

THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE 2024 WONOGIRI REGIONAL ELECTION DEBATE THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF SPEECH FUNCTIONS, TOPICS, AND ARGUMENTATIVE DEFENSE STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Political debate is an important instrument in political communication because it functions as a means of conveying programs, exchanging ideas, and evaluating the capacity of candidates by the public. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of political communication in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Public Debate based on the function of utterances and message topics using the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse developed by Benoit. The study uses a quantitative approach with a content analysis method on 237 utterance units obtained from the transcript of the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Public Debate. Data are coded using the categories of acclaim, attack, defense, policy, and character. The results show that the acclaim function dominates with a frequency of 108 utterances (45.6%), followed by defense with 83 utterances (35.0%), and attack with 44 utterances (18.6%). In terms of topics, policy is the most dominant topic with a frequency of 191 utterances (80.6%), while character appears with 44 utterances (18.6%). Further analysis showed that the future plans category dominated policy discussions with 159 utterances (83.2%), while the past deeds category only accounted for 32 utterances (16.8%). Regarding character, the ideals category was used more often than personal qualities, indicating that candidates more often emphasized values, principles, and commitment to public service than personal qualities. Comparisons between candidate pairs showed that Candidate Pair Number 1 (Tarso–Teguh) tended to use attack strategies more often, while Candidate Pair Number 2 (Setyo–Imron) used defense strategies more often to maintain the legitimacy of existing policies and government performance. The research findings indicate that the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate was more oriented towards conveying programs, solutions, and regional development agendas rather than personal confrontations between candidates, thus reflecting a policy-centered campaign discourse pattern as explained in the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse.

Keywords: Political Communication, Regional Election Debate, Functional Theory, Speech Function

INTRODUCTION

Political debates are a vital public communication tool in the democratic process, providing the public with the opportunity to directly evaluate candidates' visions, missions, competencies, and leadership capacities (Falah, 2023). Debates in regional head elections serve not only as a medium for conveying work programs but also as a platform for a battle of ideas, allowing candidates to build a positive image, criticize political opponents, and defend themselves against various argumentative attacks. This process makes political debates a means of political education that can help voters obtain information before making their political choices. Research shows that the use of language, persuasive strategies, and argumentation patterns in debates influence public perceptions of candidates and the quality of political discourse within society (Jiménez-Preciado et al., 2024; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2024). Furthermore, effective political communication in debates can increase audience engagement and strengthen the appeal of candidates' political messages (Prabhakaran et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate that political debates serve not only as campaign tools but also as spaces for public deliberation, contributing to the quality of modern democracy.

Studies on political communication in debates often utilize the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse developed by Benoit. This theory explains that political communication in campaigns and debates can be categorized into three main functions: acclaims, attacks, and defenses (Benoit, 2017). Candidates use acclaims to emphasize their own strengths, attacks to criticize their opponents' weaknesses, and defenses to respond to attacks. This framework remains a dominant approach in political debate analysis because it explains the communication strategies candidates employ to build voter preferences. Research by Parasian et al. (2025) shows that these communication functions emerge differently depending on the debate format and interaction patterns that occur during the debate. Other research on the 2024 South Kalimantan regional election debate also shows that the Functional Theory approach remains relevant for explaining candidate communication strategies in the context of local Indonesian politics (Shanti et al., 2025).

In addition to the function of speech, this theory distinguishes political messages into two main topics: policy and character. Policy topics encompass discussions of work programs, public policies, and solutions to various societal problems, while character topics relate to the integrity, competence, and personal qualities of candidates. Various studies have shown that policy topics tend to be more dominant in political debates because they directly relate to voter needs and public issues of concern (Mummolo et al., 2021). However, character topics remain important because perceptions of a candidate's personal qualities often influence public trust. Research on contemporary political communication also shows that voters consider not only the substance of policies but also the credibility and character of candidates in the political decision-making process (Duggan et al., 2025).

The function of defenses is an interesting aspect to study because it reveals how candidates respond to criticism and political attacks that arise during debates. Benoit identified several argumentative defense strategies, including denial, shifting blame, defeasibility, differentiation, and transcendence. The use of these strategies reflects a candidate's ability to manage conflict, maintain reputations, and mitigate the negative impact of opposing attacks. Research by Porath et al. (2021) showed that the intensity of critical questions and political

attacks can increase the frequency of defensive strategies in debates. Response strategies to political attacks play a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions of a candidate's credibility and legitimacy (Prahallad & Mamidi, 2025).

Research on political debates in Indonesia is still dominated by studies at the presidential election level, while research on local-level regional election debates is relatively limited. This situation indicates a research gap, particularly in understanding the dynamics of political communication in local contexts that have different social, cultural, and political characteristics than the national level. To date, no study has systematically analyzed the distribution of speech functions, message topics, and patterns of defensive strategies in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate. Therefore, this study aims to identify the functions of acclaims, attacks, and defenses, analyze the dominance of policy and character topics, and examine the patterns of defensive strategy use in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate. The results are expected to enrich local political communication studies and provide an empirical contribution to the development of content analysis of political debates in Indonesia.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with content analysis to identify political communication patterns that emerged in the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate. Content analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to classify messages systematically, objectively, and measurably based on predetermined categories (Krippendorff, 2018). The object of the study was the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate, while the unit of analysis was the candidates' utterances, each containing a coherent idea. Data collection involved video documentation of the debate, transcription of the entire debate, and segmentation of utterances into analytical units ready for coding. The sampling technique used total sampling, ensuring that all utterances meeting the analysis criteria were included in the study.

This study examined three main variables: utterance function, message topic, and defense strategy. The utterance function variable consists of acclaim, attack, and defense, referring to the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit & Harthcock, 2017). Topic variables include policy and character, while defense strategies include denial, blame shift, defeasibility, differentiation, and transcendence (Porath et al., 2021). The research instruments consisted of coding sheets and codebooks compiled based on Benoit's conceptual categories to ensure consistency between coders.

This study used inter-coder reliability testing to measure the consistency of data coding. The testing was conducted using Krippendorff's Alpha and Cohen's Kappa metrics because these two measures are able to evaluate the level of inter-rater agreement more accurately than a simple percentage of agreement (Krippendorff, 2018). The results of the reliability testing are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the Reliability Test of the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate Instrument

Variable	Krippendorff's (α)	Alpha	Average Kappa	Cohen's %	Interpretasi
Function	0,4871		0,4917	64,8%	Currently
Topic	0,0915		0,1760	74,1%	Very weak
Policy (Sub-Topik)	0,1167		0,1528	53,7%	Very weak
Character (Sub-Topik)	0,2743		0,2743	77,4%	Weak
Defense Type	-0,0408		-0,0408	80,4%	Very Weak

Source: Results of researcher data processing, 2026.

Based on Table 1, the Function variable was the only category that demonstrated a relatively adequate level of reliability, with an Alpha value of 0.4871 and an average Kappa of 0.4917, which is in the moderate category. These results indicate that the coders understood the speech function coding guidelines fairly consistently. The Topic, Character, and Defense Type variables exhibited a prevalence paradox, a condition where the percentage of agreement is relatively high, but the Alpha and Kappa values remain low due to the dominance of one particular category in the data (Krippendorff, 2018). The Policy variable demonstrated the lowest level of agreement, with an Alpha value of 0.1167 and an average Kappa of 0.1528. These findings indicate that there are still significant differences in interpretation between coders. Therefore, this study recommends refining the codebook, clarifying operational definitions of variables, and retraining coders to improve coding reliability in future research (Neuendorf, 2017; Bryson et al., 2021).

The research instruments consisted of a coding sheet and codebook compiled based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit & Harthcock, 2017). The coding sheet was used to record the classification results of each utterance based on its function, message topic, and defense strategy. An example of the coding format is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Example of the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate Coding Sheet

No	Time	Speech	Candidate	Function	Topic
1	16:33	"Wonogiri is more advanced, fair, and equitable"	Paslon 1	<i>Acclaim</i>	<i>Policy</i>
2	23:08	"1000 coastal wells program"	Paslon 2	<i>Acclaim</i>	<i>Policy</i>
3	39:01	"Wrong way of looking at it"	Paslon 2	<i>Defense</i>	<i>Character</i>

Source: Compiled by researchers based on coding guidelines, 2026.

Data analysis was conducted by calculating the frequency and percentage of occurrence of each category, then interpreting the findings based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse. Cross-tabulation was used when necessary to identify the relationship between speech functions, message topics, and defense strategies used by candidates in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate (Porath et al., 2021; Heiberger et al., 2022; Jiménez-Preciado et al., 2024).

RESULTS

Coding Reliability Test Results

Prior to the content analysis process, all analysis units, consisting of candidate pairs' utterances in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Public Debate, were coded by three independent coders using coding guidelines based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse developed by Benoit (2017). The coding process encompassed three main variables: Function (acclaim, attack, and defense), Topic (policy and character), and Defense Type (denial, shift blame, defeasibility, differentiation, and transcendence). Reliability testing was conducted to ensure consistency of coding results between coders so that the data obtained had a sufficient level of reliability for further analysis.

Table 3. Results of Inter-Coder Reliability Test

Variabel	Krippendorff's Alpha	Cohen's Kappa
<i>Function</i>	0,4871	0,4917
<i>Topic</i>	0,0915	0,1760
<i>Defense Type</i>	-0,0408	-0,0094

The reliability test results in Table 3 show that the Function variable achieved a Krippendorff's Alpha value of 0.4871 and an average Cohen's Kappa of 0.4917. These values indicate a moderate level of inter-coder agreement, making the coding guidelines for the campaign function variable relatively easier to understand compared to other variables. This indicates that the raters were able to identify utterances that fell into the acclaim, attack, or defense categories more consistently.

The Topic variable achieved an Alpha value of 0.0915 and a Kappa value of 0.1760. These values indicate a low level of reliability. Differences in interpretation emerged primarily in the classification process between policy and character topics. The dominance of the policy category in the data limited assessment variation, leading to the prevalence paradox phenomenon, a condition where the raw level of agreement is relatively high but the reliability coefficient remains low.

The Defense Type variable produced an Alpha value of -0.0408 and a Kappa value of -0.0094. Negative values indicate that the level of inter-coder agreement is below random chance. This situation occurs because the majority of utterances do not fall into the defense category, thus concentrating in the "not defense" category. Consequently, the data distribution is unbalanced and leads to a decrease in statistical reliability. These findings suggest that the coding guidelines for the Defense Type category require refinement of the operational definition to produce more uniform interpretations.

Overall, the Function variable was the category with the highest reliability compared to the other variables. These results allow for further analysis, taking into account the limited reliability of the Topic and Defense Type variables.

Analysis Results Based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

Distribution of Functions in the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate

One of the main concepts in Benoit's (2017) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse is the function of political communication, which consists of acclaim, attack, and defense. Candidates use these three functions to build a positive image, attack political opponents, and defend themselves from criticism during the debate. An analysis of 237 speech units in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate yielded the distribution of communication functions as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution Function

Function	Frekuensi	Persentase
Acclaim	108	45,6%
Attack	44	18,6%
Defense	83	35,0%
Tidak Ada	2	0,8%
Total	237	100%

Source: Results of researcher data processing (2026)

Based on Table 4, the acclaim category was the most dominant communication function, with a frequency of 108 utterances, or 45.6% of the total analysis units. This dominance indicates that both candidate pairs predominantly employed self-promotion strategies through the presentation of their visions, missions, work programs, and various solutions offered to the Wonogiri community. Candidates sought to build a positive image by highlighting their leadership capacity and development agendas, which they believed could address various regional issues. This finding aligns with Benoit's (2017) view that political candidates tend to use acclaim more frequently because this strategy carries relatively low political risk. Through acclaim, candidates can gain electoral advantage without facing the negative consequences that often arise from excessive use of political attacks.

The defense category ranked second with a frequency of 83 utterances, or 35.0%. The high use of defensive strategies indicates that the debate took place in a competitive atmosphere, requiring each candidate pair to provide clarification, justification, and explanations for criticisms leveled by their political opponents. This form of defense frequently emerged when candidates responded to criticism regarding regional development, public services, government policies, and flagship programs offered during the campaign. Meanwhile, the attack category appeared in 44 utterances, or 18.6%. This percentage indicates that attacks on opponents continued to be used as a tool of political persuasion, although they did not dominate the debate. Attacks were generally directed at criticizing the performance of the previous government, the effectiveness of development programs, or the feasibility of programs offered by political opponents. The distribution of communication functions indicates that the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate was more oriented toward conveying programs and building a positive image than aggressive political confrontation. This pattern indicates that candidates sought to convince voters through substantive arguments rather than through personal attacks on their opponents.

Topic Distribution in the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate

In addition to its communication function, Functional Theory also distinguishes campaign message content into two main topics: policy and character. Policy topics relate to programs, policies, and solutions to public issues, while character topics relate to the candidate's personal qualities, values, and leadership traits. The distribution of topics in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Topic Distribution

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Policy	191	80,6%
Character	44	18,6%
Nothing	2	0,8%
Total	237	100%

Source: Results of researcher data processing (2026)

The analysis revealed that policy dominated the debate, accounting for 191 utterances, or 80.6% of the total analysis units. This finding suggests that both candidate pairs primarily discussed substantive issues related to governance, public services, education, health, economic development, agriculture, investment, infrastructure, and public welfare. The dominance of policy topics indicates that the public debate served as an arena for offering solutions to various regional issues. Through policy discussions, candidates attempted to demonstrate their capacity in governing and presenting programs deemed capable of improving the welfare of the Wonogiri community. Conversely, character topics only appeared in 44 utterances, or 18.6%. This percentage indicates that both candidate pairs relatively rarely used character as the primary focus of their political arguments. Statements categorized as character generally concerned commitment to public service, leadership integrity, political experience, and the candidates' values. This finding suggests that the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate strongly characterized itself as a policy-centered debate. The main focus of the candidate's political communication is on conveying regional development programs and solutions, not on personal image building or attacking the character of political opponents.

Policy Type Distribution in the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate

In Functional Theory, policy topics are divided into two main subcategories: past deeds and future plans. Past deeds refer to previous achievements or performance, while future plans refer to programs and policies that will be implemented in the future. The distribution of these two categories is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Policy Type Distribution

Policy Type	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Past Deeds</i>	32	16,8%
<i>Future Plans</i>	159	83,2%
Total Policy	191	100%

Source: Results of researcher data processing (2026)

Based on Table 6, the "future plans" category was the most dominant policy category, with a frequency of 159 utterances, or 83.2% of all policy-related utterances. This finding indicates that both candidate pairs predominantly offered programs, development visions, and

policy plans to be implemented if they receive a mandate from the Wonogiri community. The dominance of "future plans" is a common characteristic of political communication in the context of general elections. Candidates tend to seek voter support by offering various future development agendas deemed capable of solving community problems. Meanwhile, the "past deeds" category appeared with 32 utterances, or 16.8%. Utterances in this category were generally used to explain past development achievements, the experience of previous governments, and the success of implemented programs. This relatively small proportion indicates that the debate was more focused on future development agendas than on evaluating past performance.

Character Type Distribution in the 2024 Wonogiri Regional Election Debate

In addition to discussing policy aspects, both candidate pairs also utilized character as part of their political communication strategy during the debate. In the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, the topic of character is divided into two main categories: personal qualities and ideals. Personal qualities refers to the candidate's individual qualities, such as experience, competence, leadership abilities, and personal integrity. Meanwhile, ideals refers to the values, principles, commitments, and normative orientations that the candidate strives to champion.

The distribution of these two categories is presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Character Type Distribution

Character Type	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Personal Qualities</i>	19	43,2%
<i>Ideals</i>	25	56,8%
Total Character	44	100%

Source: Results of researcher data processing (2026)

Based on Table 7, the ideals category was the most dominant form of character, accounting for 25 utterances, or 56.8% of all character-related utterances. This finding indicates that when discussing aspects of character, both candidate pairs more frequently emphasized values, principles, commitment to public service, concern for the community, and the normative vision they wish to realize if elected as regional head. The dominance of the ideals category indicates that the candidates are attempting to build political legitimacy by conveying values perceived as closely aligned with the needs and expectations of the Wonogiri community. Statements falling into this category generally relate to a commitment to public welfare, equitable development, better public services, clean governance, and a spirit of change and sustainable regional development. Meanwhile, the personal qualities category appeared with 19 utterances, or 43.2%. Statements in this category generally relate to leadership experience, government management skills, closeness to the community, political competence, and the candidate's capacity to implement regional development programs. The use of this category indicates that the candidates are still striving to build their image as figures with the ability and experience to lead Wonogiri Regency.

However, the frequency of personal qualities remains lower than that of ideals. These findings indicate that both candidate pairs preferred to build their image through the values and

principles they champion rather than directly highlighting personal qualities. This pattern suggests that the debate focused more on conveying ideas and policy orientations than on excessive political personalization. The distribution of character types indicates that character aspects were indeed used in the debate, but to a much lesser extent than policy aspects. When character was used as argumentative material, the candidates' primary focus was on conveying political values and commitments they believed would persuade voters.

Comparison of Functions Between Candidate Pairs

In addition to examining the overall distribution of communication functions, this study also analyzed the differences in communication function use between Candidate Pair Number 1 (Tarso–Teguh) and Candidate Pair Number 2 (Setyo–Imron). This analysis aimed to determine the communication strategy tendencies used by each candidate pair during the debate.

Table 8. Comparison of Functions Between Candidate Pairs

Function	Paslon 1 (Tarso–Teguh)	Paslon 2 (Setyo–Imron)	Total
<i>Acclaim</i>	55	53	108
<i>Attack</i>	26	18	44
<i>Defense</i>	32	51	83
<i>Nothing</i>	1	1	2
Total	114	123	237

Source: Results of researcher data processing (2026)

Based on Table 8, both candidate pairs used acclaim as their most dominant communication strategy. Candidate Pair 1 produced 55 acclaim utterances, while Candidate Pair 2 produced 53 utterances. This very small difference indicates that both candidate pairs attempted to build a positive image by conveying their vision, mission, work programs, and solutions offered to the Wonogiri community. The dominance of acclaim among both candidate pairs indicates that the persuasive strategies used during the debate were more directed at gaining public support through promoting development programs and ideas rather than through political confrontation. This finding aligns with Benoit's (2017) assumption that political candidates tend to use acclaim more frequently because it offers greater electoral benefits and lower political risks. A more striking difference is seen in the use of the attack function. Candidate Pair 1 produced 26 attacks, or approximately 22.8% of their total, while Candidate Pair 2 only produced 18 attacks, or approximately 14.6% of their total. This finding indicates that Candidate Pair 1 was more active in criticizing political opponents, particularly regarding the performance of the previous administration, equitable development, public services, agricultural sector management, regional investment, and various programs deemed to have not been implemented optimally.

The high use of attacks by Candidate Pair 1 demonstrates the characteristics of a challenger candidate who seeks to build a narrative of change by highlighting the weaknesses of the current administration. This strategy is used to convince voters that a change in leadership is necessary to improve regional conditions. In contrast, Candidate Pair 2 predominantly used defense. Candidate Pair 2 produced 51 defenses, or approximately 41.5% of their total. This number is significantly higher than Candidate Pair 1's 32 defenses, or approximately 28.1%. The high use of defense indicates that Candidate Pair 2 was more frequently in a position to

respond to criticism directed at the government's performance and previously implemented development programs. As a candidate pair with ties to the incumbent government, Candidate Pair 2 tended to need to provide clarification and defense against various criticisms that emerged during the debate. The analysis revealed a fairly clear difference in communication strategies between the two candidate pairs. Candidate Pair 1 tended to use a combination of acclaim and attack to build a narrative of change, while Candidate Pair 2 preferred a combination of acclaim and defense to maintain the legitimacy of policies and the sustainability of ongoing development.

Comparison of Topics Between Candidate Pairs

Further analysis was conducted to examine the differences in topics used by each candidate pair during the debate. This comparison is important to determine whether there are differences in the focus of issues between the two candidates in conveying their political messages to the public.

Table 9. Comparison of Topics Between Candidate Pairs

Topic	Paslon 1 (Tarso–Teguh)	Paslon 2 (Setyo–Imron)	Total
<i>Policy</i>	90	101	191
<i>Character</i>	23	21	44
Nothing	1	1	2
Total	114	123	237

Source: Results of researcher data processing (2026)

Based on Table 9, both candidate pairs demonstrated a strong tendency to prioritize policy-related topics in their political communication during the debates. Candidate Pair 1 made 90 policy-related statements, while Candidate Pair 2 made 101. Consequently, more than three-quarters of the statements delivered by each pair focused on public policy issues. This dominance of policy topics indicates that both pairs utilized the public debates to articulate development programs, governance strategies, public services, regional economic development, education, healthcare, agriculture, and investment initiatives, as well as solutions to challenges facing the people of Wonogiri.

Although Candidate Pair 2 made a slightly higher number of policy-related statements than Candidate Pair 1, the difference was not significant. These findings suggest that both candidate pairs shared a relatively similar communication orientation, placing policy issues at the core of their political arguments.

In the "character" category, Candidate Pair 1 produced 23 utterances, while Candidate Pair 2 produced 21. This negligible difference indicates that both pairs utilized character-related issues to a similar extent. However, these figures remain significantly lower than those for policy-related topics. The low proportion of character-related content suggests that neither pair prioritized personal aspects as the main focus of the debate. Utterances concerning character were generally used to emphasize commitments to public service, closeness to the community, political experience, or the candidates' personal values. The analysis reveals that the 2024 Wonogiri regional election debate was characterized by policy-centered campaign discourse—focusing more on the exchange of ideas, work programs, and development solutions than on

personal attacks or individual image-building. These findings reinforce the earlier analysis, which showed that policy topics accounted for 80.6% of all analyzed utterances. Consequently, the 2024 Wonogiri election debate can be categorized as one that prioritized policy substance over the candidates' personal attributes, aligning with the characteristics outlined in Benoit's (2017) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that the most dominant communication function in the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Public Debate was acclaim. The data in Table 4 shows that the acclaim category appeared in 108 utterances, or 45.6% of the total 237 speech units analyzed. This dominance indicates that both candidate pairs predominantly used self-promotion strategies through conveying their visions, missions, work programs, and various solutions offered to address regional issues. From the perspective of the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, political campaign communication has three main functions: acclaim, attack, and defense, which candidates use to help voters differentiate between available political alternatives (Benoit, 2017). The findings of this study indicate that most of the candidates' utterances contained explanations of regional development programs, bureaucratic reform, improving public services, strengthening the agricultural sector, infrastructure development, improving the quality of education, health services, and strategies for improving public welfare. The dominance of the acclaim function indicates that both candidate pairs attempted to build a positive image and increase the perception of political competence by conveying a concrete development agenda. This strategy tends to be chosen because it carries a lower political risk than directly attacking political opponents, making it more effective in building voter support (Benoit, 2017).

The distribution of communication functions also shows that the defense category ranked second with a frequency of 83 utterances, or 35.0%, while the attack category appeared with 44 utterances, or 18.6%. These findings indicate that the debate took place in a competitive atmosphere, but was not dominated by aggressive political confrontation. The relatively high frequency of defense indicates that both candidate pairs needed to provide clarification, justification, and explanations for criticisms that emerged during the debate. This situation was particularly evident in discussions regarding regional development, health services, investment, agriculture, bureaucracy, and various flagship programs offered by each candidate pair. Candidates with ties to the previous administration tended to use the defense strategy more frequently because their policies and performance were the object of evaluation and criticism from political opponents (Benoit, 2017). The lower frequency of attacks compared to acclaim and defense indicates that both candidate pairs continued to strive to maintain a constructive political image by positioning the debate as a space for conveying programs and policy arguments. These findings are in line with research showing that contemporary political debate is more oriented towards conveying policy arguments than personal attacks on political opponents (Porath et al., 2021).

Analysis of the debate topics indicates that policy issues were the primary focus of political communication for both candidate pairs. Data in Table 5 shows that policy topics appeared in 191 utterances, or 80.6% of the total analysis units. Meanwhile, character topics

appeared in only 44 utterances, or 18.6%, while the other two utterances did not fall into either category. The dominance of policy topics indicates that both candidate pairs focused their arguments on substantive issues related to governance, public services, education, health, economic development, investment, agriculture, infrastructure, and public welfare. This situation suggests that the public debate functioned as a means of conveying policy alternatives to the public, allowing voters to compare the programs offered by each candidate. Information about policies serves as a primary basis for voters in evaluating candidates' capacity to resolve public issues and determine the direction of future regional development (Denton et al., 2023).

The dominance of policy topics also indicates that political communication in the Wonogiri Pilkada was more oriented toward program substance than personal image building. Discussions during the debate focused heavily on infrastructure development programs, bureaucratic reform, increasing agricultural productivity, developing regional investment, strengthening health services, human resource development, and various public welfare programs. Conversely, character was used only to a limited extent and generally emerged when candidates emphasized their commitment to public service, leadership experience, political integrity, and the support they have in governing. These findings indicate that both candidate pairs preferred building political legitimacy through program-based arguments rather than emphasizing personal qualities. This communication pattern aligns with research that found that policy issues tend to dominate over character issues in political debates because they are considered more relevant to voters in making political choices (Gyasi & Sarfo-Kantankah, 2021).

Further discussion of the policy subcategories indicates that the most dominant form of policy is future plans. Data in Table 6 shows that the future plans category appeared in 159 utterances, or 83.2% of all policy-related utterances, while the past deeds category appeared in only 32 utterances, or 16.8%. The dominance of future plans indicates that both candidate pairs offered programs, development visions, and policy plans that would be implemented if they received a mandate from the Wonogiri community. Issues emerging in this category included infrastructure development, bureaucratic reform, improving health and education services, developing regional investment, strengthening the agricultural sector, empowering the community economy, and equitable development between regions. This situation indicates that the candidates sought to convince voters through political promises and future-oriented development agendas. This type of strategy is a common characteristic of electoral political communication, as candidates need to demonstrate their ability to bring about the changes that the community desires (Benoit, 2017). Meanwhile, the past deeds category was used to a lesser extent. Statements in this category generally emerged when candidates explained past development achievements, the success of previous government programs, or their experience as a basis for political legitimacy. The relatively small proportion indicated that candidates were more oriented toward future development agendas than exploiting past successes. These findings suggest that the political debate in the Wonogiri regional election was not focused solely on evaluating past performance, but rather on competing ideas regarding the direction of future regional development.

The ideals category was more dominant than personal qualities. Data in Table 7 shows that the ideals category appeared in 25 utterances, or 56.8%, while the personal qualities category appeared in 19 utterances, or 43.2%. The dominance of the ideals category indicates

that when discussing character, both candidate pairs more frequently emphasized values, principles, commitment to public service, concern for the community, and the normative vision they hoped to realize during their term of office. Statements in this category generally related to commitments to providing a government that serves the community, improves citizen welfare, fosters equitable development, and achieves better governance. The emphasis on political values and principles indicates that candidates sought to build emotional closeness with voters by conveying moral orientations and development goals deemed appropriate to community needs. The personal qualities category appeared in a lower proportion and was generally used to highlight the candidate's experience, competence, leadership abilities, and capacity to manage regional government. This low frequency indicates that neither candidate pair made personal qualities a primary focus of their political communication strategy during the debate. This situation further confirms that the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada debate was more oriented towards a battle of ideas and development programs than a competition of candidates' personal images.

A comparative analysis between the candidate pairs reveals quite clear differences in communication strategies. The data in Table 8 shows that Candidate Pair Number 1 produced 55 acclaim utterances, 26 attack utterances, and 32 defense utterances. Meanwhile, Candidate Pair Number 2 produced 53 acclaim utterances, 18 attack utterances, and 51 defense utterances. This distribution indicates that both candidate pairs utilized acclaim as their primary communication strategy. The difference is evident in the use of attack and defense. Candidate Pair Number 1 used attack utterances more frequently than Candidate Pair Number 2. This situation indicates a tendency to build a narrative of change through criticism of various policies and the performance of the previous administration. Conversely, Candidate Pair Number 2 more frequently used defense to maintain the legitimacy of their programs and development achievements. This pattern is consistent with the characteristics of competition between challenger candidates and candidates who have ties to the incumbent government as explained in the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2017).

The comparison of topics between candidate pairs in Table 9 further strengthens the finding that the debate took place within a policy-oriented communication framework. Candidate Pair Number 1 produced 90 policy utterances and 23 character utterances, while Candidate Pair Number 2 produced 101 policy utterances and 21 character utterances. This distribution indicates that both candidate pairs placed policy issues as the primary focus of political communication during the debate. The relatively small difference in numbers indicates that both candidates had a similar orientation in utilizing the debate as a means to offer solutions and development programs to the public. This finding indicates that the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Public Debate represents a policy-centered campaign discourse pattern, namely a political communication pattern that places policy issues as the primary focus of political persuasion. The dominance of policy, the high use of acclaim, and the strong orientation toward future plans indicate that political competition in the debate was more directed at the battle for development programs than at personal conflicts between candidates. This pattern is in accordance with the predictions of Functional Theory which states that candidates tend to use political communication to build an image of competence, offer solutions, and gain voter support through arguments oriented towards public policy (Benoit, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis using the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Public Debate showed that the political communication of both candidate pairs was dominated by the acclaim function with a frequency of 108 utterances (45.6%), followed by defense with 83 utterances (35.0%) and attack with 44 utterances (18.6%). These findings indicate that both candidate pairs emphasized their programs, visions, missions, and development solutions more than attacking their political opponents. In terms of topics, the debate was heavily dominated by policy issues with 191 utterances (80.6%), while character topics only appeared with 44 utterances (18.6%), indicating that the debate focused more on policy substance than on the candidates' personal image. Further analysis showed that the future plans category dominated the policy discussion with 159 utterances (83.2%), while past deeds only amounted to 32 utterances (16.8%), thus demonstrating the candidates' strong orientation towards the future development agenda. In terms of character, the ideals category was used more often than personal qualities, indicating that candidates more often emphasized values, principles, and commitment to public service than personal qualities. Comparisons between candidate pairs showed that Candidate Pair Number 1 (Tarso–Teguh) tended to be more offensive with a higher use of attacks, while Candidate Pair Number 2 (Setyo–Imron) used more defense to maintain the legitimacy of policies and the performance of the existing government. Overall, the 2024 Wonogiri Pilkada Debate represented a policy-centered campaign discourse pattern, namely political communication oriented towards conveying programs, solutions, and regional development agendas, so that the debate functioned more prominently as a means of exchanging policy ideas rather than an arena for personal confrontation between candidates.

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