

Forum Comments – a Means of Embedding the Effects of the TV Debate in the 2009 Presidential Campaign in Romania

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Abstract

Taking into account the TV ratings, the final debate represents the most visible event during presidential campaigns. We agree with Sidney Kraus’s opinion, according to which the importance of a debate results from the symbolic stake that it has both for the candidates and for the (potential) voters. Placed face to face, the two candidates introduce themselves and ask directly for the voters’ consent. After receiving the information, the voters decide whom (not) to legitimate for a coming mandate. The literature on debates highlights the cognitive, behavioural effects of evaluating the candidates’ image and also the latent effects of the debate upon the candidates and the democratic process. Having as empirical data the forum comments (n = 1278) upon the final debate from the 2009 Romanian presidential debate, we have tried to provide a salience of the effects (cognitive, behavioural, latent, and candidate image evaluation) discursively embedded within the voters’ comments. The content analysis provided to the forum comments showed a prevalence of the candidate image evaluation (75%), followed by cognitive effects (10%), latent effects (10%), and behavioural effects (5%).

Keywords: forums, presidential debate, effects, candidates’ image, Romania

“(…) an electronic transposition of the Greek tragedy with its gradual evolution towards the dramatic and the collective catharsis, an indispensable complement for democracy, the debate encompasses, eventually, two forms of social representation: the State-show with its political heroes and the television-State which instantaneously socializes the great ideological debates.” (Nel, 1991 in Beciu, 2002, 109, our transl.)

Literature Review On Political Debates

As Nel (1991) claims, debates are but the (post)modern version of the famous debates in the Greek agora because they preserve some common features, such as confrontation, equal and

adequate time, matched contestants, a stated proposition, audience-decision gaining (Auer, in Kendall, 2000, 76-77).

The ritualized spectacle, especially political debates as an election subsidy of every modern political campaign, is often associated with a pseudo-event (Boorstin, 1985, 39-40) which is planned for dissemination and intelligibility, thus being more dramatic, more sociable, and more convenient than a spontaneous event.

After almost 50 years since the debate started in America, it has become a component of the election campaign worldwide and a media event that scores high ratings (Kraus, 2000, 197). Studies carried out especially within the American context could be considered solid arguments for the importance that these debates have acquired in the election process and in supporting the “deliberative democracy” (Beciu, 2002, 109).

The American recipe to a successful political campaigning has been tackled upon in different national election campaigns (France, Germany, UK, Sweden, etc.) from a twofold perspective:

- as a threat (the diminution of ideology, a trivialization of important contemporary issues, the development of a personality cult, the decreasing of the link between politicians and voters, and higher campaign costs – Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996; Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Schulz, 1998, Holtz-Bacha, 2004);

- as a model (TV coverage, the institutionalization of political debates, more polling, the professionalization of political actors, professional campaign consultants and advertising professionals imported mainly from the United States – Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001).

The contribution of debates to the proper development of elections has had the following functions throughout time: (1) informing voters about the issues or the topics included in the political debates (Miller and MacKuen, 1979, 291), (2) catching the attention of citizens less interested in political life, (3) providing summaries of the most important problems of the campaign, which might guide the voter within their process of differentiate among the candidates (Chaffee, 1979, 128), (4) consolidating the initiative of the government of facing the citizens in order to ask for their agreement on the public political measures to be implemented. But the most important contribution, namely that of doing away with physical violence, is emphasized by Braud ([1991] 1996, 206) as follows: “The ideological debate is important because it substitutes physical violence as a means of confrontation between rivals. In democracy, one discusses (with friends), negotiates (with partners), debates with his/ her opponents; but coercion is not used as a winning strategy. In those countries where the democratic culture has been long rooted, there have not been few transgressions of this taboo” (our transl.).

Election debates have been approached from different perspectives: a structuralist and a thematic perspective (Ranney, 1979; Hellweg, Pfau and Brydon, 1992; Schroeder, 2000), content and survey analyses (Lemert et al., 1991); rhetorical studies (Friedenberg, 1997); a

functional perspective (Benoit and Wells, 1996; Benoit et al., 2002); a psychological perspective (Biocca, 1991); a stylistic perspective (Johnston and Kaid, 2001).

Presidential Debates In Post-December Romania

The presidential debates in Romania have been linked to the elections organized after the Revolution of December 1989, a Revolution that had led to the fall of the Communist regime. The first democratic elections, and also the first debate among the three candidates standing for the country’s presidency, took place in May 1990. The following election campaigns were accompanied by two majors elements: on the one hand, the growing number of commercial TV channels, as new forms of making the candidates’ political presentations known, and, on the other hand, by the Americanization of the Romanian electoral communication (Beciu, 2000, 105; Haineş, 2002, 167). The only exception was the electoral year 2000 when the president, Ion Iliescu (the Romanian Social Democratic Party), refused to take part in a face-to-face debate with his opponent, Corneliu Vadim Tudor (the Great Romania Party). Their speeches, which were under the form of political monologues, were broadcast by the public TV channel at prime time hours, but in two different days.

The successful organization of a presidential debate appeals to a very complex mediatization device that involves the participants, their social and institutional identity, roles and communication rules, the script and staging (Charaudeau and Ghiglione, [1997] 2005, 68-71). However, leaving aside the fact that a debate is also a political show, we consider that the debate succeeds in directing the voters’ attention towards certain issues regarded as more significant, a fact known in literature as agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 176-187). The table below (Table 1) illustrates the most important topics approached by the candidates who have entered the second round of the presidential elections in Romania during the last twenty years (Miclescu, 2002, 14-178; Popa, 2005, 112-190). The candidates and/or the moderators of the final debates regarded these issues as being of high interest for voters and representative for the progress of the Romanian society.

Table 1. Final (face-to-face) debates organized in Romania starting with 1990

Year of debate	Candidates taking part in the final debate	Agenda setting
1990	Radu Câmpeanu (NLP), Ion Iliescu (NSF), Ion Raţiu (NPCDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the country’s economic situation and the future strategy; - agricultural and industrial issues; - support for private initiatives; - state budget situation – foreign debts; - the evolution of the Romanian political scene and the election campaign; - the communists’ responsibility for the country’s

		<p>disaster;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - accusations brought to candidates; - forming a coalition government.
1992	Emil Constantinescu (RDC), Ion Iliescu (DFNS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - political identity and electoral alliances; - national consensus and national reconciliation; - government responsibility and shaping the target voters; - the financial crisis, the IMF agreement, pensions and subventions; - social protection and the role of unions; - the most favoured nation clause in relation to the USA; - positions towards the relation with the West, the Treaty with the USSR, the Moscow Coup, the Romanian lobby abroad; - fairness of elections, corruption, the '90 and '91 miners' riots .
1996	Emil Constantinescu (RDC), Ion Iliescu (RSDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - corruption, the truth about the '89 Revolution and the miners' riots; - monarchy and the change of the government form; - territorial autonomy on ethnic criteria; - restructuring economy, agriculture and subventions; - nationalized houses, restitutio in integrum, education, health; - adherence to NATO and the EU, regional cooperation, the embargo on Yugoslavia.
2000	-	-
2004	Traian Băsescu (T. J. Alliance), Adrian Năstase (SDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - taxation and flat tax; - elections and election fraud, election bribery; - forming the government and the parliamentary majority; - independence of the judiciary system and the fight against corruption; - meeting with the requirements for adhering to the EU; - the country's foreign policy: the "Washington-London-Bucharest axis"; - (non)achievements of the SDP's governing; - the functioning of state institutions and the president's responsibilities
2009	Traian Băsescu (DLP), Mircea Geoană (SDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Romania's foreign policy and national security strategies; - independence of the judiciary system and the fight against corruption;

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the functioning of state institutions and the president’s responsibilities; - the financial crisis, the IMF agreement, taxation, economic policies and rural development; - reforming the state, the medical and the educational systems; - social protection; - media moguls, the role of women in political life.
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We believe that following these debates, the interested voters had the chance to become familiar with the candidates’ points of view and suggestions regarding the public political measures. Thus, they were able to observe their behaviour under the tension of electoral competition and to evaluate which of the candidates would legitimately represent their interests, problems and opinions.

The Effects Of The Final Debate In The 2009 Romanian Election Campaign

There have been provided many approaches to the questions regarding the impact of the election debates on citizens. Chaffee (1979, 342) has described four situations in which voters consider election debates as useful: (1) when at least one of the candidates is relatively unknown, (2) when many voters remain undecided, (3) when the race appears close, and (4) when party allegiances are weak. The same author emphasizes the fact that the effects of the debate also depend upon the interest the voters show towards the events of the election campaign: the effects are greater upon those interested and undecided and much smaller upon those who regard the electoral phenomenon as a marginal and insignificant one. McKinney and Carlin (2004, 210) also present the situations in which voters, although having watched the election debates, consider that they have not been influenced by the respective debates in taking the vote decision because these did not provide them with any relevant pieces of information. Therefore, it is agreed upon the fact that debates are more successful in consolidating the voter’s electoral intention and less in modifying it, and influence the perception upon the candidates’ image and character.

In our research on the effects of election debates upon voters we have started from McKinney’s classification (2007, 211-213), a classification which includes cognitive effects, behavioural effects, candidate image evaluation and latent effects.

The objective of our paper is to analyse the opinions of the viewers and the way in which the final debate (December, 3, 2011) succeeded in changing their voting intentions.

As empirical data we used 1278 comments posted by voters on the forums of four Romanian newspapers *Adevărul*, *Evenimentul zilei*, *Gândul*, *România liberă* (www.adevarul.ro, www.evz.ro, www.gandul.info, www.romanalibera.ro) and of two Romanian news agencies *Hotnews* and *Mediafax* (www.hotnews.ro, www.mediafax.ro). The debate was a highly rated

event, a fact also due to the tight result that the two candidates obtained during the first round of elections: Traian Băsescu (DLP) obtained 32.44% and Mircea Geoană (SDP) – 31.15%.

Our study will focus on two research questions:

RQ1: In the comments posted on the forums, are there statements which embed cognitive, behavioural or latent effects as a result of watching the final election TV debate?

RQ2: How is the image of the two election candidates shaped by the forum viewers?

Online Forums – A Novelty Within The Romanian Public Opinion

The breakdown of communism in 1989 has had a huge impact upon the Romanians' freedom of speech and thought. Throughout these 20 years, Romanians have learned how to express their public opinion: from letters or petitions sent to the press or to the authorities, to public surveys, election voting or strikes and finally to forums due to a widespread internet access.

This latter two-way communication space which provides "reader-to-reader" uncensored interactive communication (Schultz, 1999), has gained ground in Romania since Romanians have turned into vivid Internet users. According to Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com), in Romania, with a population of 22.215.421 inhabitants, the internet is used by almost 8 million inhabitants. Within nine years (2000-2009), there was a 828.8% increase of internet users. This huge growth of Romanian internet users is mainly due to the advantages that new media provide (Wilcox, 2009, 15): widespread broadband, cheap/free online publishing tools, new distribution channels, mobile devices such as camera phones, 24/7 news and information, and democratized media where everyone is a publisher.

Online forums do not impose restrictions, allowing all potential users to take part in vivid debates about a particular issue. Its anonymity and openness are two characteristics which encourage users to freely express their point of view. The main danger of online forums is a reduced accountability (Johnson, 2001; Rains, Scott, 2007) which has two important consequences: (1) negative behavior and (2) a social consensus with the majority group's opinions. Thus online forums turn into postmodern embodiments of Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance (1954), since they provide a virtual space where physically-absent participants try to validate their personal opinions about a particular issue.

Coding Procedure

We used the qualitative level of the content analysis as a research method applied to the comments posted on the newspaper forums (Babbie, 2007, 448). The empirical data (n = 1278 forum comments) were decomposed into statements in order to be coded. A statement is the coding unit or the semantic unit which is to be understood as an argument. According to Foucault ([1969] 1999, 121), a statement may be formed of a single word, a sentence or even clauses as long as the respective unit enters into an associated field which will allow it to have a determined context and a representative context.

For example, the statement “Traian Basescu hit a child during an election meeting, had a hostile attitude towards the moderator during the TV debate and that is why I won’t vote him on Sunday” is formed of three arguments. The first two arguments (hitting a child and the hostile attitude towards the moderator) will be coded as weak points of the candidate whereas the act of not voting Basescu will be coded as a behavioral effect. The statement “Mircea Geoana showed during the debate that he is a genuine diplomat and that he is supported by the greatest political party in Romania. Watching the debate I found out more information about the diplomatic Romanian-Russian relations that have been taking place for more than 20 years” is formed of three arguments: the first two (the diplomatic qualities and the supporting of a political party) will be coded as the candidate’s strong points whereas the last argument will be coded as a cognitive effect.

In order to code the 1278 forum comments, we used two independent coders. The intercoder reliability was calculated with Cohen’s *kappa*, using 10% of the forum comments. *Kappa* was .84 for cognitive effects, .87 for behavioral effects, .91 for latent effects, .89 for candidate image evaluation. Landis and Koch (1977) explain that *kappas* of .81 or higher reflect almost perfect agreement between coders, so these values represent acceptable reliability.

Findings

Cognitive Effects

Cognitive effects refer to the fact that the voters who watch the debates know a lot more about the country’s problems and the candidates’ solutions. They manage, by comparison, to analyse the candidates’ political offers (McKinney 2007, 211) and to correctly situate them on the political stage (Ries, Trout [2001] 2004, 267).

On forums, voters declare:

“Nonsense! How is he going to bring the medicines we need to our front door, how is he going to pay 25.000 Euros to those that will return to the country? Where will Geoană take all this money from? Of course, from the suckers in the country who work for a lousy salary!!! How is he going to find the resources to provide more jobs at a time when the financial crisis is global?!” (<http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-6301946-mircea-geoana-campanie-electorala-pensionarii-vor-primi-medicamentele-acasa-prin-posta.htm>, retrieved December, 10, 2009) .

“I would like to ask him if he knows article 50 from the Treaty of Lisbon. This stipulates for a member-state of the EU to be able to withdraw from the EU, a thing that wasn’t stipulated until now. Ask Mircea Geoană what his opinion concerning this article is and whether there is any connection between his visits to Moscow and this article” (<http://voxpública.realitatea.net/politica-societate/votati-psd-la-televoting-18874.html>, retrieved December, 10, 2009).

“We no longer want a ‘sharper’ president who takes Romania back into dictatorship! / We no longer want a corrupted president who declares war to corruption! / We no longer want a president who drives his personal car although he has been drinking! / We no longer want a president whose statements are mere lies! / We no longer want a communist who accuses others of communism! / We no longer want a president who uses the Secret Services for personal interests! (<http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/basescu-geoana-a-mintit-la-dezbatere-canu-s-a-intalnit-cu-vantu-5134634#comments>, retrieved December, 11, 2009)

“Condemning communism did not have any effects upon daily life, it was more of a symbolic gesture. Why haven’t they enforced the lustration law? ” (<http://www.romanialibera.ro/actualitate/politica/basescu-accepta-invitatia-lui-geoana-la-dezbatere-publica-169966.html>, retrieved December, 10, 2009).

“It is a very serious fact that a president should know, each and every minute, where a politician from the opposing camp is, since he is the president of the Senate. This shows only one thing: the president owns political police forces that are paid from the taxpayer’s money. The president uses the institutions of the state to one’s own purposes. And then we wonder: have we returned to Ceaușescu’s time?” (<http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/dezbatere-in-trei-organizata-de-ipp-si-moderata-de-turcescu-vineri-la-parlament-5117126/comentarii#comments>, retrieved December, 12, 2009).

“Bănescu supports the dismissal of thousands of state employees without taking into account the fact that they have families and loan rates to pay. Bănescu has caused and supported the political crisis, which also led to increased unemployment.” (<http://www.gandul.info/news/cererea-de-rejucare-a-meciului-basescu-geoana-in-dezbaterea-ccr-5171162> retrieved December, 12, 2009).

All these dialogues among the supporters or the opponents of the two candidates have outlined the traits of a rational citizen who has not yet received all the answers to the questions concerning the governing of Romania during the last twenty years, the way in which political decisions are made to the benefit of the common man, the existence of strategies meant to improve the country’s economic situation. The percentage of comments that compare the problems raised by the candidates and their solutions represent approximately 10 % (128 forum comments) out of the total of the comments analysed.

Behavioural Effects

Behavioral effects refer to the few changes in the voting intention after watching the debate. Usually, these changes affect the undecided voters or those who are less certain about the validity of the decision to vote for one candidate or the other. Although statistically this segment is very small, it is highly important because in many cases, the undecided voters have contributed to designating the winner (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, [1968] 2004, 82-91). The comments posted by the voters who have watched the debate illustrate all these theoretical considerations: “Anyway, I already know who I am going to vote for; this debate won’t make

me change my mind” (<http://www.gandul.info/politica/dezbaterea-transmisa-de-gandul-minut-cu-minut-vezi-aici-schimburi-de-replici-dintre-cei-doi-5150946>, retrieved December, 14, 2009), “I am still undecided and this debate matters” (<http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/dezbatere-evz-cine-a-castigat-duelul-geoana-sau-basescu-878521.html>, retrieved December, 14, 2009), “I watched the debate from the Parliament’s Palace on TV! I liked Bănescu very much! He spoke like a householder and I’m going to vote him on Sunday!” (<http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-6610920-cine-fost-castigatorul-dezbaterii-dintre-mircea-geoana-traian-basescu.htm>, retrieved December, 5, 2009) “It’s amazing how a truth about Geoană’s whereabouts changed my voting option” http://www.adevarul.ro/actualitate/politica/Geoana_si_Basescu_se_bat_la_microfon_joi_sau_vineri_0_161984154.html, retrieved December, 12, 2009).

Those who declared that after watching the debate decided to go voting, or took the decision of voting for one candidate or the other, represent a very small percentage (64 forum comments, approximately 5% out of the total number of posted comments), a fact which confirms that in Romania as in other countries, such as US, debates do not greatly change the citizens’ voting behaviour.

Latent Effects

The latent effects of the debate upon voters refer to increasing their trust in the electoral process and searching for additional information concerning the functioning of democratic institutions, the increase in voter participation rate, stimulating interpersonal discussions on political topics and decreasing political cynicism. The voters’ comments concerning these effects represent approximately 10% of all the comments (128 forum comments), for example:

“If you, too, are one of those who’s got sick and tired of sitting by and watching how the political class thinks they are able to manipulate us, who’s got sick and tired of the feeling of living in a country of the third world called, by chance, Romania, then in the little time that’s left until elections, promote this cause! It doesn’t matter whether you are under-aged, adult, boy or girl, student or teacher, rocker or minimalist, socialist or capitalist, employee or employer. You, too, are a citizen of this country and we need your help! Go vote! Go vote with all your friends!” (http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_in_campanie-6647073-dezbaterea-finala-dintre-geoana-basescu-mica-analiza-televizuala.htm, retrieved December, 10, 2009),

“Romanians, be careful which direction you take, these elections are crucial!” (<http://www.jurnalul.ro/stiri/politica/basescu-ii-propune-lui-geoana-cel-putin-trei-dezbateri-528398.html>, retrieved December, 09, 2009), “Let’s go vote! Let’s urge people to go out there and vote. We must get rid of these impostors! Five minutes of your day (December, 6) can guarantee that there will be no robbery for the coming five years.” (<http://www.romanialibera.ro/actualitate/politica/voinescu-basescu-il-invita-pe-geoana-luni-la-o-dezbatere-ponta-avem-programul-facut-pana-joi-171329.html>, retrieved December, 08, 2009)

“Last night I finally got the point about the mechanisms within wheels of elections. I thank the free press in Romania for opening my eyes!” (<http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/mircea-geoana-supus-unor-atacuri-energetice-la-dezbaterea-cu-basescu-5356391#comments>, retrieved December, 09, 2009).

Candidate Image Evaluation

Evaluating the candidate’s image by the voters seems to be the most common effect. In TV shows, the attempts to shape the politicians’ image are more frequent than the debates on political issues (McNair, [2003] 2007, 61). The politician’s image incorporates all the citizens’ impressions and evaluations related to his activity and person, and influence their voting behaviour (Toode, 2009, 303). The candidates’ effort of making a good impression is motivated by the fact that the media plays a significant part in building a certain image and in establishing the final result. The electoral debate is the perfect opportunity to consolidate a positive self-image and a negative image of the political opponent. The TV viewer seems to forget rather quickly the rational arguments brought by a politician but remembers better the impressions provoked by the rhythm of the debate (dynamic or boring phases), the tone of the protagonists (aggressive or reconciliatory), the points “marked” against the rival.

The image of the two candidates was the topic that managed to raise most of the comments (approximately 75% of all the comments posted on the sites under analysis), that issued the most fierce controversies between the supporters and adversaries of the two candidates, that determined the voters to evaluate their work and political career, their personality and presentation during the debate. Providing a SWOT analysis (see Tables 2 and 3), we have shaped the image of the two candidates, Traian Bănescu and Mircea Geoană, as seen through the “lens of the citizen”, discursively embedded in 958 forum comments.

Table.2. The SWOT analysis for the candidate T. Bănescu (Democratic Liberal Party)

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supported by a powerful political party (DLP); - Highly rated in opinion polls ; - Charisma, relaxation; - Experience in presidential administration; - Supports the reform of the political class; - Supported by intellectuals with visibility/fame in the public space; - Strong personality, man of the people, good speaker ; - Knows the country’s problems and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involved in the “Fleet” file; - Failure to meet with previous election pledges; - Denial of having hit a child during an election meeting; - Indecent/inadequate public behaviour ; - Harsh attitude towards critical journalists ; - Responsible for the politicization of all state institutions; - Supported by the most aggressive political party; - His daughter’s, Elena, political

<p>provides solutions to solve them; - Romania's integration into the European Union, the introduction of the flat tax.</p>	<p>ascension and her appointment into the European Parliament; - The wealth accumulated by his daughter, Ioana ; - The president's and the DLP's incapacity to negotiate with the other political parties; - False oath sworn on the Bible; - Promoting incompetent and corrupt persons to the government; - Dictatorial and conflicting attitudes inside the party, the governments(s) and the alliances that he has been part of.</p>
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Threats</p>
<p>- Carrying on the judiciary reform ; - Pleading for the unicameral parliament; - Modernizing the Romanian state.</p>	<p>- The risk of being suspended through a new referendum; - The possibility to enforce a presidential regime in Romania; - Implementing the Roşia Montana project.</p>

Table 3. The SWOT Analysis for the Candidate M. Geoană (Social Democratic Party)

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supported by a powerful political party (SDP); - Former ambassador, diplomat, intellectual and moral qualities required by a president; - General knowledge, solid professional training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Affiliation to a corrupt and (neo) communist party; - Surrounded by politicians with criminal files; - Supported by media moguls in exchange of promoting their obscure interests; - Publicly criticised by Ion Iliescu (the former SDP president) and labelled as a “dumb” person; - Use of “wooden language”, anxious and lacking in self-confidence during the televised debate; - The visit to Timișoara during the election campaign; - Demagogy, ignorance of the country’s real problems, lack of the required solutions; - Secret visit to Moscow; - Lack of spontaneity, verticality, strength of character; - False oath sworn on the Bible; - Weak man, a puppet with a communist past; - Ignorance of the events related to the 1989 Revolution.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alliance with NLP and the possibility of forming both the “Klaus Johannis government” and a parliamentary majority; - Turning all the relations previously established with European representatives into opportunities; - The possibility of uniting several political parties around one common project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Returning to communism with political actors involved in the miners’ riots (1990); - Assigning governmental titles to corrupt and incompetent politicians; - Reorienting foreign politics towards Moscow.

Besides the topics related to the image of the two candidates, there were also issues with no direct link to the elections on December 6, 2009, but which succeeded in drawing many citizens into less polite dialogues. We did not include these statements within the coding process. If it

were to rank them, the first three places would belong to the following topics: (non)forgery of the video in which Traian Băsescu hits a child during an election meeting, the status of the TV moderator Robert Turcescu and his involvement in organizing the final debate, and Mircea Geoană's involvement into the script of the debates, as questions are concerned.

Conclusion

Besides other campaign events, the debate is a valuable discursive subsidy available to voters interested in the evolution of the campaign and concerned with voting for the best candidate. Zakahi and Hacker (1995, 122) consider presidential debates as the defining event/moment that helps voters know and evaluate candidates, and this fact can be even better observed in the case of undecided voters or voters with no political affiliation. It is considered that the intention of voting for one candidate can also be correlated with the perception of the candidate as the winner of the debate. Moreover, the candidate's chances increase if he owns strong points such as credibility, competence in a certain field, empathy and the ability to convey to his voters the fact that he is one of them (Andersen, 2009, 4).

In Romania, debates also provide voters with the chance of watching and judging candidates in a face-to-face competition, and even register high rating scores. Our study on the effects of presidential debates is an exploratory one, providing information on the existence of these effects, but not on their scale or intensity among Romanian voters. The content analysis of the 1278 forum comments on the final 2009 presidential debate in Romania showed the following hierarchy of comments: the most salient comments focused on the candidate image evaluation (75%), followed by cognitive and latent effects (10% each) and the fewest comments were on behavioural effects (5%).

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