

# Character or policy? Thematising Ghanaian Presidential debates

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## Abstract

There is a growing interest in institutional presidential debates as a key pre-election campaign genre in Ghanaian politics. Since the early 2000s, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) has organised debates for presidential candidates to advance their campaigns. Contrary to previous claims that Benoit's (1999) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse is only applicable to US presidential debates (Isotalus, 2011), this theory has been effectively applied to the Ghanaian context (Gyasi & Sarfo-Kantankah, 2021; Mensah et al., 2018). This study, following the previous studies, applied Benoit's theory to examine the themes of two Ghanaian Presidential Debates—the 2012 and 2016 IEA debates. The study revealed that the debates prioritised policy topics. From the sub-topics of policy (past deeds, future plans and general objectives), candidates used more future plans as campaign promises were preferred to lauding past achievements. The study concludes that Ghanaian presidential debates are issue-based and not image-focused. This study has implication for theorising Ghanaian presidential debates and adds to the growing literature.

**Keywords:** political campaign discourse, presidential debates, general elections, policy character

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## Introduction

Presidential candidates utilise several campaign strategies to persuade the electorate to vote for them in national multi-party elections. In the Ghanaian political space, campaigns mostly take the form of rallies, political walks, party conferences, manifestos and presidential debates. Whereas rallies and conferences have no timelines and may take place anytime within the four years of a government's tenure, manifestos and presidential debates are more regulated and time bound: they take place in the election year and may immediately precede elections. Of the two pre-election campaigns, i.e., manifestos and debates, the former has received relatively significant scholarly attention from Ghanaian political and discourse analysts. Yet the Ghanaian presidential debate, on the other hand, has been understudied (Gyasi & Sarfo-Kantankah, 2021), even though debate is one form of

campaign discourse which attracts a relatively large audience (Stelter, 2012).

The scarcity of literature on presidential debates in Ghana may be attributed to the newness of this pre-election campaign form to the Ghanaian political space. Compared to manifesto, rallies and other campaign forms which existed in the First Republic of Ghana (1960-1966) and have been in use for six decades, presidential debates in Ghana began only in the Fourth Republic. The first debate was organised by the Institute of Economic Affairs in 2000, fifty years after the first parliament had been instituted.

This new pre-election campaign genre has, however, gained ground and become a constant practice each election year. The IEA presidential debates, after two decades, remain the longest and most consistent in the history of Ghanaian politics regarding institutional organisation of such debates. In spite of the importance of presidential debates in Ghanaian politics, there is not much literature on the discourse of such debates. A few notable studies are Botchway (2018); Gyasi and Sarfo-Kantankah (2021); van Gyampo (2009). Van Gyampo (2009) set out to observe the correlation between presidential debates and the electoral fortunes of a political party. While the study found an insignificant impact even among undecided voters, the role of the 2008 IEA debates in consolidating Ghana's democratic credentials was noted. Similarly, Botchway's study centred on democratic consolidation through the activities of IEA, mainly the organisation of presidential debates. The two studies, from a conceptual perspective, focused on impact of debates on democracy, which is not the focus of the current study. Gyasi and Sarfo-Kantankah's study discussed the discourse functions of Ghanaian Presidential Debates, using Benoit's theory. Even though Benoit's theory emphasises two main levels of analysis, discourse functions and themes, their study was limited to the discursual functions of the debates. Thus, this study sought to fill that intellectual gap by analysing the themes, to complement

Gyasi and Sarfo-Kantankah (2021), and consequently present a holistic understanding of the discourse features and topics of Ghanaian presidential debates. To achieve this, the current study interrogated the following research question: what is the distribution of policy and character themes in the 2012 and 2016 IEA presidential debates? In the subsequent sections of the study, we present the theory, previous studies, methods, analysis and conclusion.

### **The Functional theory of Political Campaign Discourse**

This study adopts Benoit's (1999, 2007) Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to guide the analysis. The theory which has been widely used to analyse presidential debates across several countries has five main foundational principles:

1. voting is a comparative act where a candidate must be seen as a preferable choice.
2. a candidate must be distinguished from opponents to be considered preferable.
3. campaign messages are means through which a candidate can be distinguished.
4. campaign discourse creates preferability through three functions: acclaims, attacks and defenses.
5. candidates set themselves apart from opponents by emphasising differences in their character (image) and policy (issues). Candidates may choose to acclaim or attack on character, policy or both topics. (Gyasi & Sarfo-Kantankah, 2021, p4).

This study adopts the fifth principle, and the selection is based on relevance as the fifth principle captures the essence of the current study – discussions of character or policy.

The theory contends that two themes are discussed in presidential debates—policy and character. A policy theme is any utterance that relates to governmental plans and considerations. Policy themes are further categorised into three sub themes: a

discussion of past governmental deeds or achievements; future plans or proposals for governmental action; and general goals and policy outcomes sought by candidate. Concerning past achievements, the theory explains that incumbents mostly acclaim on their past deeds by telling success stories, while challengers attack the past failures of incumbents. Future plans are the specific campaign promises a candidate intends to implement if elected, while general goals refer to political objectives and aims. On the other hand, character themes entail a discussion of the image and individual qualities of candidates such as personal qualities or traits, leadership experience in governance and ideals or principles. A candidate may decide to acclaim or attack any of these character topics.

### **Previous Studies on Themes in Presidential Debates**

In campaigning, political candidates discuss two issues: policy and character. That is, a campaign can be said to be policy-driven when more policy topics are discussed, or character-driven when candidates spend much time discussing their personalities. In Ghana, one study that has explored political themes using the functional theory of political campaign discourse is Gyasi and Sarfo-Kantankah (2021). The study applied corpus analytical techniques to explore the focus of NPP and NDC's manifestos from 1996 to 2016 (excluding NPP's 2004 due to unavailability). The major observation in the contrastive study was that while the NPP prioritised both policy and character topics, the NDC focused more on policy. The researcher observed the tenure of the two parties could account for the findings: while the NDC had ruled for 16 years (as at 2016) and could speak more about their policies, the NPP had been in power for 10 years. It is the argument of the current paper that since Ghanaian presidential debates differ from manifestos (the former is unscripted, more dialogic, etc.), exploring the former may reveal new insights on the phenomenon.

Some studies have examined the themes of presidential debates

in countries like United States (Geer, 2006; Trent et al, 2011), Finland (Paatelainen *et al.*, 2016) and Ghana (Fordjour, 2015; Sarfo-Adu, 2018). The justification for reviewing studies from the three countries, aside the wide application of the theory in these countries, lie in their socio-political similarities: while each country practices multi-party democracy, there seems to be a form of duopoly in their political landscape where two main political parties dominate. This establishes a common contextual ground for the review.

Trent *et al.* (2011) contend that policy topics, specifically past deeds, are utilised by incumbents seeking re-election to hype their achievements in government. The authors add that this emphasis on past deeds (policy) is effective as more than fifty percent of incumbents get re-elected in the US. They confirm the assumption that by discussing their success stories as evidence of their capabilities, candidates can develop their identity and gain the acceptance of the electorate (Benoit, 1997).

Whereas Schutz (1995) argues that televised election campaigns focus more on the individual's personality and not policies, Benoit and Sheafer (2006) contend that political candidates devote a higher percentage of their remarks to policy, often emphasising past deeds. Incumbents boast of their landmark achievements, and these past deeds also serve as targets of attack for the challenger who may want to discredit or fault the incumbent for certain policy initiatives. Benoit and Sheafer add that character topics are equally discussed even though they are less frequent compared to policy. Geer (2006) also adds that most people prefer policy-driven campaigning because it is more informative than campaigning on personality. The writer avers that both voters and political analysts subscribe to issue-based voting because it is superior to voting based on a candidate's personality or individual traits.

However, Mayer (1996) argues that both the personality and policies of a candidate must be critically assessed and discussed, whether incumbent or challenger. The writer

emphasises that character flaws such as vindictiveness, dishonesty and poor management skills have been the major cause of failures of some US presidents. He argues for the need to discuss both character and policy topics when acclaiming and attacking.

Also in Finland, Isotalus (2011) reported that of the two topics discussed in political campaigning, character occupied one third of candidates' remarks whereas the remaining two thirds was devoted to policy discussions. The study found that, contrary to some findings from studies in US (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Trent *et al.*, 2011), general goals were mostly discussed compared to past deeds. Similarly, Paatelainen *et al.* (2016) analysed Finnish presidential elections and confirmed Isotalus' finding that, in Finnish presidential debates, policy is discussed more than character. That is, candidates prefer to discuss the issues that relate to governmental action - what their government has done or will do – than to discuss their individuality.

The above reviews concern countries other than Ghana, but the orientation and findings of the works could relate to Ghana. In Ghana, themes of presidential debates remain unexplored, but several studies have examined the themes of other presidential discourses such as presidential campaigns. For example, Fordjour (2015); Mensah *et al.* (2018) revealed that candidates discussed both policy and character topics. The former observed that candidate Kufour in the late 1990s constantly discussed the failures of the government, the decline of the economy, unemployment, decline in education and health services (policy topics) and criticised the government appointees as being corrupt and nation wreckers (character topics). He attacked both the policies and character of his opponents to persuade the voters to see him as more deserving and qualified to be elected. Fordjour adds that, in Ghanaian political messages, policy is discussed more frequently than character. Incumbents discuss more policy issues than character while the challenger(s)

emphasise character topics. In the next section, we discuss the methodological approach employed in this study.

### **Methods and Data**

The study employed qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse data to identify the major themes of the 2012 and 2016 Presidential Debates in Ghana. It is a method within the broad Thematic Discourse Analysis (TDA) that identifies patterns or themes in the linguistic elements of texts to produce similar meanings or connotations. As Weber (1990) explained, any set of linguistic elements that addresses a common issue or a coherent idea constitutes one theme or category. Data for the study were collected from the IEA website (<https://ieagh.org>) and the YouTube page of the IEA. Data collection took place between April and June 2020. Out of the five (5) presidential debates (at the time of the study), the 2012 and 2016 IEA Ghanaian presidential debates served as the data for the study on the basis that the 2012 debate featured an incumbent and there was an independent candidate in the 2016 debate (as discussed in Gyasi & Sarfo-Kantankah, 2021). The 2012 and 2016 debates were the fourth and fifth successive debates to be organised by the IEA. The 2012 debate featured four presidential candidates – John Dramani Mahama (J. Mahama) from the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Nana Akufo-Addo representing the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Abu Sakara from the Convention People’s Party (CPP) and Hassan Ayariga from the People’s National Congress (PNC). There was an incumbent president, Mahama, and three challengers in that debate. On the contrary, there was no incumbent candidate in the 2016 debate. The three challengers who participated in the debate were Edward Nasigri Mahama (N. Mahama) from the PNC, Papa Kwesi Nduom from the Progressive People’s Party (PPP) and Jacob Osei Yeboah, an independent candidate. This was the first time an independent candidate was taking part in a political debate.

Regarding the specific analytical framework, the study applied theoretical thematic analysis, which is theory-driven and useful for summarizing the key features of a large qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). Thus, we first analysed data into functions (*acclaim* and *attack*) and then categorised *acclaim* and *attack* each into *policy* and *character* themes. We then coded the *acclaim* themes into *policy* and *character* topics and repeated the same process for *attack* themes. A theme that discussed government action (past or future plans) and general government objectives was coded as *policy* (POL), and themes that were person-centred and discussed individual qualities, traits, and experience or otherwise were coded as *character* (CHA).

In reporting analysis, Elo and Kyngas's (2007) model suggest researchers measure intercoder agreement. Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken (2004) explain that intercoder agreement entails consistency in measurement between or among independent coders who evaluate the same data. Three independent coders were given extracts to code and there was agreement on what constitutes policy and character. Also, as a qualitative study, copious extracts have been presented in the next section to guide the discussion of the themes.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Policy and Character Themes in Ghanaian Debates**

This study analysed the distribution of the two topics/themes in the two debates to determine whether the debates were issue-based (policy) or image-driven (character). Previous studies on political discourse have established that candidates discuss two topics – issues/policy and image/character. In the 2012 and 2016 Ghanaian presidential debates, we observed that all the candidates (see Table 1 for the candidates) discussed both topics; albeit, with varying frequencies, as captured in Table 1.

Table 1: Policy and Character Themes in the 2012 and 2016 Debates

Candidate/Political Profile	Policy	Character	Total
	<b>2012</b>		
J. Mahama/Incumbent	34	8	42
Akufo-Addo/Challenger	44	7	51
Sakara/Challenger	45	3	48
ayariga/Challenger	49	2	51
(Sub) Total	<b>172 (90%)</b>	<b>20 (10%)</b>	<b>192 (100%)</b>
	<b>2016</b>		
N. mahama/Challenger	25	5	30
Nduom/Challenger	26	17	43
Yeboah/Challenger/NP	29	2	31
(sub) Total	<b>80 (77%)</b>	<b>24 (23%)</b>	<b>104 (100%)</b>

*NB: NP means non-partisan/no party*

Table 1 shows that the candidates discussed more policy topics than character in both presidential debates. In the 2012 debate, a total of 172 (90%) out of the 192 themes discussed policy whereas 20 (10%) themes were related to the image of the candidates. Similarly, there were 80 (77%) policy topics as compared to the 24 (23%) character topics in the 2016 debate. The study thus confirms previous findings in the field of political discourse analysis that political candidates usually prefer policy themes and discuss less character topics (Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006; Geer, 2006; Isotalus, 2011).

The study further investigated the distribution of the two topics in the discourse of the candidates. In the 2012 debate, all the candidates dedicated most of their themes to policies while discussing few character themes. One of the three challengers, Ayariga, recorded the highest number of policy themes. Out of

the 51 themes discussed by the candidate, 49 were policy and two (2) were character themes. Abu Sakara also discussed 45 policy and three (3) character themes, making a total of 48 themes. Another challenger, Akufo-Addo, also discussed 44 policy and seven (7) character topics. The incumbent candidate, John Mahama, discussed the least policy themes (34) but the highest character themes (8). Concerning the higher number of character themes, President Mahama probably capitalised on his presidential image as the incumbent President and lauded his character traits.

In the 2016 presidential debate, the non-partisan candidate, Yeboah, discussed the most policy topics (29) as well as the least character topics (2). The Progressive People's Party (PPP) candidate, Nduom, discussed 26 policy topics and recorded the highest character topics in the debate (17). The third and final candidate, Nasigri Mahama, used 25 policy and five (5) character themes in the 2016 debate. Nduom discussed the highest number of character topics probably because, out of the three candidates in the 2016 debate, he had a record in ministerial office and as an established businessman, he arguably had the most leadership experience.

As espoused by the functional theory, policy and character topics are used to acclaim and/or attack. Also, policy and character topics have been sub-categorised into three sub-topics each. A policy topic may emphasise past deeds, future plans (campaign promise) and general goals whereas a character topic can be categorised into leadership ability, ideals and personal qualities. In the subsequent sections, I discuss the findings of the study pertaining to the distribution of policy/issue and character/image topics.

### **Policy Themes in Ghanaian Presidential Debates**

Any theme that concerns governmental action but not an individual's character is considered a policy theme. In discussing policy themes, candidates have three sub-topics to choose from: past deeds, future plans and goals. While the first of the three

policy sub-topics – past deeds – stresses previous happenings, the other two – future plans and general goals – focus on proposed future benefits and policy objectives of a candidate/ political party. Candidates may acclaim on these topics or attack the policy topics of opponents. Table 2 presents the distribution of policy topics in the discourses of the candidates. It also shows the number of times candidates used each of the policy sub-strategies to acclaim and attack.

The study found that, in both presidential debates, the candidates discussed more future plans than past deeds and general goals.

Table 2: Forms of Policy Topics in the 2012 and 2016 Debates

Candidate/ Political Profile	Past Deeds		Future Plans		General Goals	
	(Attack/acclaim)		(Attack/acclaim)		(Attack/acclaim)	
<b>2012</b>						
J. Mahama	1	13	1	15		4
Akufo-Addo	16	2		17	1	8
Sakara	8	2	1	19	2	13
Ayariga	10	1	3	25		10
	(35)	(18)	(5)	(76)	(3)	(35)
(Sub) Total (172)	<b>53 (31%)</b>		<b>81 (47%)</b>		<b>38 (22%)</b>	
<b>2016</b>						
N. Mahama	4			15		6
Nduom	6	1		15		4
Yeboah/NP	6		1	18		4
	(16)	(1)	(1)	(48)		(14)
(Sub) Total (80)	<b>17(21%)</b>		<b>49 (61%)</b>		<b>14 (18%)</b>	

NB: Table shows how many times the topic was used to attack (left) and acclaim (right)

As shown in Table 2, in the 2012 presidential debate, 81 (47%) out of the 172 themes emphasised specific campaign promises of candidates (future plans); 53 (31%) were used to discuss past deeds whereas 38 (22%) themes were devoted to general goals. The candidates acclaimed more than they attacked policy. Out of the 172 policy topics in the 2012 debate, 129 were acclaims while candidates used 43 policy themes to attack. A similar observation was made in the 2016 debate. The analysis revealed 49 (61%) future plan themes, followed by 17 (21%) past deeds and 14 (18%) general goals. Also, in the 2016 debate, 63 (79%) of the policy themes were acclaims and 17 (21%) were attacks. The analysis revealed that there were noticeable similarities as well as differences in the candidates' discussion of past deeds, future plans and general goals. In the ensuing sub-sections, we discuss the research findings pertaining to the forms of policy topics (i.e., past deeds, future plans and general goals) in the two debates.

### ***Past deeds***

The functional theory of political discourse advances that political actors laud their past deeds or attack the past deeds of opponents. The former entails that candidates stress past political achievements. A candidate can acclaim on his/her achievements in political office. On the other hand, a candidate can criticise the failures of an opponent. All the candidates in the two debates discussed past deeds, however, differently.

In 2012, President Mahama, the incumbent, lauded 13 past achievements and attacked one (1) past deed of an opponent. Akufo-Addo, the main challenger, highlighted 18 past deeds including 16 attacks and two (2) acclaims. Also, out of 11 past deeds mentioned in the discourse of Ayariga, 10 were negative messages with the remaining one (1) being an acclaim. Likewise, Sakara discussed the failures of his opponents (8) more than he acclaimed on his party's past achievement (2). The findings by Benoit and Rill (2013) and Trent *et al.* (2011)

that incumbents use past deeds to acclaim more than challengers while challengers attack more on past deeds was corroborated by this study. This study also confirms the assumption of the functional theory that since incumbents have served at the presidency, they will tell success stories. On the other hand, their actions in office will serve as grounds of attack from challengers (Benoit, 1999). Extracts 1 to 3 demonstrate how the incumbent and the challengers in the 2012 debate utilised past deeds:

**Extract 1 (J. Mahama, 2012)**

Well, I am ensuring that agriculture does not lose its strategic place in the economy already because of the investment that this government has been making in agriculture, phenomenal investments: we have invested in mechanization, distributed tractors to farmers; we are providing farmers with improved seeds...

In this extract, the incumbent candidate stresses the achievements of his government in the agricultural sector. Prior to this utterance, some challengers had registered their displeasure that agriculture had been neglected after the discovery of oil. The incumbent presents a different account of the situation as he outlines some specific initiatives undertaken in the sector: provision of improved seeds, agro-chemicals, ready market, etc. With this rhetorical approach to campaigning, the incumbent registers in the mind of voters what has been done in just four years hence, the need to be given the endorsement to do more. To provide some historical context to the incumbency of President Mahama, he served as Vice President to Former President Mills and upon the demise of Mills in 2012, a few months to the December general elections, Mahama was sworn in as president on July 24, 2012. Having been on the presidential seat for less than five months, President Mahama, during the debates, mainly discussed the achievements and goals of the NDC government before his ascendancy, unlike other incumbents who serve their full tenure.

The challengers, on the other hand, seek to register in the mind of the voters a record of failure by the incumbent government:

**Extract 2 (Akufo-Addo, 2012)**

...the economic growth that we have reached since last year has been rightly described as a windfall. The 14% figure because if you look, 2008, Kufuor left us a growth rate of 8.7% of our economy and that is without oil. Today with oil, we got to 14% and already the indications are that we are going to come under 8% this year. Agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, construction, hotels and restaurants, all these areas have seen a significant decline in the period of the last 4 years of the NDC rule.

**Extract 3 (Ayariga, 2012)**

The Ghanaian industries have collapsed over the years due to lack of raw materials and due to global challenges and market issues, guaranteed markets. When you look at the situation today, our companies are not able to compete with foreign companies because of the market system. Chinese have taken over the market producing at a very low cost and bringing it into Ghana and spoiling the nation with inferior goods.

Extracts 2 and 3 show how Akufo-Addo and Ayariga respectively attacked past deeds of the incumbent government(s). In Extract 2, Akufo-Addo juxtaposes the achievement of the Kufuor administration in terms of the growth of the economy with that of the Mahama administration which had an extra boost with the discovery of oil in 2007. He then emphasises the failure of the incumbent government as it only managed a 5.3% growth in the economy they inherited from the NPP government even with the addition of oil revenue.

Extract 3 reveals a similar discussion of past deeds by Ayariga. The focus of his attack is on the collapse of Ghanaian industries due to a number of issues which are amenable to government action: lack of raw materials and unguaranteed market, etc. The candidate also bemoans the country's lack of proper implementation of foreign policy laws which has led to Chinese officials taking over the markets which should be reserved for Ghanaians. Here, the candidate emphasises one sensitive issue that voters would probably agree to: the presence and competition from foreign nationals even in retail business. Almost every year, Ghanaian businessmen/women complain about unhealthy competition from foreign nationals who are not even sanctioned to operate. The tension normally leads to the latter's shops being closed by citizens (Ogbotu, 2020). The failure highlighted by the candidate could possibly change voters' perception about the incumbent and the immediate past governments.

In the 2016 presidential debate, all but one of the 17 past deeds themes were attacks; in fact, only Nduom lauded one past achievement. This finding further emphasises the conclusion by Benoit and Sheaffer (2006) and Trent *et al.* (2011) that challengers usually use past deeds to attack. This was the case in the 2016 debates since all the challengers had little or no record in political office. Nduom, however, was the only challenger to acclaim with a policy topic. Extract 4 shows how the candidate used this strategy:

**Extract 4** (Nduom, 2016)

...we talk about the issue of whether it's rice or yam or anything else; unless there is a market in Ghana for the rice, you are not going to get anywhere producing anything. And I have done an example. You go to Worawora in the Volta region today. We have gone there, refurbished a rice mill and over 5,000 farmers now have hope. They are now going to expand their farms because the rice mill is there...

In this extract, Nduom, a former minister and an entrepreneur, praises his efforts in the agricultural sector where he has provided opportunities for several farmers in the Volta region of Ghana. Nduom, however, does not give any indication that this past accomplishment happened during his time as a government official. The refurbishment of the once defunct Oti Rice Mill Factory (now Worawora Rice Mill Factory) in 2016 by Groupe Nduom, under the leadership of Nduom, was a private investment. That notwithstanding, this constitutes an acclaim on past accomplishments as it seeks to encourage the voters to endorse him so that, if he becomes the president, he can continue the good initiatives on a large scale.

The findings and discussions pertaining to past deeds reveal that incumbent candidates normally use past deeds to acclaim more often than to attack. This is probably because the candidates see the need to give an account of the achievements they have made to ensure retrospective voting (voting based on past achievement) and secure re-election. In the Ghanaian political space, acclaims on past deeds are mostly accompanied by slogans such as *JM Toaso* (JM [John Mahama] continue), *etc.* The slogans are to stress that if the candidate has been able to do something remarkable, he/she should be given the endorsement to continue. Whereas this may be the case for incumbents or even challengers whose party may have been in office in times past (all the three challengers in the 2012 debate acclaimed on past deeds), challengers who have no record in office and non-partisan candidates who have no political record in the presidency usually criticise the failures of the incumbents so as to prevent retrospective voting. Such candidates rather emphasise prospective voting (voting based on proposed future benefits) as they constantly acclaim more on campaign promises/future plans.

### ***Future plans***

Campaign based on future plans emphasises specific promises of candidates. This theme is marked linguistically by the use of the modal ‘will’ to show willingness to do something in the future. In the two Ghanaian presidential debates, this sub-category of policy topics was the most discussed. The frequent use of campaign promise demonstrates the preference for prospective voting. The study found that future plans lend themselves to positive campaigning as most of the candidates acclaimed their campaign promises and only attacked few campaign promises of opponents. There were 124 acclaims and six (6) attacks on campaign promise. All the seven candidates made campaign promises while four of these candidates—John Mahama, Sakara, Ayariga (all in 2012 debate) and Yeboah (2016)—criticised the promises of other candidates. In Extracts 5 and 6, two candidates discuss their plans for the country.

**Extract 5** (J. Mahama, 2012): We’ll continue to invest in health care to increase its access for all our people and to ensure that they have quality health delivery. We will continue to invest to ensure that our mothers don’t die when they are carrying out their biological function of giving birth to us. We will continue to invest to ensure that our children survive beyond the age of five and even much further than that...

**Extract 6** (N. Mahama, 2016)

Another area that we were thinking...adding value to some of our raw products. For example, I have said that we *will* mint a gold coin called the “Yaa Asantewaa gold coin” and we *will* encourage every Ghanaian to keep a piece of that gold coin. That means own your own gold...

In Extract 5, John Mahama emphasises his government’s plans for health-care delivery in the country. With the successive use of the

verb phrase ‘will continue’, the president reminds voters of what has already been done (past achievement) and the willingness to continue (promise). Also, having stepped in as flagbearer after the passing of President Mills, President Mahama sought to re-assure Ghanaians of his conviction to continue policies that had already been introduced. In Extract 6, Nasigri Mahama also promises a number of future acts which seek to curb youth unemployment. As earlier indicated, campaign promise or future plans are characterised by the frequent use of ‘will’ which marks futurity in English language. There is the predominant use of ‘I will’ and ‘we will’ in the discussion of future plans in Ghanaian presidential debates. This confirms Nartey and Yankson’s (2014) study which also found the frequent use of ‘will’ in Ghanaian political manifesto discourse.

One observation made in the current study is that campaign promises, just like all commissive speech acts, are judged based on situational appropriateness: preparatory condition–ability rule, benefit rule, etc. (Searle, 1969). That is, the candidates indicated that the promised act will take place in the future (futurity). They demonstrated their ability – financial, physical and intellectual – to fulfil the campaign promises (ability). They also knew that the voters would benefit from the campaign promises (benefit). The promises, however, are conditioned on the voters’ endorsement of the candidate (Agyekum, 2013) since the candidate needs to be elected first to fulfil the promises. While campaign promises are mostly preferred because they are informative and can alter voter behaviour (Håkansson & Naurin, 2014), one particular campaign promise was perceived as infelicitous. Ayariga promised to enforce the use of contraceptives in his future government. The audience showed their disagreement (in the form of boos and hisses) which violates the ‘benefit rule’ of promises (Searle, 1969).

Even though candidates would usually discuss their own campaign promises, the study found six instances where the promises made by some candidates were subjected to attacks.

Extract 7 shows how Yeboah, the independent candidate, attacked the feasibility of some campaign promises:

**Extract 7 (Yeboah, 2016)**

We should also bear in mind it had to do with the ability to pay. Using solar at a higher cost might not necessarily help industries.

In the extract, Yeboah questions Nduom and Nasigri Mahama's promise of using solar to solve the energy crisis. The candidate, thus, casts doubt about the possibility of solar helping industries. With the use of the epistemic modal verb 'might' (probability) and negation 'not', the modal meaning espoused is the probability that the main predication 'help' will not occur. It is probable their plan will not help industries. This criticism also renders the promise infelicitous since it is not feasible. Hence, the voters, after this criticism, may be less enthused about the earlier promise.

The emphasis placed on campaign promise in Ghanaian presidential debates corroborates Håkansson and Naurin's (2014) finding that campaign promises are on the rise. Even the incumbent President Mahama discussed more future plans than past deeds probably because voters may be more concerned about what they intend to do and not what they have done. Candidates who rely mostly on past deeds appear complacent and lose focus. In his book, *Chasing the Elephant into the Bush: The Politics of Complacency*, Kennedy (2009) reiterates a statement by former United States President, Bill Clinton, who asserted that elections were always about the future. The author attributes the NPP's loss in the 2008 election to their emphasis on the past which did not 'move floating voters' (Kennedy, 2009, p 171).

Incumbents may also rely on prospective voting because their first term in office is used to set in motion the long-term plans that they intend to pursue in their second term; hence, they will promise future benefits. For challengers, a lack of political

record means that they mainly rely on encouraging prospective voting. Contrary to claims that all acclaims are welcomed by voters (Benoit & Sheafer, 2006), we observed that some promises which appear impractical, infelicitous or lacking feasibility may attract ill feelings from the electorate.

### ***General goals***

The final as well as the least frequent sub-topic under policy in the 2012 and 2016 Ghanaian presidential debates was a discussion of general goals. Whereas future plans entail a discussion on specific campaign promises, general goals consist of a discussion on the broad political goals of a candidate. General goals are mostly situated in the ideological orientation of a political party or candidate (in the case of non-partisan candidate). For instance, in the 2012 debate, the NPP candidate lauds the general goals of his party, as shown in Extract 8:

#### **Extract 8 (Akufo-Addo, 2012)**

There is absolutely no doubt in the mind of anybody in this country that if there is a party which is unashamedly in favour of private sector operation, in favour of the market it is the New Patriotic Party. We have been singing the song of a market-led private sector-led development of our country from the very beginning of our independence...

As shown in the extract, the candidate projects the ideological orientation of the NPP (capitalist) as a party that sees the private sector as the engine of growth. He stresses that their obligation to private sector growth is integral to the political party's ideological orientation. This acclaim follows a question asked by the moderators on the candidate's private sector development strategy. Discussing the general goals of the NPP as a party, Akufo-Addo tries to convince individual business persons and the general public that if there is any party that can impact positively on the private sector, it is the NPP since they

openly advocate private ownership and market-led economy. While some candidates sought to acclaim on party ideologies, others discussed their broad vision for the country. In the 2016 presidential debates, Nasigri Mahama discussed his broad intentions (general goals) for the country.

**Extract 9** (N. Mahama, 2016)

I intend to change this economy that we have in Ghana which is made up of high inflation, high excessive interest rates, unbridled borrowing and a depreciating currency, fuelled by economic indiscipline, through a disciplined economy, balanced budget and also by balancing the budget. It is possible to bring interest rates down and to also stem inflation.

In as much as the candidate proposes a future action, this does not constitute future plans as conceptualised by the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse. Benoit (1999) explains that a theme is considered a future plan if it highlights a specific campaign promise. In Extract 9, however, the candidate acclaims on his goal to change the economy. This goal is so general that it can be realised through specific campaign promises. Also, he acclaims that he will ensure a disciplined economy, balance the budget and in doing so reduce inflation. His decision not to specifically discuss the ‘how’ of these proposals is what makes this theme a general goal. Similarly, the non-partisan candidate who could not have acclaimed on any political party ideologies discussed four (4) general goals as he emphasised his intent to identify with ‘all-inclusive governance’, and ‘industrialisation’.

The study further observed that similar to campaign promises, general goals were mostly used to acclaim. Out of the 52 themes, only three were negative messages—Sakara attacked two general goals while Akufo-Addo also attacked an opponent’s goal. In one of his attacks, Sakara noted:

**Extract 10** (Sakara, 2012)

...My two compatriots who have been in power over the last 29 years have fed you on the utopia of private sector-led growth with market leading the way but what I can tell you is that that module has not developed one single developing...

He launches a direct attack on the general goals and/or ideology of the NPP and NDC whom he argues have painted a perfect yet unreal picture (utopia) of private sector-led economy. There is a clear instance of conflict of ideologies as the CPP, a pro-socialist political party, criticises the ineffectiveness of capitalism practised by the NPP (Agyekum, 2013). Even though the NDC, per article 5 of their constitution, identifies themselves as social democrats (NDC Constitution, 1992), the CPP candidate criticises the incumbent NDC government of *betraying* socialist values.

The first part of this section has presented a discussion of the subtopics under policy used by the candidates and the frequency of usage. The study found that future plan was the most frequent policy topic for all the candidates, including the incumbent who discussed more campaign promises than past achievements. This confirms the assertion made by former U. S. President Bill Clinton that future promises win elections (Kennedy, 2009). Past deeds were discussed by all candidates but differently. The incumbent acclaimed and only criticised few failures of some challengers while the challengers mostly attacked the failures of the incumbent and in some few cases previous governments. Compared to future plans, past deeds were less frequent probably because the candidates did not want to appear complacent (Kennedy, 2009) nor proud (Sarfo-Adu, 2018). General goals involved discussions of candidates' party ideologies and broad visions. Candidates used this sub-strategy mostly to acclaim as there were only three attacks on general goals. The predominant discussion of policy topics compared

to character confirms the conclusion that policy topics are informative and therefore preferred by candidates (Geer, 2006). Also, the findings that incumbents use past deeds much more to acclaim while challengers mostly attack past deeds (Benoit et al., 2007) was confirmed in Ghanaian presidential debates. However, the current study contrasts previous findings (Airne & Benoit, 2005) that candidates discuss past deeds more than future plans. While US debates mostly encourage retrospective voting, Ghanaian debates emphasise prospective voting probably because future plans and deliberative rhetoric have a higher persuasive impact on voters in Ghana than past deeds.

### **Character Themes in Ghanaian Presidential Debates**

Whereas a majority of the themes discussed policy topics, few character topics were emphasised in the two presidential debates. In the 2012 debate, the study found 20-character themes as against the 172-policy themes discussed. In the 2016 debate, character topics had slightly increased as the three challengers used 24-character topics.

Table 3: Forms of Character Topics in the 2012 and 2016 Debates

Candidate/ political profile	Personal Qualities		Leadership Ability		Ideals	
	(Attack/acclaim)		(Attack/acclaim)		(Attack/acclaim)	
<b>2012</b>						
J. Mahama/ Incumbent	5		1		2	
Akufo-Addo/ Challenger	1	1	3	2		
Sakara/ Challenger			2	1		
Ayariga/ Challenger	1				1	
	(6)	(2)	(5)	(4)	(3)	
(Sub) total (20)	<b>8 (40%)</b>		<b>9 (45%)</b>		<b>3 (15%)</b>	
<b>2016</b>						
N. Mahama/ Challenger	1				2	2
Nduom/ Challenger	4		8	4	1	
Yeboah/ Challenger/NP			1			1
	(5)		(9)	(4)	(2)	(4)
(Sub) total (24)	<b>5 (20.8%)</b>		<b>13 (54.2%)</b>		<b>6 (25%)</b>	

NB: Table shows how many times the topic was used to attack (left) and acclaim (right)

Table 3 presents the results of the character topics and how they were used by candidates (acclaim or attack) to achieve their communicative purposes. The results indicate that the most frequent character topic in the two presidential debates was leadership ability (9 and 13 in the 2012 and 2016 debates respectively). Almost half the character topics in the 2012 debate (9) was devoted to discussions of the leadership ability and/or inability of candidates and their opponents. Four (4) of these themes lauded (acclaimed) the abilities of candidates while the remaining five criticised the inabilities of opponents. All but one candidate in the 2012 debate acclaimed and/or attacked leadership ability, just as only two candidates in the 2016 debate—Nduom and Yeboah—discussed leadership abilities. Also, out of the 13 leadership ability themes found in the 2016 debate, nine were negative messages which targeted the character of opponents while four themes were used to acclaim.

The statistics presented in Table 3 also show that the candidates lauded and criticised personal qualities and ideals. Ideals were mostly mentioned in acclaims and only two attacks targeted the ideals of opponents. Only two candidates lauded their ideals in the 2012 debate whereas all the candidates in the 2016 debate utilised this strategy. Only Nasigri Mahama attacked his opponent's ideals. Concerning personal qualities, five out of the seven candidates in the two debates discussed this sub-topic: the incumbent, John Mahama, two challengers from the 2012 debate—Akufo-Addo and Ayariga, and two challengers from the 2016 debate—Nasigri Mahama and Nduom. The incumbent used this topic to attack on five occasions. The main challenger in the 2012 debate, Akufo-Addo, also criticised once the personal quality of an opponent; Ayariga, Nduom and Nasigri Mahama, on the other hand, used personal qualities only to acclaim.

The study further found that in the 2012 presidential debate, the incumbent discussed more character themes (eight) than the challengers—Akufo-Addo (seven), Sakara (3) and Ayariga (two). Also, the incumbent discussed the most negative

character themes (five), followed by the main challenger, Akufo-Addo, (four) and Sakara (two); Ayariga, however, did not attack any opponent's image. In the 2016 debate, Nduom discussed 17 out of the 24-character themes; Nasigri Mahama discussed five while Yeboah used the other two character topics. Nduom recorded the most attack on character (eight) topics compared to the two attacks by Nasigri Mahama and one by Yeboah in the 2016 debate.

In the subsequent sections, we present how candidates discussed the three forms of character themes—personal qualities, leadership abilities and ideals.

### ***Personal qualities***

The individual qualities of a candidate may influence voters positively or negatively depending on the nature of the qualities and the perceptions associated with them. Based on some admirable characteristics that candidates may possess, they may appear 'presidential', thereby influencing voter behaviour. Schutz (1995) emphasises the importance of discussing character themes in political advertising as it allows the voters to assess the individual behind proposed policies. In the Ghanaian debates, even though candidates discuss less character topics, the candidates stress certain praiseworthy qualities such as honesty, confidence, determination, and hard work. Extracts 11 and 12 demonstrate acclaims on personal qualities by the NPP and PPP candidates in the 2012 and 2016 presidential debates respectively:

#### **Extract 11** (Akufo-Addo, 2012)

I lead a team of committed, dedicated men and women who are ready to take on the challenge of transforming the economy of our country and setting Ghana on the road to prosperity. I am passionate about education....

**Extract 12** (Nduom, 2016)

I am a local boy from Elmina, who through education, hard work and the grace of God, have been able to create thousands of jobs in all the 10 regions in all districts of the country...

In Extract 11, Akufo-Addo presents himself as an individual who possesses three presidential attributes: commitment, dedication and passion, which may be termed ‘presidential’ because they befit a president. In Extract 12, Nduom, on the other hand, describes himself as a humble and unsophisticated person. He alludes that his dedication and hard work is the reason for his success as one of the business moguls in the country. Here, the candidate also stresses two admirable qualities—humility and hard work—as he seeks to persuade the electorate to vote for him. Whereas more personal quality themes were used to acclaim (7), there were instances (6) where some candidates criticised some negative qualities of their opponents. All the five (5) personal quality themes discussed by the incumbent candidate were attacks targeted at the NPP candidate and main challenger. The incumbent described the challenger as mischievous, deceitful and one who distorts facts and uses ‘whimsical’ campaign promises to achieve political gains. By attributing these undesirable qualities to Akufo-Addo, Mahama sought to instigate the electorate against the NPP candidate since accountability, honesty and transparency are expected of any future president. On the basis of this attack on personal qualities, the challenger is portrayed as lacking these necessary qualities expected of a potential president.

***Leadership ability***

Candidates did not only discuss their qualities but also lauded their leadership abilities while criticising the inabilities of their opponents. This constituted the most frequent character topic in the Ghanaian presidential debates. In the 2012 debate, nine

(9) out of the 20 character themes discussed leadership ability. Also, the 2016 debate recorded 13 themes related to leadership ability as compared to the five (5) themes on personal qualities and six (6) themes on ideals. The predominant use of this sub-topic contrasts Brazeal and Benoit's (2001) finding that personal quality is the most frequently discussed character theme by political actors. The socio-political difference between United States of America and Ghana may have resulted to the difference in findings. Since governance is primarily about leadership, the candidates acclaimed on their leadership capabilities to convince the electorate of their (candidates) preparedness for office. With the exception of Nasigri Mahama, all the candidates discussed their abilities. Also, only the incumbent candidate did not attack leadership ability. Extract 13 demonstrates how the incumbent, Mahama, carried out his acclaim on leadership:

**Extract 13 (J. Mahama, 2012)**

I came face to face with the vulnerable in society and that made me understand that to be able to affect the lives of these people it was necessary to affect policy and so I went into parliament. I served as a three-term member of parliament, and have served at various levels in political office; first as deputy minister then as minister of communications and then as vice president and I am currently the president of the republic of Ghana.

John Mahama lauded his rich leadership experience from the grassroots where he observed the vulnerabilities of Ghanaians, which motivated his leadership instinct as an assembly member, law maker, minister, vice president and now president. He creates an image of himself as a candidate whose leadership ability has been tried and tested at different stages of his political journey. Hence, he is the most qualified candidate to win the 2012 election. The decision by the incumbent candidate not to attack any opponent's leadership ability could be as a result of him being the incumbent and his opponents not having any

much record in office. Some of the challengers did not seek to assume that they had leadership abilities. For instance, Ayariga did not discuss any topic under leadership ability; Yeboah, the non-partisan candidate, only used this topic to attack. Also, Akufo-Addo and Sakara in the 2012 debate and Nduom in the 2016 debate used the theme more to attack the incumbent than to acclaim. In one of such attacks, Sakara notes:

**Extract 14** (Sakara, 2012)

Believe it or not there is a generation in Ghana who knows what full employment means even though today after the active killing of our industries, we now say we are going to promote industries. What happened? Under whose stewardship did that happen? And can they today tell you they are going to create jobs? We must examine track records...

Extract 14 contrasts the theme discussed by the incumbent in Extract 13. While the latter sought to convince the electorate that the incumbent had the necessary experience and ability to manage the high political office, this particular utterance seeks to discredit the leadership credentials of Mahama, the incumbent. The message directly implicates the president for the collapse of industries. Early on, some challengers specifically criticised the failure of the government to solve the energy problems which had led to the collapse of many businesses. This extract reiterates that failure in leadership and the candidate through the use of three successive rhetorical questions, advises the electorate against re-electing the same person who had failed the country. The third rhetorical question (*And can they today tell you they are going to create jobs?*) further implicates the incumbent as a charlatan as Sakara alludes to a popular Akan adage: the naked man cannot promise you clothes. Here, Sakara metaphorically describes the incumbent as a naked man (he supervised the collapse of industries) who goes about promising clothes/things he could not afford (he promises to create jobs).

In a similar fashion, the other attack messages targeted the leadership capabilities of the incumbent.

### ***Ideals***

Moral principles are cherished while immoral traits attract the displeasure of society. In Ghana, just like many other settings, the norms and values of the society are held in high esteem; hence, any political candidate who portrays himself/herself as being morally upright stands to gain approval from the electorate. Similarly, when candidates attract perceptions of immorality, they attract the displeasure of Ghanaians.

In the two Ghanaian presidential debates, ideals were the least common character topics. In the 2012 debate, only three themes discussed ideals. Mahama and Ayariga were the only candidates who discussed their positive ideals in that campaign. In the 2016 debate, however, all three candidates discussed their positive ideals. The study found that only one challenger, Nasigri Mahama, attacked the ideals of an opponent. This indicates that ideals are mostly used to acclaim than to attack.

President Mahama, for instance, acclaimed that he was ‘imbued with nationalism’ and that he believed he stood for all Ghanaians. In a country where ethnic politics is prevalent, such acclaim on the principles of the incumbent shows that he will not be discriminatory in carrying out his duty as president. Similarly, the other four candidates—Ayariga (2012), Nasigri Mahama (2016), Nduom (2016) and Yeboah (2016)—discussed their beliefs and moral values. As earlier mentioned, the only two attacks that targeted ideals were discussed by Nasigri Mahama in the 2016 presidential debate. The two themes both portrayed President Mahama as a corrupt leader. The extract below indicates one of the two themes utilised by the candidate in the 2016 debate:

**Extract 15** (N. Mahama, 2016)

They paid monies to contractors; they chopped the money. Later, another government tried, they chopped the money. Between Mills and Kufuor, monies were chopped ... Sometimes they just reposition them, we've seen it. If you are a Minister of Sports and you have chopped some money, they take you to the Presidency or something....

In this extract, the candidate begins by tracing the acts of corruption from previous governments. The specific mention of ex-presidents Kufuor and Mills is an attack on the personalities of Kufuor and Mills. Even though these two statesmen were no longer viable candidates for re-election, Nasigri Mahama strategically attacked their character to indict both the NPP and NDC as parties, and Nana Addo and Mahama as political protégés who after serving under the supposedly corrupt leaders— Kufuor and Mills respectively—want to lead Ghanaians. There is a sense that the candidate wants the electorate to blame the *sins of the fathers on their children*. The second part of the theme discusses corruption in the incumbent government, implying that just like his predecessor, Atta Mills, Mahama and his government have condoned corrupt acts. However, Nasigri Mahama does not explicitly mention his accused as he uses the third person plural pronoun ‘they’ which most likely refers to the past and current government. He refers to a popular incident in Ghana when after the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the Sports Minister, Elvis Afriyie Ankrah, was accused of misappropriating funds and was subsequently fired only to be given a new appointment at the presidency. Even though the candidate does not directly attack the ideals of President Mahama, he reminds the electorate of this act that was frowned upon by many and in so doing, incites the voters against the incumbent who seeks re-election.

From the above discussion, the study has revealed that candidates used three forms of character themes to acclaim and/or attack. The relatively smaller number of character

topics discussed in the two debates corroborates previous studies (Drăgan, 2016; Lee & Benoit, 2005) that reported that character topics are discussed less frequently. In Ghanaian debates, candidates tend to emphasise issues. A number of the character themes were discussed at the beginning of the debate only because the moderators asked the candidates to introduce themselves. At this point, the candidates had a chance to discuss their qualities, leadership abilities and ideals (sub-topics of character). This is because studies have found that one reason why policy is preferred to character is because frequent discussion of the latter makes the campaign less informative and individual-based (Geer, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

This analysis of Ghanaian presidential debates explored themes discussed by Ghanaian presidential candidates during the 2012 and 2016 IEA debates, platforms provided for such candidates to address issues to the electorate about their suitability to be elected as Ghana's president. The functional theory of political campaign discourse provided an analytical lens for in-depth thematic discussion of the discourses of all seven candidates in the two debates. The study found that Ghanaian presidential debates are predominantly policy-based as the candidates discussed more policy themes. Character (image) themes were significantly less than policy. The implication of these findings is that Ghanaian political actors prioritise issues (issue-based campaigning) and place less importance on their individual 'self'. Further, the study found that out of the three policy themes espoused by the theoretical framework (past deeds, future plans and general goals), the dominant theme was future plans (deliberative rhetoric), followed by past deeds and general goals. Ghanaian political actors tend to discuss more future plans or make campaign promises as they share in the 'Clinton-Principle' of elections being about the future. Character themes were scarcely discussed and the few were about leadership (in) ability.

These findings have implications for further studies. For example, while the study indicates that presidential aspirants display policy intentions and in their campaign promises (future plans), it remains to be scientifically known whether indeed they are voted for based on the strength of their policy positions. Additionally, the campaign rhetoric and the economic and socio-political realities seem to suggest that the aspirants were being insincere or may not have what it takes to achieve things they promise. Consequently, a diachronic study could be conducted to assess the impact of campaign promises on voters, the success or failure of the campaign promises made by Ghanaian presidential candidates, and the impact of policy and character-based campaigning on voting behaviour, among others.

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