

Iran and US General Election Debates (from 2004-2016)

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Abstract

This paper examines US general election debates to discover whether or not the Republican and Democratic candidates equally present Iran as a major US foreign policy issue. Petrocik's Issue Ownership theory was employed as the theoretical framework of this paper. The Issue Ownership theory asserts that since American voters perceive the Republican and Democratic parties to handle different sets of political, social, and economic issues better than their opponents, each party will highlight and emphasize issues that they are regarded to own during elections. In this regard, Petrocik's theory predicts that since the Republican party is perceived to handle foreign policy and national security-related issues better than their Democratic opponents by American voters, their candidates are more likely to bring up foreign policy-related issues while Democrats are more likely to avoid such issues during presidential campaigns. Overall, 13 US general election debate transcripts from among the 16 General debates held from 2004 to 2016 were selected for analysis using the Critical Case Sampling

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approach. The analysis, which utilized the Critical Framework Analysis method, resulted in seven major thematic categories concerning Iran: nuclear program, threat, sanctions, negotiations, war, Iran's influence, and sponsorship of terrorism. The study finds that although Republican candidates did present Iran as a major foreign policy issue more frequently than their opponents in US general election debates, there was an element of convergence on Iran. Therefore, contrary to what the Issue Ownership theory would have predicted, the Democrats did not typically avoid nor showed any hesitancy talking about Iran.

Keywords: Issue Ownership Theory, US General Election Debates, Critical Framework Analysis, Foreign Policy, Iran

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Introduction

In the final Presidential debate of the 2012 election, when asked about what he would do if Iran attacked Israel, President Obama pledged that “if Israel is attacked, America will stand With Israel” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a). In the same night, Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee, raised Iran as “the greatest threat that the world faces, the greatest national security threat is a nuclear Iran,” more than three times (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a). The argument on the Iranian nuclear threat was raised over and over for the rest of this debate. Similarly, in the 2008 General debates, McCain, the Republican nominee, emphasized the threat of Iran and promised he would strike Iran if the Iranian-Israeli conflict leads to war because they can “never allow a second Holocaust to take place” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008b).

The threat of a nuclear Iran and the way to deal with it have been an issue of the US Presidential campaigns since the 2004 election. In the 2004 General debates, the Democratic nominee John Kerry warned the Americans about the danger that a nuclear Iran would expose to the world. In the same debates, President Bush categorize Iran as a part of the “Axis of Evil” along with Iraq and North Korea (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004b). The Iranian threat was also a significant issue of the 2016 General debates. Donald Trump described the “Iran deal” as the “worst deal” he has “ever seen negotiated,” and Hillary Clinton in response argued that the “Iran deal” put “a lid on Iran’s nuclear program without firing a single shot” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016a).

During the past two decades, Iran has always been presented as

an important foreign policy issue during US presidential campaigns. It has been a topic of the foreign policy sections of the General debates, it has been threatened with more sanctions and even war, it has been warned about, and it has always been mentioned when discussing the dangers of nuclear proliferation. Being the second most frequently mentioned country in US General Election debates (Figure 1) of the twenty-first century, Iran's place in US presidential elections is indeed an interesting and yet under-investigated topic that requires further analysis and examination.

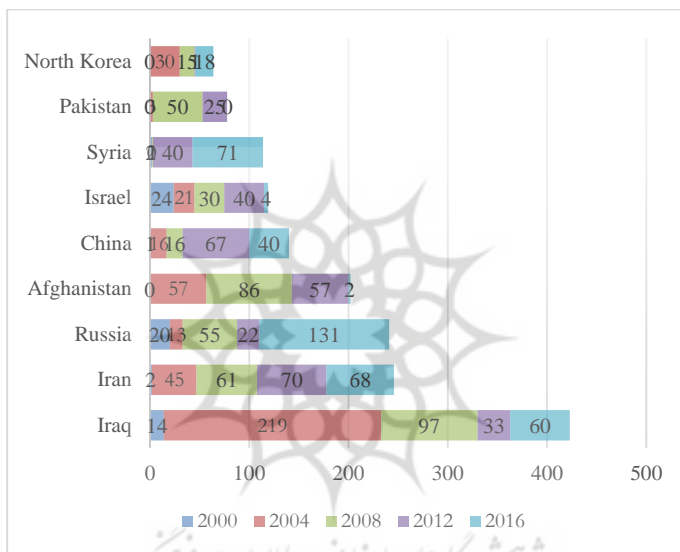


Figure 1. Times that the most Frequent Countries have been Mentioned in The US General Election Debates 2000-2016

Note. This figure is prepared by the authors. The count includes the name of each country, the name of each country's capital, and the nationality of each country. The data is drawn from a python script employed to search within the General debates corpus.

Tensions between the United States and Iran have steadily escalated during the past twenty years. According to the latest Gallup public polls (2020), almost 88 percent of Americans consider Iran an unfavorable state. This has resulted in consistent discussions about

how to deal with the Iranian threat in most US political arena. The General Election debates have played a significant milieu for Presidential nominees to present their policies concerning Iran. Looking into these debates would provide illuminating answers to important questions. This paper elucidates the ways Iran is presented, discussed, and raised through the General Election debates. Moreover, it aims to find whether there is a consensus between the Republican and Democratic candidates regarding the issue of Iran. The following are the main research questions of the study:

1. Which foreign policy themes do the Republican and Democratic candidates consider most important regarding Iran?
2. Do the Republican and Democratic candidates diverge or converge on Iran as a US foreign policy issue?
3. The study developed a hypothesis based on the public polls conducted by the Gallup organization (2020). The following is the main hypothesis of the study:

Since the Republican Party is perceived by the American public (Gallup, 2020) to be better at handling the US foreign policy and national security issues, within the General Election debates, the Republican candidates are more likely to raise Iran as a US foreign policy and national security-related issue.

During General debates, Presidential candidates seek to portray themselves in the best way without the help of campaign managers and advisers (Wells, 1999). Epwene argues that the General Election debates are considered to “serve as a forum in which candidates articulate their positions and stances before the American people” (Epwene, 2017: 42). Citizens can gain information from political campaign debates in different ways. Benoit (2014: 2) describes the main paths that information can reach voters. First, voters can get campaign messages directly by watching political debates. Second, they can indirectly access that information through political discussion with friends, family members, and co-workers who have seen the debates. Third, campaign messages can reach voters through the news media coverage of the debates directly or indirectly via political

discussions of the news regarding those debates (Benoit, 2014: 2).

Debates affect voters in several ways. Researching the effects of General Election debates, Benoit and Hansen (2004) report the increase in issue salience and issue knowledge on viewers. They suggest that citizens who watch the Presidential debates have more issues to use when evaluating candidates (Benoit & Hansen, 2004). Moreover, having an agenda-setting effect, debates can increase the importance of some issues and decrease others for voters (Weaver et al., 2004). Previous literature (Aldrich et al., 1989; Weaver et al., 2004) indicates that the candidates are well aware of this agenda-setting effect.

The Presidential debates can make a significant difference in viewers' perception of the two candidates (Benoit, 2014: 6). McKinney and Warner (2013) indicate that almost seven percent of voters change their vote decision from undecided to a candidate preference based on what they conclude from General Election debates. Also, Miller and Krosnick (2000) claim that if a Presidential candidate portrays an issue as important during a debate, the voters and the news media will also evaluate that issue as significant and important. Carlin and McKinney (1994: 204) report that "debates attract the greatest media coverage of any single campaign event." According to Benoit (2014: 5), on average, over 59 million people have watched the General Election debates from 1960 to 2008. Adding all numbers, the total viewership of all General Election debates, including Presidential and Vice-presidential, exceeds two billion through 2016 (Commission on Presidential Debates, n.d.). Voth (2017: 77) remarks that "by comparison, televised Presidential debates currently tend to dwarf the political conventions that take place in August and September and exert considerable political persuasion." So, the General debates are a proper medium for further analysis.

Methodology

This study followed the five stages of the Critical Framework Analysis method proposed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). These

five stages include the familiarization, identification of a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation phases of qualitative data collection. First, in the familiarization stage, the researcher thoroughly read the debates' transcripts to understand what each transcript contained. Essentially, "familiarization involves immersion in the data: listening to tapes, reading transcripts, studying observational notes" (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Next, a set of themes were identified in a line-by-line analysis of the debates' transcripts. Then, each passage that was directly or indirectly referring to "Iran" (both in the moderators' questions and the candidates' answers) was assigned to a thematic frame category in the indexing stage. Each thematic category was color-coded and given numbers in the transcript corpus. Next, the thematic categories were plotted on charts, tables, and graphs with quantitative values. Finally, these graphs were interpreted and discussed in the data analysis section completing all five steps of the Critical Framework Approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Data Collection: The researchers downloaded and accessed each debate transcript for the selected sample unit from the online archives of the Commission on Presidential Debates (Debates.com) and prepared them. Each transcript was fully scanned and cleared of all errors, including grammatical, typographical, and spelling errors. The number of data coded pages was 691, with an average page length of 53 pages per debate transcript.

Sampling: The study used a critical case sampling to select the General Election debates' transcripts. According to Etikan (2016), the critical case sampling is a method where "a select number of important or 'critical' cases are selected and then examined." Furthermore, the critical case sampling is a type of purposive sampling, also known as non-probability sampling, which is recommended by scholars to be used when the research is dealing with qualitative data and mixed method approaches (Coyne, 1997; Etikan, 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Tongco, 2005). Using this method, the researchers first identified the whole universe of General debates. Overall, there have been 43 General debates

(Presidential and Vice-presidential combined) from 1960 to 2016. Then, the researchers chose debates' transcripts in which the word "Iran" has been mentioned at least one time. Because the paper focuses on how Iran is presented through the debates, the researchers excluded transcripts with no mention of Iran. Reading the transcripts, the researchers did not find any instance where the candidates referred to Iran without mentioning its name at least once. In all, there have been 24 debates where Iran is referred to at least one time.

In order to identify General debates year where Iran is a critical and significant issue, the researchers first calculated the mean. Then they selected the election years with a higher value than the calculated average. The result was four General Elections, including 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 General debates. As a consequence, employing a total population sampling, the final selection for analysis produced 13 transcripts in which "Iran" was referred to. So, the sampling used in this study reveal what is frequent in the debates' transcripts and provide an in-depth analysis of what the candidates discuss concerning Iran.

Unit of Analysis: This study used the General Election debates' transcripts as its data source and sampling units. Each transcript accompanying its major questions, the candidates' responses, and its follow-ups were considered a single unit of analysis to identify issues and themes discussed during debates. Each transcript was then carefully read, analyzed, and coded from the starting point to the final sentences articulated by any of the candidates or moderators in the debate.

Working from theory provided this study the opportunity to focus on transcripts in which "Iran" appears to be a salient foreign policy issue. The first Bush-Kerry September 30, 2004 Presidential debate presented a starting point for sample selection due to the candidates' extensive and significant mentioning of "Iran" and its leaders through their discussions. In this particular debate, "Iran" was mentioned more than 17 times, showing the critical role it played in that election year. Overall, in the 2004 general election

debates, “Iran” was mentioned more than 45 times in three out of four Presidential and Vice-presidential debates.

Reading through the transcripts, the researchers noticed that in all four Vice-presidential debates from 2004 to 2016 General Elections, “Iran” was significantly mentioned (more than 75 times overall). In fact, it was one of the major foreign policy issues that the moderators questioned and the Vice-presidential candidates discussed over and over through their debates. Therefore, the transcripts of the Vice-presidential debates play an integral part in this study.

I- Issue Ownership Theory

This paper employs the Issue Ownership theory to uncover how each party depicts Iran. Also, it intends to find whether there is a leaning in parties’ proposals and discussions during debates to raise Iran as a national security threat to the United States.

The literature on Issue Ownership theory is extensive (Benoit, 2018; Budge, 2015; Damore, 2005; Egan, 2008; Petrocik, 1996; Simon, 2002). Issue ownership theory proposes that a set of policy issues are considered to be better handled by a specific party rather than the others, so those parties' candidates have more advantage emphasizing those issues (Petrocik, 1996). Petrocik (1996) argues that Presidential candidates emphasize more on issues owned by their political party and talk less about issues that are considered to be owned by their opposing party. In other words, in the US Presidential election, "Democrats discuss Democratic issues more – and Republican issues less – than Republicans" (Benoit, 2018).

According to Petrocik (1996), in terms of Issue Ownership theory, the political campaigns insist more on their owned policy issues and try to evade the issues that help their opponents. The essential argument here is that candidates emphasize issues during the campaign, hoping for their emphasis to put an agenda-setting effect on the voters, so those issues become more salient for the voters (Weaver et al., 2004). In this regard, this argument presumes that if an issue obtains higher saliency during the campaign, it is more

likely to influence voters' decisions (Benoit, 2014: 90). Therefore, the more a candidate stresses a particular issue during the debates, the more that issue is salient to the voters (Petrocik, 1996).

A recent example that validates the saliency aspect of the Issue Ownership theory was the 2004 Presidential election (Gadarian, 2010). Gadarian (2010) argues that the ultimate reason for George W. Bush's re-election in the 2004 Presidential race was in the way the American public viewed the Republican party as the "owner" of the foreign policy issue. Also, in a series of experiments conducted by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), the participants "were exposed to either one or no campaign advertisement and news report dealing with the same issue," and the advertisement "was aired by either the Democratic or Republican candidate contesting the race;" it was found that Democratic candidates benefited more when the campaign focused on unemployment while Republican candidates were helped more by ads about crime. Simon (2002: 91) suggests that winning in elections does not come through dialoguing on the issues owned by the opponents, but a candidate wins when he devotes his resources campaigning on issues that favor his own party.

Political parties can own issues in two different ways. First, "political parties can gradually acquire ownership of an issue over time" (Benoit, 2018). Budge (2015) asserts that parties are always tied to particular issues by their record and origin, so they are not able to disown their issues deliberately. Thus, it is in their best interest to raise and promote the most associated issues with their record (Budge, 2015). The other way to obtain ownership over issues is for the challenging party to put the blame of "current difficulties" on the "record of incumbent" (Petrocik, 1996). For example, according to Petrocik (1996), difficulties such as "wars, failed international or domestic policies, unemployment, and inflation, or official corruption" can help the challenging party own those issues.

Petrocik (1996) notes that the Republican party has "owned" the issue of foreign policy and national security since 1980. According to Gadarian (2010), "issue ownership implies that in so

far as an election is about foreign policy and voters concentrate on foreign policy, Republican candidates should benefit." Goble and Holm (2009) state that the Republican Party generally "owns" the national security issue, making it an advantageous position to hold onto and raise in the Presidential campaigns. Hickey and Gandhi (2019) assert the tendency of the Republican Party candidates to talk and emphasize more on foreign policy and national security issues. Moreover, Egan (2008) estimates that in recent decades, the American voters have trusted the Republican Party more than the Democratic Party in doing a better job at handling the issue of terrorism by an average of 15 percentage points and the foreign policy issue by 11 percentage points. Therefore, as an overwhelming body of literature agrees on the Republican Party's ownership of the foreign policy and national security issues, this paper tries to find whether this ownership applies to Iran as a US foreign policy issue as well.

II- Results

The study analyzed the General Election debates to find what themes were most discussed, and whether a divergence or convergence existed between the two major US political parties concerning Iran. The researchers identified themes highly debated regarding Iran during the debates. The identified themes were indexed and charted, and interpreted based on Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) Critical Framework Analysis method.

Research Question 1: Which foreign policy themes do the Republican and Democratic candidates consider most important regarding Iran?

The first research question tried to categorize themes regarding Iran within the General election debates' transcripts. In this regard, the analysis of the study resulted in 8 thematic categories, including nuclear program, threat, sanctions, negotiations, war, Iran's influence, sponsor of terrorism, and a couple of insignificant themes categorized under "Other." The "Other" thematic category consists of non-frequent themes dispersed through the debates such

as the Green Revolution, helping the Iranian reformers, and indicting the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Because these themes were not significantly mentioned and they were inconsistently appeared through the debates, the study does not discuss them. The seven most frequent and significant thematic categories are described as follows.

The nuclear program thematic category includes the word of nuclear weapons along with nuclear power and nuclear program. The threat thematic category includes the phrases nuclear threat, cyber threat, the threat to the world, and the threat to Israel. The sanctions thematic category consists of sanctions, crippling sanctions, and pressure. The negotiations thematic category includes negotiations, diplomacy, talks, and the Iran deal. The war thematic category consists of war, military strike, and preemptive action. Iran's influence thematic category contains Iran's advancing influence in Iraq, Syria, the Middle East, and North Korea. The sponsor of terrorism thematic category consists of the exact words of its title along with the theme of IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) acting as a terrorist organization. Tables 1 and 2 show the analyzed thematic distribution of the General Election debates.

Table 1. Thematic Categories Identified in the US General Election Debates (2004-2016)

THEMES	FREQUENCY	FREQUENCY %
NUCLEAR PROGRAM	90	31.25
THREAT	48	16.67
SANCTIONS	47	16.32
NEGOTIATIONS	45	15.63
WAR	27	9.38
IRAN'S INFLUENCE	16	5.56
SPONSOR OF TERRORISM	8	2.78
OTHER	7	2.43
TOTAL	288	100.00

Note. This table is prepared by the authors.

Table 2. Thematic Distribution by Election Year

Themes	Nuclear w.	Threat	Sanctions	Negotiations	War	Iran's Inf.	Sponsor of T.
Election Y.							
2004	9	10	7	5	1	0	2
2008	20	20	7	15	6	5	2
2012	39	13	25	8	17	2	2
2016	22	5	8	17	3	9	2
Totals/281	90	48	47	45	27	16	8

Note. This table is prepared by the authors.

Analyzing the thematic distribution through the sampled transcripts (Table 1) indicated that Presidential and Vice-presidential candidates across the aisle were deeply concerned with the Iranians getting knowledge and enough nuclear material to build a nuclear weapon. This theme was consistently mentioned through every debate sampled for the analysis both by the Republican and Democratic candidates. The nuclear program theme was frequently discussed in the 2012 Presidential election. For example, in 2012, the Republican candidate Mitt Romney, criticizing the Obama administration Foreign policy, in multiple discussions, argued that “Look, I look at what’s happening around the world, and I see Iran four years closer to a bomb” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a). Besides, responding to a question about the possibility of a conflict between Iran and Israel, President Obama pledged that “as long as I’m President of the United States, Iran will not get a nuclear weapon” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a).

The second highly debated thematic category is the theme of threat. In the 2004 General debates, it was the Democratic candidate John Kerry and his Vice-presidential nominee Senator Edwards who portrayed Iran as a threat to the United States and its allies such as Israel multiple times. At least 4 times through the 2004 debates, the Democratic candidates referred to Iran as a dangerous country. In the 2008 General debates, both the Democratic and Republican candidates frequently referred to Iran as a threat to the United States, Israel, and the world. The

Republican candidate John McCain warned multiple times that Iran is a serious threat suggesting that “it is a threat not only in this region but around the world” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). On the other hand, the Democratic candidate Barack Obama referred to a nuclear Iran as a game-changer, one that “not only would it threaten Israel, a country that is our stalwart ally, but it would also create an environment in which you could set off an arms race in this Middle East” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). In contrast to the 2004 debates, in the 2012 General debates, it was the Republican candidates that were trying to portray Iran as a significant threat to the United States national security. In all 3 sampled transcripts of 2012 General debates, Republican candidate Mitt Romney and his Vice-president nominee Congressman Ryan stressed Iran as “the greatest threat that the world faces, the greatest national security threat is a nuclear Iran” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012b).

The next thematic category is the theme of sanctions. This theme ranks as the third most debated theme concerning Iran within the sampled transcripts. Both the Democratic and Republican candidates frequently referred to this theme through the debates. The 2012 General debates could be interpreted as the most contested race between the Democratic and Republican candidates in terms of who has sanctioned Iran more and who is the right candidate that can fill the loopholes in the sanctioning process. Both candidates across the aisle discussed the need for more sanctions on Iran at least 25 times during the 2012 General debates. The Democratic Vice-president nominee Biden referred to sanctions that the Obama administration had put on Iran as “the most crippling sanctions in the history of sanctions,” several times during his debate (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012b). On the other hand, his Republican opponent Ryan complained about the Obama administration undermining the sanction (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012b).

Negotiations was the theme with frequent references all over the sampled transcripts, but there was no consensus among the

opposing parties on the existence of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. Kerry criticized the absence of a US official in the early stages of negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004a). Bush defended his approach of not directly talking to the Iranians (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004a). Obama asked for direct talks between the United States and the senior Iranian officials (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). On the other hand, McCain attacked Obama's position on the direct talks with the Iranian officials several times (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). In 2016, the concept of negotiations shifted from having bilateral and multilateral talks with the Iranians to the "Iran deal" that has already been made a year earlier. The Republicans stressed the mismanagement of the "Iran deal" in all four 2016 General Election debates. Trump referred to it as "the worst deal" that he has "ever seen negotiated" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016a). In contrast, Clinton referred to the "Iran deal" as a success that "put a lid on Iran's nuclear program without firing a single shot" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016a). So, despite the aforementioned thematic categories, there was almost no consensus among the Republican and the Democratic candidates on the theme of negotiations.

The thematic category of war was not as frequent as the other themes discussed above, but it appeared mostly in the 2008 and 2012 General debates. In 2008, Obama accused McCain of having the intention to "bomb Iran" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). Although McCain refused this allegation, when a member of the audience asked him in case that a military confrontation between Iran and Israel breaks out, should they wait for the United Nations Security Council approval for attacking Iran, he responded that "let me say that we obviously would not wait for the United Nations Security Council" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008b). The war theme was also repeatedly referred to in the 2012 General debates. Romney pledged that in case of an Iranian-Israeli conflict, his administration would "have their [Israel] back, not just

diplomatically, not just culturally, but militarily” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a). President Obama suggested that the war should be “the last resort,” but also pledged that “if Israel is attacked, America will stand with Israel” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a).

Iran’s influence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, was another theme of the General debates. In 2008, both the Democratic and Republican candidates agreed that war in Iraq has resulted in a significant Iranian influence. McCain argued that “the consequences of defeat” in Iraq “would have been increased Iranian influence” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). Obama discussed that “ironically, the single thing that has strengthened Iran over the last several years has been the war in Iraq” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). Trump warned several times that Iran is “taking over Iraq” and that Iran has gained more influence in Syria and Yemen (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016d). Clinton also noted that Iran has significant influence in Syria’s civil war (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016d).

The last thematic category is the phrase sponsor of terrorism. This theme was mentioned at least once, in the General debates, in every election year from 2004 to 2016. Edwards, the Democratic Vice-presidential nominee, referred to Iran as “the largest state sponsor of terrorism on the planet” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004b). McCain wanted to declare IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) as “a sponsor of terrorism” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008a). The Republican Vice-presidential nominee Ryan described Iran as “the world’s largest sponsor of terrorism” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012b). Obama referred to Iran as “a state sponsor of terrorism” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012b). Trump mentioned Iran as “the number one terror state” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016b).

The analysis shows that overall, the Republican candidates (54 percent) discuss more thematic categories related to Iran as oppose

to their Democratic opponents (46 percent). The results indicate that the Republican candidates discuss five out of seven thematic categories more than the Democratic Candidates. These five thematic categories include threat, negotiations, war, Iran's influence, and sponsor of terrorism. On the other hand, the Democratic candidates debated the nuclear program and sanctions themes more. Figure 2 shows the difference between the Republican and Democratic candidates regarding the themes related to Iran.

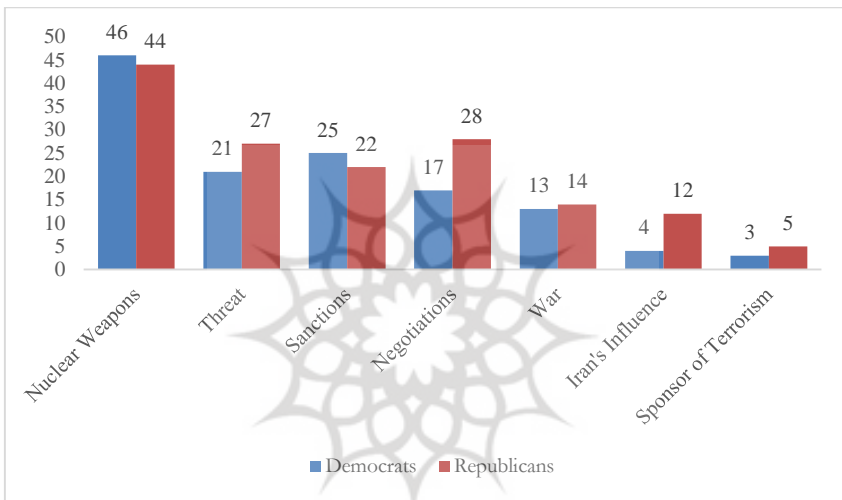


Figure 2. Thematic Distribution among Democrats and Republicans Regarding Iran

Note. This figure is prepared by the authors

The data analysis (Figure 2) revealed that the Republican candidates were more concerned with issues regarding Iran than the Democratic candidates. They were dominant while debating 5 thematic categories. Furthermore, regarding the last 2 categories (nuclear program and sanctions thematic categories), they did not diverge from discussing these issues. However, they mentioned them by a margin of 2 (nuclear program) and 3 (sanctions) times less than the Democratic candidates. In contrast, the Democratic candidates were less likely to debate the thematic categories that

the Republican candidates seemed to be more concerned with. The thematic categories that the Democratic candidates were more likely to diverge from include threat (a margin of 22 percent), negotiations (a margin of 39 percent), and Iran's influence (a margin of 67 percent). Below, Tables 3 (Republican) and 4 (Democratic) present a detailed analysis of each Presidential tickets' discussion of the identified thematic categories.

Table 3. Thematic Distribution by Each Republican Ticket/Year

Republican Ticket	Bush-Cheney	McCain-Palin	Romney-Ryan	Trump-Pence
Themes/Election Year	2004	2008	2012	2016
Nuclear program	3	10	23	8
Threat	2	12	10	3
Sanctions	3	4	11	4
Negotiations	4	7	4	13
War	0	4	9	1
Iran's Influence	0	3	2	7
Sponsor of Terrorism	1	1	1	2
Totals/152	13	41	60	38

Note. This table is prepared by the authors.

Table 4. Thematic Distribution by Each Democratic Ticket/Year

Democratic Ticket	Kerry-Edwards	Obama-Biden	Obama-Biden	Clinton-Kaine
Themes/Election Year	2004	2008	2012	2016
Nuclear program	6	10	16	14
Threat	8	8	3	2
Sanctions	4	3	14	4
Negotiations	1	8	4	4
War	1	2	8	2
Iran's Influence	0	2	0	2
Sponsor of Terrorism	1	1	1	0
Totals/129	21	34	46	28

Note. This table is prepared by the authors

Tables 3 and 4 indicate that the Iran-related thematic categories were most debated in the 2012 General debates. In those particular debates, both the Republican and Democratic candidates had multiple discussions regarding how to prevent Iran from getting access to a nuclear weapon, its threat to the United States and its allies, including Israel, and the role that the “crippling sanctions” play in that prevention. In addition, the 2012 General debates encompass the most lead and follow-up questions, specifically mentioning Iran (Figure 3).

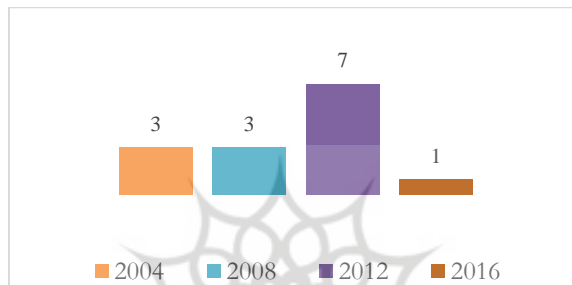


Figure 3. Lead and Follow-up Question Specifically Mentioning Iran (2004-2016)

Note. This figure is prepared by the authors

Research Question 2: Do the Republican and Democratic candidates diverge or converge on Iran as a US foreign policy issue?

Using MAXQDA software, the study conducted an analysis of the times each candidate has mentioned Iran, Iranian leaders, including the words “Ayatollah,” “mullahs,” “Ahmadinejad,” and Iranian capital Tehran to gain a better insight into the sampled transcripts. Looking into the transcripts, the researchers found that both the Republican and Democratic candidates sometimes referred to countries by mentioning their capitals or leaders' names. Below, Figure 4 shows the results from the analysis.

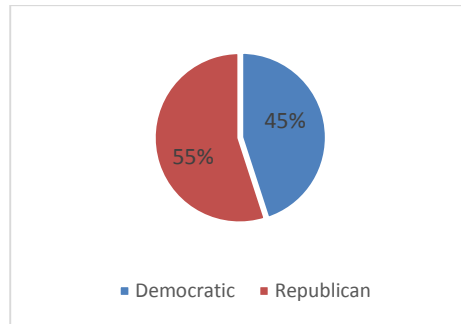


Figure 4. Times Republican and Democratic Candidates Have Mentioned Iran (2004-2016)

Note. This figure is prepared by the authors

The results from Tables 3, 4, and Figure 4 indicate that the Republicans are more likely to discuss Iran and put more emphasis on the thematic categories related to Iran. They are also shown to mention Iran and its leaders more (10 percent margin) than the Democratic candidates through the debates. The results are aligned with the Issue Ownership theory's premise that the Republicans would emphasize the foreign policy issues more than the Democrats (Benoit, 2018; Petrocik, 1996). So, when looking from the quantitative perspective, some level of divergence exists in the study of the thematic categories regarding Iran. However, the results from the qualitative analysis are somewhat different. The qualitative analysis conducted in the study did not find Democratic candidates avoiding the issue of Iran. Instead, when the leading questions or the discussions were about Iran-related issues, the Democratic candidates took an active role in debating how to deal with Iran. The results in Figure 2 support this argument showing that the Democrats were even emphasizing two thematic categories, including nuclear program and sanctions, more than the Republican rivals. Furthermore, the study's qualitative analysis phase (Figure 2) found that the Democratic candidates, while mentioning Iran, were discussing the same seven thematic categories as the Republican candidates. Thus, an element of divergence exists between the qualitative and quantitative findings of the analysis.

Though the quantitative analysis shows some level of divergence from the Democratic candidates while discussing Iran, the qualitative analysis does not support this finding. It indicates the existence of a convergence where the Republican and Democratic candidates are debating Iran.

III- Discussion

According to the data analysis presented above, the study's hypothesis was confirmed, so the Republican candidates were more likely to raise Iran as a US foreign policy and national security-related issue. This statement is in line with the Issue Ownership theory's argument with respect to foreign and national security-related issues being "owned" by the Republican party. However, looking into the qualitative data, the study did not find any evidence of Democrats avoiding the issue of Iran. Instead, the study noticed that the Democratic candidates discussed every question posed by the moderators or audience on the issue of Iran through the course of the General debates. Moreover, the Democrats did not try to diverge on the issue and more or less emphasized the same seven thematic categories as the Republicans with regard to Iran. The issue of Iran's nuclear program was highly discussed through all the General Election debates sampled by the study. In this particular subject, the study found that both the Democratic and Republican candidates were repetitively addressing the danger of a "nuclear Iran." In fact, the analysis showed that the Democrats raised Iran's nuclear threat slightly more than the Republican candidates. For instance, John Edwards, the Democratic Vice-presidential nominee in the 2004 General debates, while attacking the Bush administration, argued that "the reality about Iran is that Iran has moved forward with their nuclear program on their [Bush administration] watch" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004b). While answering a question about the war in Iraq, the Democratic candidate John Kerry warned that "this President [George W. Bush] rushed to war; pushed our allies aside, and Iran now is more dangerous, and so is North Korea, with nuclear

weapons” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004c). Also, in the 2008 General Election debates, the Democratic candidate Barack Obama did not avoid any Iran-related questions. The issue of sanctioning Iran was the other subject that the Democratic candidates discussed more than the Republicans (Figure 2). For example, in the 2012 General Election Debates, President Obama boasted that his administration has been able to organize “the strongest coalition and the strongest sanctions against Iran in history, and it is crippling their [Iranian] economy” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2012a). Raising the issue of sanctioning Iran by the Democratic candidates was not limited to the 2012 General debates. In the 2016 General Election Debates, in multiple times, the Democratic Vice-president Nominee Senator Kaine claimed that Hillary Clinton played the most crucial role in building “the sanctions regime around the world that stopped the Iranian nuclear program” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2016b).

The results from the 2004 General debates analysis were not in accordance with the rest of the sampled debates. In these particular debates, the Democratic candidates discussed Iran more than the Republican counterparts (Table 4). In multiple debates, Kerry claimed that Iran has become “more dangerous” due to the Bush administration mishandling the war in Iraq (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004a). An explanation for this inconsistency is the effect that the incumbent candidates like President Bush or President Obama may have while campaigning for re-election (Petrocik, 1996). The Issue Ownership theory argues that political parties might temporarily “own” issues that were not previously “owned” by them when their opponent is the sitting president (Benoit, 2018; Petrocik, 1996). So, the Republican candidates’ divergent and the Democratic candidates’ emphasis on the issue of Iran could be explained in this context.

As Figure 2 shows, the Democratic candidates did not avoid discussing Iran as a national security-related issue which, according to the Issue Ownership theory, is supposed to be “owned” by the Republican Party (Petrocik, 1996). Instead, they actively took part

in the discussions when Iran-related issues were raised. In some particular issues (nuclear program and sanctions), they even raised the case of Iran more frequently than the Republican opponents. So, an act of divergence—a core argument in the Issue Ownership theory—did not mainly occur between the Republican and Democratic candidates in the case of Iran. On the contrary, the Iran-related issues were highly debated between both parties' candidates, which presented a level of convergence.

Looking into the General Election debates, the study argues that some sort of dialogue did occur between the Republican and Democratic candidates in the case of Iran. Furthermore, a level of convergence was evident because both parties' candidates discussed the same seven Iran-related issues through the General Election debates. In this regard, Damore (2005) suggests that opposing candidates frequently discuss the same issues through their campaign debates. In every election, candidates try to discuss and show their willingness to resolve the issues that matter the most to the electorate (Damore, 2005). Gadarian (2010) argues that, despite what was perceived by the Issue Ownership theory on the idea of foreign policy issues being always owned by the Republican party, "the salience of foreign policy may not always be a net benefit for Republican candidates." Furthermore, Budge (2015) suggests that the advantage that a political party enjoys when emphasizing specific issues "can be enhanced or lost by its handling of the campaign." In this regard, Sigelman and Buell (2004) call for "the need to rethink" saliency theories, including the Issue Ownership theory, as they fall short in explaining the issue convergence that occurs through the course of Presidential campaigns. They suggest "the notion of a tit-for-tat sequence," in explaining the issue convergence perspective, where one side's emphasis on a specific issue "may generate pressure on the other side to do likewise, producing a continuous process of mutual adjustment" (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). This notion was very evident in the study's sampled transcripts where the Republican and Democratic candidates engaged in multiple long consistent

discussions about the Iran-related issues. Therefore, with support from its findings, the study argues that, at least during the past four General Election cycles, the Republican and Democratic candidates have converged on Iran as a major US foreign policy issue, and both parties see it to their advantage to actively discuss and elaborate on where they stand on Iran.

Conclusion

This study tried to examine how Iran is presented and discussed within the milieu of US General Election debates. The study employed a critical case sampling to drive a sample from General debates' transcripts. Following the Critical Framework Analysis, the study identified significant Iran-related thematic categories. In this regard, it identified seven thematic categories concerning the issue of Iran. These thematic categories include nuclear program, threat, sanctions, negotiations, war, Iran's influence, and sponsorship of terrorism. The study also found that while the Democrats did talk less about Iran, they did not avoid any lead or follow-up questions posed about the issue of Iran as the Issue Ownership theory would have predicted. The Issue Ownership theory suggests that the Republican and Democratic candidates do not typically discuss the same issues and instead try to emphasize their owned issues and avoid issues that the public perceives as owned by the opposition (Petrocik, 1996). On Iran, however, this does not seem to be the case. While it is true that Republicans are more likely to bring up the case of Iran as an important foreign policy issue, the Democratic candidates neither avoid nor show any hesitancy to actively talk about Iran whenever appropriate. This suggests that, at least during the past four General Election cycles, the Republican and Democratic candidates have converged on Iran as a major US foreign policy issue, and both parties see it to their advantage to actively discuss and elaborate on where they stand on Iran.

The present study sought to answer some important questions on the role that Iran-related foreign policy issues play in the US

General Election debates. However, more questions still remain unanswered. Researching the US Primary debates could result in a rich understanding of each party's perspective on the issue of Iran. Primary debates feature different views towards a particular issue because, in the Primaries, more candidates with different backgrounds have a chance to lay out their plans. This will help to gain an in-depth knowledge of the voices within each party and to examine what differences and similarities each candidate hold within and across parties with respect to the issue of Iran. A comparison between what the candidates have argued in the Primaries and what they emphasized through the General debates would also enhance the analysis. This study focused only on the case of Iran, so for the findings to be generalized other cases should be analyzed as well. Through familiarization with the transcripts, the researchers noticed other countries being mentioned and discussed upon as foreign policy and national security-related issues. These countries included Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, China, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan. Further analysis of how each of these cases was discussed within the General debates is needed to see how different the candidates deal with each case. Finally, a study on what the candidates emphasized through the campaign trail and General debates and what policies they implement when they get elected could reveal the extent to which their promises have been kept. It is important to examine how the candidates' discussions concerning Iran and other foreign policy issues within the General debates have turned out in the real world.

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