

# A MODEL OF TELEVISED ELECTION DISCUSSION: THE FINNISH MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

PEKKA ISOTALUS  
EEVA AARNIO

## Abstract

The article presents a model of televised election discussion combining elements of communication, culture and the political situation, and the ways in which these elements influence the nature of political discussion. The main argument is that in the multi-party political system of Finland the televised election discussion is indeed a "discussion" rather than a "debate." Key elements of interaction in discussion are not attacks and defences as in a debate but rather expressions of agreement and disagreement. Other important elements include political memory and discourse orientation toward past, future, or present situations.

Pekka Isotalus is Professor at the Department of Speech Communication and Voice Research, University of Tampere; e-mail: pekka.isotalus@uta.fi.

Eeva Aarnio is Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä; e-mail: eeva.aarnio@jklmlk.fi.

## Introduction

Television is related to election campaigning in many ways. For example, television news is effective in setting the campaign agenda. In entertainment programs and television commercials, candidates can, in turn, polish their images. The televised election debates have, however, the most important role in campaigning. They also have established a prominent role in political campaigning nearly everywhere.

In the televised election debates, the voters can see the political leaders in real time and evaluate their credibility. In these programs, politicians can present their own views or express what they think about the opinions of other politicians. Therefore, viewers have an opportunity to assess the differences between politicians and compare their opinions with their own views. The television debate enables viewers to identify with a politician and his or her party. Furthermore, such programmes can help voters make their political decision, for example by confirming their earlier opinions. In many countries, they are also the most watched events of election campaigns and other media report on them regularly.

Television already became a part of political communication in its early years in the 1950's. Gronbeck (1996), however, notes that electronic political life did not begin with television, but started already in the 1920's with radio and is nowadays more extensive than ever because of computer-mediated communication. It was in the 1960's, when politicians learned to take advantage of television in their campaigns. In those days, the televised election debates also became common in Europe (Holtz-Bacha 2004). An important event in the history of televised election debates was the 1960 U.S. presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon (e.g. Hellweg, Pfau and Brydon 1992). At that time, it was realised that television can have a dramatic effect on viewers' impressions of the candidates. This was also the first television debate to be extensively studied.

These days, televised debates have been studied a great deal. However, most of the research is still American, although the analysis of the debates has increasingly been done in other countries as well (see Coleman 2000). While the research is becoming more international, it still concentrates on the countries with a two-party or similar political systems. Further, the earlier research has mainly been focused on the effects of the debates. In these studies, many different effects have also been found. Trent and Friedenber (2000, 274-283) have combined these results and identified eight effects of the political debates. According to them, the political debates (1) attract large audiences; (2) they tend to reinforce prior political dispositions; (3) they may affect limited numbers of voters; (4) they help set the voters' agenda; (5) they increase voters' knowledge of issues; (6) they modify candidates' images; (7) they may freeze the campaign (there will be an electoral flat-line until after the debates); (8) they may build confidence in democracy. In their recent meta-analysis of the effects of watching debates, Benoit et al (2003) found that debates have significant effects on issue knowledge, issue salience, issue preference, agenda setting, candidate character, and voting preference. On the other hand, the televised debate does not necessarily have effects at all on viewers (Benoit and Hansen 2004).

Content analysis is another perspective on researching political debates. However, this perspective has not been as popular as the research on effects (McKinney

and Carlin 2004). In these studies, the debates' visual or verbal content have been analysed. Sometimes the analyses have been at the micro level and concentrated on verbal or nonverbal communication. Argumentation of candidates and the camera work in the programme have also been analyzed. Occasionally, the focus has been on a chair of the debate instead of politicians, or only a single debate has been analysed more carefully. These studies typically concentrate on a certain feature of the debate and aim to describe it carefully. The goal of these studies does not seem to be to create a general view of debates. Hence, there is a lack of research seeking to describe the main elements of debates or create a theoretical perspective for content analysis of a televised debate. Additionally, more research is needed to take equal account of both the political situation and the features of communication. Further, a limitation of earlier research is that it mostly concentrated on presidential debates in two-party political systems (Graber 2005, McKinney and Carlin 2004, 226).

In this study, televised election discussions are approached from the perspective of a multi-party system. In the Finnish system, political discussions on television are fundamentally different from the debates in a two-party system. To indicate this substantial difference, the term "discussion" is used instead of the term "debate." Additionally, instead of presidential debates, the focus is on party-political programmes during the parliamentary campaigning.

### Debate or Discussion?

The aim of the paper is to develop a theoretical model of the main elements of the televised election discussion in the Finnish culture combining elements of communication, culture, and political situation. The development of the model is based on a macro-level analysis of all televised election discussions during the 1996 and 1999 parliamentary elections in Finland. In this analysis, we have tried to outline the elements of interaction which seem to be constant across different programmes and elections. On the other hand, we have tried to identify the elements that change when the political situation changes, i.e. the elements varying from one election campaign to another. We have also tried to identify reasons for these differences. The aim has been to summarise characteristics of televised election discussions in each election year and of political and interactional elements influencing the nature of discussions. We have identified main elements influencing interaction in every televised election discussion in different election periods in Finland.

Earlier research has paid attention to the debates in two-party systems. These debates typically entail confrontation between two or at most three parties. Both the number of parties and the distinct confrontation are natural in the two-party system or in a political situation resembling that system. In these earlier studies, the clash has been seen as the core of the debate (Carlin and Howard 1991, Carlin et al 2001). Benoit and Wells (1986) consider debates to consist of attacks and defences. The goal of the candidates is to put their opponents into an unfavourable light, which is why opponents' verbal attacks are necessary. To avoid falling into an unfavourable light, the opponents have to defend themselves.

One of most widely used theories in the research of political debates is functional theory of campaign discourse. It sees the campaign discourse as inherently instrumental, a means to a desired end – securing enough votes to win the election.

According to functional theory, the discourse can only take one of three forms: acclaim, attack, and defend. First, candidates may acclaim their positive characteristics or their policy positions. Second, candidates may attack their opponents by addressing their undesirable character or policy position. If a candidate decides to respond to attacks, he or she will mount a defence. The theory also states that the campaign discourse may occur on both policy (issue) and character (image) grounds. The policy utterances may occur on three topics: past deeds, future plans, and general goals. The character utterances occur, in turn, on personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals (Benoit and Hartcock 1999; Benoit et al 2003). Functional theory elucidates forms of discourse in the debate but it is limited to debates such as the presidential debates, where the character of a candidate is crucial. The theory seems to be more appropriate for a two-party system but it is of a limited value for a multi-party system where the political discourse is more diverse. Finally, in the parliamentary debates the character of a party leader is not as crucial as the character of a presidential candidate.

In the Finnish political discussions, the forms of interaction are seldom only attacks or defences, and downright attacks are especially rare. The lack of attacks is naturally reflected in the non-appearance of defences: if there are no attacks, no defence is needed. Indeed, Finnish political discussions could not be called debates at all if the main characteristic of a debate is that it consists of attacks and defences. Consequently, the conceptualisation of the debate as attacks and defences as well as functional theory does not seem to be suitable for the analysis of Finnish television discussions.

### The Finnish Perspective

Debates between only two parties are generally rare in the multi-party system. In Finland, for example, about ten politicians usually participate in televised political discussions. Sometimes there have been over twenty parties represented in a televised discussion before a parliamentary election. The number of debaters alone suggests that it is rather a discussion than a debate. The confrontation between the parties in the multi-party system is not as sharp and clear or polarised as in the two-party system because there is always more than one opponent to a party. Nor does a voter have to choose between every two parties. Since more alternatives always exist, the discussion significantly departs from a debate between just two opponents. There are also important political and cultural elements accounting for the nature of Finnish televised political discussions.

The main Finnish political parties have for decades been more or less reluctant to win elections at all costs. Since the end of the 1960s Finnish parties have become semi-state agencies characterised by the interpenetration of party and state, and also by the pattern of interparty collusion (Aarnio and Pekonen 1999). One of the side-effects is that party programmes have become more and more similar, and these are not used in the traditional sense, i.e., as an ideological narrative.

When major political actors have been consensus-oriented, competitions in elections have not meant an all-out struggle between main parties, but rather a contested competition inside the market situation of an oligopoly. In practice this has meant that an increasing political contingency has not been used as effectively as was possible: the changing policy is not a primary aim; the most important thing is to stay among those who have governmental power (Aarnio and Pekonen 1999).

The situation in a multi-party system fundamentally differs from a two-party system where one party must get more votes than the other party in order to achieve governmental power. In a multi-party system, however, the party must reconcile two different functions to gain power Karvonen and Paloheimo (2005): (1) for vote seeking it must have an individual profile, because it needs to stand out from other parties; (2) when seeking office, it must be able to co-operate with at least one of the other parties. Because the parties have to pursue these two functions at the same time, it reduces their willingness to stand out too much from the other parties. Excessive challenging may destroy the party's chances of getting into the government with other parties. In addition, all former political decisions have been taken in co-operation with several other parties; therefore no party is solely responsible for them.

The consensus policy which is deeply rooted in the Finnish system is an additional reason for the absence of confrontations. Furthermore, it is not yet known during the parliamentary campaign which parties are going to form a joint government after the elections; therefore every party has a chance of getting into the government. This has been observed to narrow the ideological differences between the parties. In describing Finnish politics in the 1980s, the metaphors "consensus," the "politics of low profile," and "rhetoric of necessity" are widely used.

One reason for the "reluctance" to win has been that Finnish politics has experienced a relatively stable period, with more or less stable political alignments and without critical elections. In Finland, for a long time, there have been three major parties in the government with supporting parties. The willingness to share with competitors a mutual interest in collective organisational survival explains, for example, the exceptional combination of parties in the Finnish government in 1995 continuing after the 1999 parliamentary election. The "Rainbow Government" consisted of the Social Democratic Party, the National Coalition Party (the Conservatives), the Left-Wing Alliance (former Left-Wing Socialists and Communists), the Swedish People's Party, and the Green League.

One important reason for consensus-minded elections discussions is foreign policy issues. For a long period until 1991, over 40 years, the so-called Paasikivi-Kekkonen foreign policy enjoyed a hegemonic and uncontested position (Aarnio and Pekonen 1999). One of the main tenets was that a national consensus on foreign policy was the only option for Finland. The politicisation of the foreign policy questions is still rarely seen in Finnish political discussions.

The absence of attacks and defences in political television discussions could also be explained by specific Finnish communication culture. The main function of discussion in Finnish culture is to maintain harmony (Sallinen-Kuparinen 1986). The role of communication is more to create harmony between people than to challenge them to argument. Donal Carbaugh (1995) suggests that it is preferable in Finnish culture to avoid themes that are contentious or conflictual.

In addition, a close bond exists in Finnish culture between the speaker and the message; there is little distinction between a speaker and his or her opinion (Carbaugh 1995, Sallinen-Kuparinen 1986). In practice this means that attacking opponent's opinion in a debate is attacking the opponent as a person.

Nuolijärvi and Tiittula (2000b) observed significant differences in the nature of interaction between Finnish and German television discussions. In Germany, discussions are characterised by a culture of dispute. Confrontation is considered

essential for a democracy and it must be resolved by dispute. Finnish television discussions are gentler and do not include dispute. Although disagreements also appear in Finnish discussions, their communication style is less aggressive.

On the other hand, Salo-Lee (1994) observed that the Chinese considered the Finnish way of speaking often as offending because Finns express their feelings and opinion too directly for the Chinese. This notion indicates how difficult it is to define the dominant characteristics of a culture because they are relative to the culture(s) one would like to compare to. Generally, however, the Finnish culture seems to be prevalently one harmony- and consensus-seeking if compared to other European and American cultures.

Therefore, the earlier research on political debates does not seem to be very relevant for an analysis of Finnish political discussions. A new perspective would be needed for the analysis of mediated political discussions in the Finnish system and, generally, contexts different from those of presidential debates.

### The Core of the Model

As we have already stated, defences and attacks are not principal elements of Finnish political discussions. The televised election discussion is a *discussion* rather than a *debate*. Instead of attack and defence, the basic elements of interaction are expressions of agreement and disagreement. In the discussion, disagreements and agreements may be expressed directly or indirectly, both verbally and nonverbally. Thus the expressions of agreement and disagreement will form the core of the model to which other elements are connected.

The wide use of patterns of agreement and disagreement diminishes the willingness to politicise questions where new political aspects are interpreted or new issues are brought to the agenda of the discussion. Politicisation would be the key instrument to express the differences between the parties.

It is natural that politicians and parties have disagreements. They result from different political views, likely based on the election or party manifestos, different situational interpretations and reasoning. In Finnish televised election discussions, however, disagreements are expressed more indirectly than agreements (Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2000a, 2000b, 2003).

On the other hand, since most of the Finnish parties tend to be catch-all parties nowadays, this may make for the voters difficult to recognize differences between them (Karvonen and Paloheimo 2005). Thus, party leaders may also deliberately take advantage of the situation where they can stand out from other parties without spoiling their chances of future co-operation. This naturally increases expressions of disagreement.

Expressing agreement also seems to have a certain function. When the party leaders expressively agree with others they strengthen the impression of harmony and communicate their ability for co-operation. Nuolijärvi and Tiittula (2000b) even speak of entering into an alliance with somebody when agreement is expressed with somebody in a television discussion. Additionally, it may be assumed that parties which are ideologically less “extreme” would express more agreements than parties which are ideologically farther from each other.

But not only differences in political views can explain how party leaders express agreement and disagreement with other party leaders in televised election discussions. One of the most significant factors is the political position of a party

– whether it is a government or opposition party. It seems typical that during the campaign the parties in office express more agreement with each other than with other parties. The agreement is based on the common government platform and common responsibility for the decisions which the government has taken. On the other hand, there are typically many disagreements between the opposition parties and the government parties. The opposition criticises the government's decisions and tries to put forward the new options which the government, in turn, rejects. The opposition parties are challengers, and this role is directly reflected in their communication style. In our analysis, the position of a party was clearly reflected in the ways of expressing disagreement and agreement.

The third element apparently affecting disagreement and agreement is the personal relationships of the party leaders. If the party leaders are on good terms with each other this is also apparent in how they address one another. Mutual discord is likewise reflected in their communication style. In sum, disagreement and agreement are affected in any case by political and communication culture, political views, the position of a party, and personal relationships.

### Political Memory

When politicians express their agreements and disagreements in the discussion, a good political memory and skilful use of it may be of great help. Our analysis suggests that politicians differ in their ability to use political memory in their argumentation. This can be observed in how well and selectively they demonstrate who did what, when, and with what consequences in a way that serves their interest. The most important element of political memory is the ability to politicise: to show how a non-political question can be interpreted as political, and that an undisputable issue has a disputable nature.

Politicians typically talk about who is responsible for a certain decision and what its consequences have been. Such argumentation can be used to demonstrate one's own achievements and others' failures. The government parties emphasise the results of their policies and the opposition parties try to prove ineffectiveness and even destructiveness of the government's decisions.

To be able to use political memory effectively, a politician has to be familiar with background of political decisions. Politicians who have played an important role in the party, such as ministers, can better use this kind of argumentation because they know the background of the issues. The sitting prime minister especially seems to derive benefit from his or her position for this kind of argumentation, by being better informed than other party leaders on the background of issues and the consequences of the decisions taken.

From this perspective, small parties which have never been in the government are in the worst position. Leaders of these parties are unable to invoke this kind of argumentation to demonstrate their achievements. If a party has never been in government and in a decision-making position, it has difficulties to demonstrate the achievements of its actions. Therefore, the leaders of small parties dispose of a limited variety of communication styles compared to leaders of larger parties; they are mostly restricted to criticism of earlier decisions by larger parties. This kind of style may turn out unfavourable to them since the viewers see them speaking most critically. In Finland, such small parties are often called "protest parties."

## Discourses Oriented to Past, Present, or Future Situations

Televised election discussions also include other forms of interaction than agreement and disagreement. Earlier studies of the Finnish election discussions have shown that instead of real interaction between politicians, the “discussion” could take a form of consecutive monologues (Isotalus and Pörhölä 1994). This suggests that politicians are not coming to television studios primarily to discuss controversial issue but rather to promote their own views (see Pörhölä et al 1997, 439). High frequency of monologues in Finnish televised election discussions strengthens the view that it would be difficult to call them “debates.” Yet despite the fact that political discussions may sometimes resemble a series of monologues, they are brought together in the same programme because they are expected to be mutually responsive, and precisely moments of lively discussions seem to arouse the greatest interest among Finnish viewers (Isotalus and Pörhölä 1994).

Our analysis shows that the three (at times interwoven) general forms of discourse – oriented to past, present, or future situations – are also key elements in televised election discussions. The discourse oriented to the past deals with past events and the previous decisions. It is typical for the Finnish election discussions to refer to the government’s earlier decisions or reports of the past political committees. The discourse oriented to the present refers to the present political situation. It typically emphasises the need for change in the present situation or to defend the present development. The discourse oriented to the future creates scenarios of society’s future. It usually provides arguments on how to solve a current problem or what the party would do in government.

Politicians may employ more than one form of discourse. In turn, forms of discourse may parallel expressions of agreement and disagreement. For example, while in analyses of the present situation both disagreements and agreements are expressed, the discourse oriented to the past is more often used when disagreement is expressed.

### The Style and Contexts

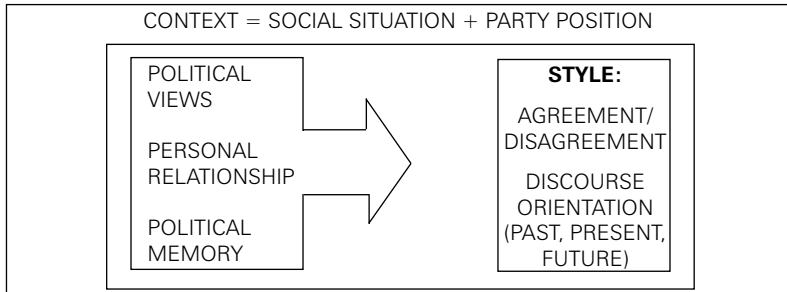
The ways politicians express agreement or disagreement and the use of specific discourses (oriented to past, future, or present situations) constitute politicians’ “discussion style.” The fundamental question is whether the style is a personal characteristic and thus invariable for a certain person, or it is context-dependent. Both ways of thinking are possible, although the style is rather seen, in this paper, to take shape in, and be dependent on, a certain discussion or context. It has also been noted that the communication style of a politician may vary during a single campaign. Carlin et al (2001) observed that the format and contents affect candidates’ strategic choices. Additionally, they suggested that other factors including the wider campaign strategy, polling data, and performance in previous debates also influenced strategies.

From a politician’s perspective, there may also be occasional factors which affect his or her strategic choices in a discussion. In a wider perspective, one can see the broader societal situation and the position of the party affecting politicians’ communication style. Since televised election discussions are always connected to a wider political context, the existing social and international situation and the historical context may well affect the style of talk in televised discussions. For ex-



ample, a bad economic situation of the country may lead to a discussion in which politicians would present different solutions to the problem in a future-oriented discourse. Similarly, an international conflict may lead politicians to consider reasons for the conflict and to analyse the present international situation.

Figure 1: Model of Televised Political Discussion



A formal model of televised election discussion with the core elements of agreement/disagreement expression is presented in Figure 1. The way of agreement/disagreement expression is affected by political views and personal relationships among politicians participating in the discussion. Politicians differ in their capacity to use political memory, which affects how disagreements and agreements are expressed. Another important dimension of discussions is the type of discourse – oriented either to the past, the present, or the future. Political memory also affects the type of discourse. All these forms of talk combine to create the communication style of a politician. Additionally, communication style depends on social situation and governmental vs. oppositional position of a party. The model represents the main elements and their interrelationships in the televised election discussion in the multi-party system of Finland; it is focused on the content of the discussion rather than its effects.

## Conclusions

Our model seeks to describe main elements and their interrelationships in the televised election discussion; many more specific elements are not considered in the model, such as the programme format and journalistic contribution. They both influence the discussion but the degree of influence varies between programmes, reflecting also editors' and producer's efforts to attract viewers with new perspectives and formats.

The model willfully ignores the influence of politicians' personal characteristics on the discussion, such as sex (see Gomard 2001). This, however, is not to deny that politicians' communicative competence significantly affects the way they express agreement and disagreement, and how well they use political memory in argumentation.

The model is based on criticism of earlier research on television debates by arguing that the earlier research done on the two-party system cannot reflect televised election discussions in a multi-party system such as that of in Finland, and challenging the attempts at generalisation based on findings in specific political environments.

Since the development of the model is based only on Finnish television discussions, it may include cultural characteristics peculiar to Finnish culture and does not account for cultural differences and specificities of other cultural/political systems. Nevertheless, we believe that it is applicable to other multi-party systems.

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