

STRATEGIC DISCOURSE IN A NON-COMPETITIVE ELECTION DEBATE: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 WEST PAPUA GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between discourse functions (acclaim, attack, and defense) and policy content (past deeds and future plans) in the 2024 West Papua Governor and Deputy Governor Election debates. The study focuses on the only candidate pair (Candidate Pair 1) participating in the debate, providing a unique environment to analyze communication strategies in a non-competitive context. Content analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A total of 287 utterances were coded into discourse function categories. The results showed that the acclaim function dominated at 94.24%, with 68.88% of statements highlighting future plans. Due to the absence of an opponent, only 0.58% of the attack function and 5.19% of the defense function appeared, showing a minimal use of confrontational strategies. Statistical testing confirmed a significant relationship between discourse functions and policy content. Overall, Candidate Pair 1's communication strategy was affirmative and forward-looking, emphasizing self-image and future vision rather than defense or attack. This study supports political communication theory on strategic self-presentation and enriches research on local political rhetoric in Indonesia, particularly in elections without strong competition. The findings also offer practical insight into how candidates can use debates as a tool to build legitimacy and voter trust, even in uncontested electoral contexts.

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Article history

Received 20 June 2025
Revised 4 September 2025
Accepted 30 September 2025

Keywords:

Political debate
Communication strategy
Political communication
Regional elections
Content analysis

1. Introduction

As a democratic country, Indonesia holds general elections as an exercise of the people's sovereignty, in accordance with Article 22E of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Rosyida & Kurniawan, 2023). Through elections, the people can directly determine their political choices. Candidate debates are essential as an open forum for candidates to present their visions, policies, and personal images, enabling the people to assess the candidates for leadership in Indonesia.

Alrufaiey & Alrikabi (2024) state that political debates serve as a platform for candidates to implement communication strategies designed to elicit desired reactions from

the audience. Additionally, debates serve as a platform for candidates to justify, defend, and attack opposing parties while maintaining political transparency. Candidates can influence, guide, and reconstruct the cognitive environment of the audience through various pragmatic and strategic methods.

The 2024 West Papua Regional Election Debate is an interesting subject to study because it was only participated in by one candidate pair (Paslon 1), so the communication strategies used tended to be more structured. The instrumental nature of political campaigns, including debates, encourages candidates to utter statements that can be categorized into three basic functions: acclaiming (praising oneself: praising the candidate's positive qualities or achievements and proposals), attacking (criticizing the opposing candidate for having negative qualities or for having taken or proposed unpopular actions), and defending (defending the candidate and/or party from attacks by the opposing candidate) (Benoit et al., 2000). Meanwhile, Hussein et al. (2024) state that there are two ways in which candidates convey their policies, namely past deeds (past track record) and future plans (future plans). Unlike most existing studies, this research explores strategic discourse in a non-competitive political context in Indonesia, providing a novel contribution to the study of political communication. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the relationship between discourse functions and policy content in the 2024 West Papua Regional Election Debate.

Literature Review

(1) Content Analysis in Political Research: Content analysis has been considered a reliable approach for examining political content, including political debates and political advertisements. Berelson (1971) described this technique as “an objective, systematic, and quantitative description of visible content.” Peniążek-Niemczuk (2024) emphasizes that this method involves mapping actual content, as well as the importance of validity and reliability for interdisciplinary studies such as political research.

(2) Functional Theory in Politics: The functional theory developed by Benoit (2000) has been widely used to examine various aspects of political campaign rhetoric, including acclaim, attack, and defense. For example, research on nomination convention speeches in the United States conducted by Christensen (2020) shows that the acclaim function dominates (51 percent), followed by attack (48 percent), and defense (1 percent). Additionally, in the 2021 Chilean presidential election debate, candidates employed these functional strategies while adapting to the way journalists asked questions (Porath et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of delving into discourse functions in the context of the 2024 West Papua regional elections.

(3) Policy Content: In addition to discourse functions, it is also important to distinguish policy communication strategies from one another: whether candidates emphasize past deeds or future plans. Leifeld (2020) studied public policy debate networks by combining content analysis with discourse network analysis to show how functional elements can be interrelated with public policy strategies. This method can be used to investigate similar relationships in the West Papua Regional Election.

(4) Combination of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Content Analysis: Mixed methods are highly relevant for this research. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), content analysis should combine quantitative (frequency) and qualitative (meaning and narrative context) components. This provides a methodological foundation for calculating the frequency of functions and policies. Additionally, the research should dissect the strategic background behind the candidates' statements.

This research is highly relevant to modern political communication studies, particularly political debates in Indonesia. Previous studies have shown that discourse functions such as acclaiming are more frequently used by candidates in various political forums, especially to build a good reputation in the eyes of the public. This indicates that rhetorical strategies are very important in shaping policy messages. Conversely, research on

the relationship between discourse function types and policy content is still very limited, especially regarding past actions and future plans, particularly for regional head elections.

Additionally, there is a lack of research specifically investigating candidate communication in local elections, such as those in West Papua Province, especially in cases where only one pair of candidates is competing. In such situations, debates are the only relevant medium for shaping public opinion and conferring legitimacy. For instance, Welda Yulia et al. (2021) examine the *political communication style of regional head candidates during debates* and demonstrate how regional candidates in Indonesia often employ assertive, emotive, or supportive styles during KPU-organized debates. Therefore, further studies are needed on how communication is used in the context of debates that are not directly competitive but still carry electoral weight.

This study focuses on the relationship between discourse functions (acclaim, attack, and defense) and types of policy content (past deeds and future plans) used by candidates in the 2024 West Papua regional election debates. This research uses content analysis to calculate the frequency of occurrence of each category and identify the strategic meaning of the use of these categories. Therefore, this research helps develop political rhetoric theory and provides practical understanding of how candidates communicate in the context of local politics in Indonesia.

Hypothesis

H0: There is no significant relationship between discourse function and policy statements in the 2024 West Papua regional election debate.

H1: There is significant relationship between discourse function and policy statements in the 2024 West Papua regional election debate.

2. Method

A mixed method was used in this study to analyze the relationship between discourse function and policy content in political debates. This method was considered appropriate because it was able to identify numerical patterns in which types of discourse appeared and the contextual meaning contained in political discourse. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), content analysis allows researchers to understand the messages conveyed through narratives and calculate frequencies. This is especially true in political communication that uses rhetorical strategies.

All verbal statements made by Candidate Pair 1 in the 2024 West Papua Provincial Governor and Deputy Governor Election Debate are the subject of this study. The debates analyzed were the first debate on October 26, 2024 (sourced from YouTube KompasTV) and the second debate on November 6, 2024 (sourced from YouTube MetroTV). Both debates were officially organized by the West Papua Provincial Election Commission (KPU Papua Barat) and had a duration of approximately two hours each.

In this study, the unit of analysis used is the utterance unit, namely sentences or complete statements, which contain discourse functions (function) and policy content (policy). A theoretical categorization framework is used to analyze the coded debate transcripts. Benoit's theory (2000) refers to discourse function categories, which consist of acclaim, attack, and defense. On the other hand, Hussein et al. (2024) distinguish policy content into past deeds (past track record) and future plans (future plans).

The coding process was carried out by three coders. Krippendorff's Alpha statistics were used to ensure inter-coder reliability because they can handle various types of data and more than two coders (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). An α value ≥ 0.80 indicates high reliability, while an α value ≥ 0.667 is still acceptable.

The first step in the data analysis process is to calculate the frequency of occurrence of each category of discourse function and policy content. Next, a cross-tabulation is performed to see how a particular discourse function relates to the type of policy content being

communicated. A chi-square test was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 to determine whether the relationship is statistically significant if the statistical requirements are met (expected cell ≥ 5). In addition, qualitative narrative analysis is also conducted to understand the context of certain statements that indicate political communication strategies. Therefore, this method not only provides a numerical overview but also provides a deeper understanding of how the political discussion topics that are the focus of the research are communicated.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Frequency of Discourse Functions

<i>SUM of Function</i>	<i>Function</i>					
<i>Candidate</i>		None	Acclaim	Attack	Defense	Grand Total
	0.00%					0.00%
1st Candidate		0.00%	94.24%	0.58%	5.19%	100.00%
Grand Total	0.00%	0.00%	94.24%	0.58%	5.19%	100.00%

The results show that the acclaim function dominated Candidate Pair 1's statements (94.24%), reflecting a strong emphasis on positive image-building. Defense appeared at 5.19% and attacks were minimal at 0.58%, suggesting that the debate was largely non-confrontational and promotional.

Table 2. Frequency of Policy Content

<i>SUM of Policy</i>	<i>Policy</i>				
<i>Candidate</i>		None	Past Deeds	Future Plans	Grand Total
	0.00%				0.00%
1st Candidate		0.00%	6.27%	93.73%	100.00%
Grand Total	0.00%	0.00%	6.27%	93.73%	100.00%

Candidate Pair 1 focused almost exclusively on future plans (93.73%), with only 6.27% of statements referring to past deeds. This highlights a prospective communication style that prioritizes vision and leadership plans rather than retrospective achievements.

Table 3. Cross-Tabulation of Discourse Functions and Policy Content

<i>SUM of Function</i>	<i>Policy</i>				
<i>Function</i>		None	Past Deeds	Future Plans	Grand Total
		0.00%			0.00%
None		0.00%			0.00%
Acclaim		17.29%	8.07%	68.88%	94.24%
Attack			0.58%		0.58%
Defense		2.59%	2.59%		5.19%
Grand Total		0.00%	19.88%	68.88%	100.00%

The cross-tabulation confirms that acclaim was primarily used to present future plans (68.88%), while defense was evenly distributed across past deeds and future plans (2.59% each). Attacks appeared only in reference to past deeds (0.58%).

Table 4. Chi-square tests result

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	35.229 ^a	2	<.001
Likelihood Ratio	23.933	2	<.001
N of Valid Cases	287		

a. 3 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .27.

A chi-square test indicated a statistically significant relationship between discourse function and policy content ($\chi^2(2, N=287) = 35.229, p < 0.001$). Although 50% of cells had expected counts below 5, the large sample size and high chi-square value suggest the results remain robust (Akinboade et al., 2012; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Overall, Candidate Pair 1’s communication strategy in the 2024 West Papua regional election debate was overwhelmingly positive, forward-looking, and designed to build electoral optimism. This aligns with findings by Braesemann and Stephany (2020), who argue that future-oriented acclaim is a common campaign strategy to generate voter sympathy. Similarly, Prasitwongsa and Panthanuwong (2020) note that in low-competition contexts, candidates tend to prioritize affirmative and informative discourse over confrontational rhetoric.

In the context of West Papua, where the election featured only one candidate pair, this communication approach carried practical implications. By minimizing conflict and emphasizing vision, Candidate Pair 1 fostered legitimacy in a setting where voters had limited alternatives. The dominance of acclaim and future-oriented statements helped reinforce narratives of stability, continuity, and optimism—factors crucial in regions where electoral participation and trust in democratic processes must be carefully nurtured. This suggests that even in uncontested elections, political debates remain an important platform for shaping public perception and consolidating legitimacy through strategic communication.

4. Conclusion

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the relationship between discourse functions (acclaim, attack, and defense) and policy content (past deeds and future plans) in the 2024 West Papua regional election debate. According to the results of content analysis conducted on 287 statements made by Candidate Pair 1, the acclaim function dominated communication strategies at 94.24%. This function was mostly used to convey future plans (68.88%), while only a small portion contained past deeds (8.07%). The attack and defense functions were also very limited, at 0.58% and 5.19%, respectively.

There is a significant correlation between discourse functions and policy content, as indicated by the value of $\chi^2 = 35.229$ with $p = 0.001$. These results indicate that the rhetorical strategy for Candidate Pair 1 was systematically designed and aimed at creating a positive perception by emphasizing future plans. Given that there was only one candidate pair, the minimal use of the attack and defense functions reflects a non-competitive debate atmosphere. Overall, the communication patterns found in this study indicate an affirmative and prospective attitude in politics, which focuses on creating an image and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Theoretically, this study contributes to political communication research by showing how rhetorical strategies function in non-competitive electoral settings, where the emphasis on vision-building and affirmative discourse replaces confrontation as the main tool of legitimacy-building.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be made, both theoretically and practically. (1) For Future Researchers: This study only looked at one pair of candidates during one debate session, so further research should look at how candidate pairs change in a more competitive debate context or look at how discourse dynamics change during various stages of the campaign. (2) For Political Communication Practitioners and the Election Commission: The results of this study indicate that candidate debates still have a strategic function even in the absence of direct political opponents. Therefore, debate organizers must ensure that the debate format encourages substance and critical responses rather than merely serving as a platform for one-sided program presentations. (3) For Theory Development: These results reinforce political communication theory emphasizing the importance of strategic self-presentation and the dominance of affirmative functions in the local political context. By considering the local context, competitive structure, and public communication formats used, this type of research can enrich political rhetoric research, particularly in non-competitive electoral environments such as the West Papua election. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which only focused on a single case (one debate, one candidate pair). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized broadly, and future research should address these limitations by incorporating multi-case or longitudinal approaches that allow for broader comparative insights.

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