both voters, and political leaders.

### **Forms of Policy and Character**

The third and final key theme category in this content analysis, forms, included statements that related to the different types of forms of the topic of each statement in the debates. For example, when a statement related either to the topic of policy or character, that

statement was then further coded into a subcategory, forms. The forms of policy are general goals (40%), future plans (32%), and past deeds (28%). The subcategories of character are ideals (36%), leadership ability (34%), and personal qualities (29%).

### ***General Goals***

The first form of policy, general goals, relates to any statement that discusses someone's policy goals and desires. Overall, in terms of policy forms, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates focused the heaviest on general goals (40%), with men slightly favoring the topic more than women (40%-39%). The first example of a general goal statement is when Senator Amy Klobuchar outlined several of her goals as president by saying, "I want to make it easier for kids to go to college. And I think we do it by focusing our resources on the people that need it most." In this statement, Klobuchar is not being specific in her proposal for the future. She is simply describing her desire for what she would want to focus on if she became President. She would want to make it easier for kids to go to college, but does not specifically mention a plan or plan to accomplish it, making it a general goal of her hypothetical future administration.

The second example of a statement about a general goal is when Congressman Tim Ryan was explaining his vision of the future by saying, "A new and better economy, a new and better education system, a new and better health care system that focuses on prevention, an education system that focuses on the trauma of our kids." This statement is considered categorized as general goals because it lists out several desires or goals of Ryan's agenda, but it is rather vague and does not outline a specific law or proposal.

The third and final example of a general goal statement is when Senator Kirsten Gillibrand said: "Why not have a green energy race with China? Why not have clean air and

clean water for all Americans?” This statement qualifies as general goals because Senator Gillibrand is not referring to any specific policy or laws, but just stating her general desire to have a green energy race, clean air, and clean water.

### ***Future Plans***

The second form of policy, future plans, are statements related to a specific policy a candidate is working on or plans to support sometime in the future. I will now provide some data and examples to justify the future plans statements within the future plans subcategory of the forms of policy. Overall, in terms of policy forms, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates focused on future plans (32%) the second most behind general goals, with women slightly favoring the topic than men (33%-31%). The first example of a future plan statement is when Senator Warren was discussing the implementation of her future wealth tax policy which would tax Americans who earn more than 50,000,000 per year. Warren said, “I have a two-cent wealth tax so that we can cover childcare for all of our children and provide universal pre-K for every three-year-old and four-year-old in America.” This is a future plan statement because it is outlining a specific policy that she is planning to implement when she becomes president.

The second example of a future plan statement is when Former Vice President Joe Biden was explaining the specific steps he would take as president to help further the women’s rights movement. Biden said, “And by the way, it’s one of the reasons -- the first thing I would do is make sure we pass the Violence Against Women Act reauthorization, which I wrote. ” This is a future plan statement because he is saying that the first thing he would do as president would be to ensure that the above-mentioned bill would get passed. Biden is discussing a specific

policy/bill and he is explaining what he would do about it in the future if/when he wins the presidential election.

The third and final example of a future plan statement is when John Delaney was talking about Senator Bernie Sanders' Medicare-For-All policy plan by saying, "So the bill that Senator Sanders drafted, by definition will lower quality in healthcare because it says specifically that the rates will be the same as current Medicare rates." This statement is an attack on a future policy plan of Senator Sanders because Delaney is referring to a bill that Sanders is proposing to implement if he wins the presidency.

### ***Past Deeds***

The third and final form of policy, past deeds, relates to any statement that highlights things that have been done in the past related to policy. Overall, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates focused least heavily on past deeds (28%), with men slightly favoring the topic more than women (28%-27%). The first example of a statement about past deeds is when Senator Bernie Sanders was explaining how past policies destroyed Detroit, Michigan, by saying, "But let us understand, Detroit was nearly destroyed because of awful trade policy which allowed corporations to throw workers in this community out on the streets as they moved to low-wage countries." This statement is clearly about past deeds because Senator Sanders specifically mentioned bad trade policies enacted in the past decades that resulted in many lost jobs in that city.

The second example of a past deed statement is when Congressman John Delaney was praising the accomplishments of Former President Barack Obama, by saying, "So that was the Trans-Pacific Partnership. I think President Obama was right. He did include environmental

standards, He did include labor standards.” This statement was categorized as a past deed because it is talking about an agreement that was signed by President Obama during his time as president in 2016.

The third and final example of a past deed statement was when Senator Bernie Sanders was discussing his accomplishments during his service in the United States Senate by saying, “Yeah, ok. You’re looking, I believe, at the only member of Congress who not only voted against these disastrous trade agreements, NAFTA, PNTR with China, which cost us over 4 million jobs, but also helped lead the effort against these agreements.” Bernie Sanders is clearly highlighting his efforts (past deeds) to stop these bills from passing, as he was one of the Senators to lead the rebellion against them.

### *Ideals*

The first form of character, ideals, is assigned to any statement that relates to the overall belief of what the world or people should be like. Overall, in terms of character forms, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates focused the most heavily on ideals (36%), with women slightly favoring it over men (38%-36%). The first example of an ideal statement was when Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard was describing how her administration would operate if she won the presidency. She said, “Every single person deserves to be treated with respect, regardless of race, religion, or gender, or even your politics...Inclusion, unity, respect, aloha, these will be the operating principles for my administration.” This statement is most definitely a statement about ideals because Congresswoman Gabbard is laying out the principles of which she believes the government should operate.

The second example of an ideal statement was when Senator Kamala Harris was detailing her version of what a more perfect America would be like, by saying, “And I truly believe that when we overcome these injustices, we will then unlock the potential of the American people and the promise of America, and that’s the America I believe in.” Senator Harris is showing her belief in the idea that because a certain segment of the American population is experiencing some unique hardships, we can not reach our full potential as a nation until we solve these problems for these people. This statement illustrates her ideals or principles she expects our country to live up to. She believes that true American values stand for equality and justice, which are general ideals or principles to live by.

The third and final example of an ideal statement was when Congressman Eric Swalwell was talking about gun violence and how he thinks it’s a crime and shame we continue to allow so many of our nation’s children in school shootings each year by saying, “We don’t have to live this way. We must be a country who loves our children more than we love our guns.” Swalwell puts forth an idealized version of America is saying he thinks we should be a country that prioritizes our children over personal rights, such as gun ownership and other things, and implies a certain set of priorities he thinks the United States should live by.

### ***Leadership Ability***

The second form of character, leadership ability, is assigned to any statement that relates to the overall strengths or weaknesses of a person that would directly correlate to their ability to lead or be a leader, and in this case, be the president. Overall, in terms of character forms, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates focused the second most heavily on leadership ability (34%), with men and women equally discussing it (34%-34%). The first example of a



leadership ability statement was when Senator Amy Klobuchar said, “We need a leader who can bring people together and who can win that way. So, if you are tired of the extremes in our politics and the noise and the nonsense, you have a home with me.” In these two sentences, Senator Klobuchar is implying that she is a leader who will be able to bring people together in order to win the election, saying that she is not extreme, but is level-headed, all of which are good traits of a powerful leader.

The second example of a leadership ability statement was when Former Vice President Joe Biden was discussing his record as the Vice President and as a Senator from Delaware, by saying, “And, Thirdly, who can deliver legislatively? That requires you to look at our records. I have a significant record of getting significant things done, from the Violence Against Women Act to the chemical weapons treaty, in foreign and domestic policy alike.” This statement is highlighting Biden’s ability to get things accomplished legislatively, which he is implying would mean he would make a great leader as president.

The third and final example of a leadership ability statement was when Senator Kamala Harris was describing her upbringing in a poor neighborhood in California and how those experiences of her childhood make her a better leader. She said, “And I’m running for president because I believe that we have to have leadership in this country who has worked with and have the experience of working with all folks.” This statement showcases her belief that our country needs a leader who has a diverse background and a unique set of experiences.

### ***Personal Qualities***

The third and final form of character, personal qualities, is any statement that relates to the personal characteristics or character traits of a person. Personal qualities are individual

aspects of a person's character or personality, which could be positive or negative. Overall, in terms of character forms, the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates focused the least amount on personal qualities (29%), with men slightly favoring the topic more than women (40%-39%). The first example of a personal quality statement was when Senator Bernie Sanders said, "Trump is a pathological liar." This statement labels President Donald Trump as a liar, which is an attack on his personal character.

The second example of a personal quality statement was when Senator Amy Klobuchar explaining why she is grateful for her life because she has been given so much, by saying, "And when you have been given an opportunity like that, you go into the world, not with the sense of entitlement, Donald Trump, but with a sense of obligation. She is attacking President Trump's character by saying that he is entitled and ungrateful, and implying that he is unappreciative of the life of privilege that he was born into.

The third and final example of a personal quality statement was when Senator Bernie Sanders said, "Well, I think the responses that the polls -- last poll I saw had us 10 points ahead of Donald Trump because the American people understand that Trump is a phony, that Trump is a pathological liar and a racist..." The statement contains several mentions of personal qualities which are phony, liar, and racist. Bernie Sanders is attacking President Trump on the basis of his character and attempting to label him as a dishonest, racist fraud, all of which are personal qualities.

### Discussion

This functional analysis of the 2020 Democratic Primary presidential debates revealed three main themes that illustrate how the candidates used rhetoric to accomplish their goals during the debates. Overall, the candidates used almost double the number of acclaims than the second most popular function, attacking (65%-33%). Females' rhetoric featured slightly more acclaiming than men (66%-64%), but this difference is negligible. The next function, attacking, was used slightly more by men than women (33%-32%), but again, this difference is not substantial. Finally, the least common function, defending (2%), was used slightly more by males than females (3%-2%). The uses of functions between the male and female candidates in the 2020 Democratic Primary debates were virtually identical, with only just one-two percent margins of difference in each category (Acclaiming, attacking, defending). The findings of Glantz, Banoit, and Airne's (2013) analysis of the 2012 Republican presidential primary debates showed that acclaiming was about 35% more common than attacking, which is very close to the findings of my study (32%).

There have now been a few presidential elections in which one female candidate has participated in the presidential or vice-presidential debates, most notably with Secretary Hillary Clinton as the Democratic Party's presidential nominee in the 2016 election, Governor Sarah Palin as the Republican Party's vice-presidential nominee in the 2008 election, and Representative Geraldine Ferraro as the Democratic Party's vice-presidential nominee in the 1984 election. Therefore, it could be assumed that the female candidates in the 2020 election have had enough opportunities to view female candidates participate in presidential debates and have learned from their mistakes, which is why the 2020 election results are nearly identical

between male and female candidates. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, it is important to note that previous research has been done on presidential debates where a woman was a participant, but that study did not differentiate or separate the uses of functions, topics, and forms by sex. In addition, no study has been published using functional theory to analyze the 2016 presidential election of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, so we do not have enough information with which to make a strong case for this near-identical uses of functions, topics, and forms by the female and male candidates in the 2020 Democratic Primary election.

In the second main category, topics, it was the only one in which there was any significant difference in usage between the female and male candidates. Both sexes focused more heavily on policy than character, but the difference in usage was quite large for men (63%-37%) and rather small for women (54%-46%). In my opinion, I feel like the larger difference in the male candidates focuses on policy could have been influenced by Senator Bernie Sanders' rhetoric in how he would constantly list out his policy goals whenever he got a turn to speak. For example, there were several instances in each debate where he would list off his campaign's policy goals by saying, "What we need now is international and regional cooperation...guaranteeing health care to all people as a human right....provide paid family and medical leave...every worker deserves a living wage...we should be creating an economy that works for all of us...." Senator Senators would repeat a similar slew of sentences like this fairly often throughout each debate, which could explain the much higher count of policy statements compared to character statements within the male candidates. On the other hand, Senator Elizabeth Warren had a similar statement that she would usually give when it was her turn to speak which focused heavily on the topic of character, which might explain the higher instances

of the topic of character among the female candidates. The statements were usually of Warren attacking different companies, organizations, or people on their personal qualities or ideals, usually proclaiming that they were greedy or corrupt. For example, she would frequently say something similar to her following statement: "So our trade policy in America has been broken for decades, and it has been broken because it works for giant multinational corporations and not for much of anyone else. These are giant corporations that, shoot, if they can save a nickel by moving a job to a foreign country, they'll do it in a heartbeat." In her second sentence in that statement, she is saying that these international corporations are greedy and corrupt because they only focus on themselves and will do anything for money, which is an attack on their character.

In the final category, forms, the male and female candidates were virtually identical, with no more than a 2% difference in usage in any of the forms of policy and character. Both male and female candidates focused most heavily on all forms in this same order: general goals, then ideals, leadership ability, future plans, personal qualities, and lastly, past deeds. These results surprised me because I expected there to be a difference between the use of forms, but also of functions and topics between male and female candidates. This lack of difference could be due to several causes, most notably to the comparatively small sample included in this analysis. Previous election years need to be analyzed and combined together, as has been done in similar research (Benoit & Airne, 2005).

It is important to note that the findings of this study fully align with the predictions and assumptions of functional theory. Functional theory predicts that acclaiming will be the most common function and policy will be talked about more than character, both of which are true of this text. A limitation of this study and a possibility for future research on this topic is that there

was only one presidential election cycle included in the analysis, so further research should include additional debates from the 2020 election, including the ones from the general election later this year.

### **Conclusion**

With the recent rise of female leaders in our government, it becomes more important than ever to include them in academic studies in order to understand how traditionally male-dominated theories and studies compare to their female counterparts. The published literature has a lot of catch up work to do on focusing on female candidates and including them into the focus of our thoughts, research, and focus. This study has provided a small, but important foundation from which future research on female presidential candidates can be built off of. I hope that it can be used to further our understanding of functional theory and in expanding our warm welcome to female candidates of all backgrounds into the political arena.

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