

The role of the final debate in a campaign's strategy

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Abstract. *From a communicational point of view, electoral campaigns are considered to be very demanding. The competition and the technological progress are considered to be the most important factors that impose such a struggle. Final debates represent the highlight of an electoral campaign. They emphasize the qualities of a politician, in disfavor of his opponent. Probably, the most important thing about the final debate is that it creates a link between three major entities: mass-media, public opinion, and political actors. The article focuses on the importance of the final debate in a campaign's strategy. Not only the political communication, or the political marketing had established relevant instruments for electoral campaigns, but the final debates try to set new trends for the politicians to keep up with.*

Keywords: *discourse, political communication, campaigns, USA, Romania.*

Introduction

There are three major entities in the public sphere that interact and demand their place: the political actor, the public opinion and the mass-media. They seem to be interdependent and they influence each other's position. The political actor gains its legitimacy from the public opinion. Of course, the public opinion has its necessities, that are constantly changing and that must be fulfilled by the political actor. Mass media works as a binding agent between the two entities and has the role of facilitating the access between those two worlds. Moreover, media has the role of both sides influence, as the political actors and, at the same time, the public opinion,

have to act and follow the steps that are imposed by the media. Furthermore, media has the role of creating a political actor, as it has the role of excluding him from the political scene. Even though media has to be impartial and to serve the interest of both sides, it seems that media is working for its own interest.

The major interest of political actors is to obtain the power. Whether it is formal or informal, during the political campaign, the whole interest is focused on the public opinion. The political actor has to determine the public opinion to vote for him. In order to obtain that, a good strategic campaign is the best answer to the problem. Of course, media has an important role and a determining act, as it transmits the political message to the public opinion. The campaign is based on promises that are presented during the campaign. The final objective is to determine the public opinion to vote for a certain candidate. The role of mass-media is overwhelming because it can influence and create certain behaviors, it can set trends and patterns and mostly it can increase the image of a candidate in favor of another. The role of public opinion is to select the information that works with them and they must see beyond the influence of the media. Moreover, during a campaign, the public opinion has to adopt and conserve an objective opinion, in order to have an objective vote.

The main theme of this research is the role of the final debate. During this paper, we will analyze this theme from different perspectives, with a main focus on the influence upon voting decision. Also, we will focus on the influence upon the electorate, the pressures upon the counter candidate, the influence of the media and the importance of the final debate in the campaign's strategy. In a few words, the theme of this paper is the role of the final debate in the campaign's strategy. The final debate represents the summary of a campaign and it presents, in front of the public opinion and media, the most important themes of a candidate, his electoral promises, his campaign strategy, the required resources, the political games and the reality as seen through the eyes of the political actor. For the political actors, the final debate represents the last chance to change, convince or to consolidate the voting decision. From a communicational point of view, the final debate represents maximum rating moments, as media uses a lot of different techniques in order to gain the audience. Whether is it important the influence upon public opinion, or transmitting some information, media has a very important role in what final debates concerns. On the other hand, media can misinform the public opinion.

Hypothesis:

In order to evaluate the role of the final debate in a campaign's strategy, we have stated the following hypothesis:

- 1. It is a fact that the final debate has a major role in a campaign's strategy. How much does the final debate influence the voting decision?*

2. *Media is the binding agent between the political actor and the public opinion. How much does the media image of the candidate influence the public opinion?*

Having stated these hypotheses, we will study the real influence of the final debates in a campaign's strategy. Whether the influence comes from the media or from the enactment of the staff, the final debate has a dose of influence upon the voting decision. The hypotheses are meant to reveal these things and after an elaborate research we will be able to tell whether the hypotheses are true or false.

Literature review

The political arena represents a space where the political actors bring forward their political offer, in order to obtain popular votes. Of course, all these political battles are taken at a much higher level where strategies are established and all the resources are used. In other words, the final objective of all the parties and of the candidates is to persuade the public opinion and to obtain their votes. The political strategy is based on three entities: the public opinion, the political actor and the mass – media. The role of the media is to intermediate the communication between the other two entities, but at the same time media can change the flow of the information.

“Politics represents the management of the social life” and is considered to be *“a power in organizing civil society”* which *“gives coherence to the social society.”*¹ This definition belongs to the researchers from Saint-Cloud, as they observe the true force of the phenomena. It is widely considered that politics represents a game of power, a multileveled game, as its final purpose is to obtain the control upon different entities. We can find politics somewhere in between the silence and the violence, as it represents the *“mediating space”* or the *“public space where communication is replaced by guns or the politics itself becomes a sort of gun.”*² From a democratic point of view, politics represents the coexistence between rival and struggling ideas and at the same time, the way of arranging the society³. The main point of this definition is the idea of conflict, as in politics the conflict has much more advantages than disadvantages. The politics is an *“extra card”* for those who know its mechanisms. *“Another advantage is that politics is simply more engaging and interesting when the climax is dramatic and unanticipated.”*⁴ Moreover, *“the politics of surprise leads through the Gates of Astonishment into the Kingdom of Hope.”*⁵

1 Delia Felicia Marga, *Repere în analiza discursului politic*, Ed. Fundației pentru Studii Europene, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 28.

2 *Ibidem*.

3 Claes H. de Vreese, *Ten Observations about the Past, Present and Future of Political Communication*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 11.

4 P. Finley, *“American Speeches: political oratory from Abraham Lincoln to Bill Clinton, and political oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War”*, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, August, 2007.

5 *Ibidem*.

A very popular instrument for manipulating through politics is the political discourse. It is considered to be a very powerful instrument as it can persuade the public opinion, it can state a voting decision or it can represent an advantage for a candidate against the other. "*A discourse can influence the audience through its logical order, through the fundamentals that generate the discourse.*"⁶ Moreover, it represents the symbolic manifestation of power. The political discourse has become one of the most popular discursive instruments, which embraces elements of the rhetoric's, myths and persuasion. This is one of the reasons why political discourse is so popular in what research and discursive interpretation is concerned. Whether it is presented in different forms or contexts, the political discourse has an ongoing importance in keeping alive the connection between political actors, public opinion and mass-media.

"Speeches are important," [Peggy Noonan] said, "because they are one of the great constants of our political history."

*"They count. They more than count, they shape what happens. (An irony you know who doesn't really know this? Political professionals. The men who do politics as a business in America are bored by speeches. They call them 'the rah.' They prefer commercials.)"*⁷ This author underlines the importance of political speech and their importance on the political arena.

The political discourse is an attempt of explaining a candidate's strategy in front of the electorate, a polemical dispute with the counter candidates, a documented response to an interpellation, a profitable negotiation with social partners⁸. Gaining legitimacy is the main reason for struggling in politics. "*Legitimacy is obtained through discourse in disfavor of other political mechanisms.*"⁹ We can find political discourse at different levels: from local to central discourses, to presidential discourses. It comes like an agenda that puts together interests, aspirations and options of groups that generate the discourse and represent different society levels. As mentioned before, the discourse is taking advantage of many instruments and practices, in order to put pressure on different groups of people. Firstly, a strategy for a persuasive discourse is represented by the language and the tonality, the target and the media instruments that are used to transmit the discourse. The language that is used in order to describe political events can influence the political perceptions in a way that goes beyond its natural sense.¹⁰ "*The language can exert a substantial and unseen influence upon political thinking, as the political language can evoke patterns of some political beliefs.*"¹¹

6 Constantin Sălăvăstru, *Discursul puterii*, Tritonic, București, 2009, p. 17.

7 Jim Coyle, "Why political leaders' speech matter", *Toronto Star*, Toronto, 13 October, 2008.

8 *Ibidem*, pp. 20-21.

9 *Ibidem*.

10 Delia Felicia Marga, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

11 *Ibidem*.

For a better understanding of a political speech, we shall present some of its characteristics, according to the author Delia Felicia Marga. Firstly, an important characteristic is the fact that the political speech is integrated in the political field. In a more common sense, the political displays of an individual or of a group are mostly known through the cross-discursive strategies. Secondly, the political speech is interdiscursive as it represents not only the main target, but other entities as well. Thirdly, the political discourse is seen as "*a progressive dislocation from the political parties or groups to the media.*"¹² Finally, the last characteristic of the political discourse is that it represents a debate in which programs and personalities are being placed and structured.

All in all, the political discourse has an important role for the three entities as it intermediates the relationship between them. Considered a part of the political debate, the discourse is staged, dramatized and the themes are carefully organized, while the draw-ups of the participants set them in the area of the political marketing. The political actors use the political speech in their advantage as they are aware of its power and the impact that can be generated upon different society groups. Ghiglione says the political discourse is "*a speech of influence*" and its purpose "*is to operate upon another person in order to make that person act, think and believe.*"¹³ Politicians make use of all sorts of techniques in order to persuade and they even use the myths in order to have a much more convincing discourse. With that being said, we will present some of the myths that are used in drawing a political discourse. Firstly, according to Edelman "*the conspiring enemy*" myth talks about a group that threatens the general state of well-being. Moreover, the myth of "*the brave leader*" emphasises an efficient and courageous leader that puts all of his efforts for the people he leads. Furthermore, there is the myth of the need for "*unity*", in order to be able to stand up in front of the enemy, the myth of "*the rational human being*", when all the people act in a rational way. Also, another myth considers the "*poor as victims*", in a society of inequalities, from an economic, racial, ethnic point of view. On the other hand, there is a myth that considers poor people being poor because they do not take any effort in order to redefine their status. This myth is called "*the lazy poor*" myth¹⁴. These myths are used as integrant parts of a political discourse. The political actors take advantage of these myths, gambling with the electorate's good will or with the good will of those who still go along and accept these strategies.

It is a well known fact that the political speeches are different depending on the moment they are being presented. The electoral speeches have different objectives and strategies that are presented in front of the electorate. The electoral campaign

12 *Idem*, p. 64.

13 Delia Felicia Marga, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

14 *Ibidem*.

is a special sequence of presenting the political reality, a moment of “*symbolic overwhelming*”, that are presented through communicational strategies and media coverage that reunite all the entities, of course, depending on each entities’ resources and interests.¹⁵ During the electoral campaign, a special accent falls upon the final debate speeches. These represent key points for the whole strategy of the campaign. They are meant to offer a résumé of all the things that have been presented during the campaign and they set a direct confrontation between the two most important political actors. From a communicational point of view, they represent moments of maximum rating for some media casts that use different techniques in order to increase the audience. Whether it is about the persuasion of the audience, or the knowledge sharing, or a possible misinforming, the media casts always set the final scene in what final debate concerns.

Final debates represent “*variables*” of political persuasion. The confrontation field doesn’t belong to the ideas, or to the language, arguments, or to the mediated rhetoric.¹⁶ That is to say, in such confrontations the political ideas that come from the political actors are not as important as the depreciation of the opponent through communicational elements. The first TV debate is primarily known as the one between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960 and the rating points of that debate were huge. It is a general fact that out of all the changes that television has had upon the electoral campaigns, the face-to-face debates represent the most important changes.¹⁷ Jeffery Auer considers that a real debate must incorporate 5 essential elements: a confrontation, a real and adequate time, adequate participants, a certain theme and winning the audience’s decision. According to these elements, the final debate sets in front of the audience two candidates, who discuss certain themes and they have to use these themes in their favor, in order to gain the vote of the electorate. The final debates are being studied by many specialists, through some theories like the public’s expectancy theory, stereotypes theories, theories of building and changing attitudes, of interpersonal communication and of persuasion.¹⁸ From such a TV program, the public expects to get some information, but mostly, it is about the show. A TV format of this kind is meant to reveal the personality of the candidates, the verbal and nonverbal communication of a political actor. Moreover, the audience is acquainted with a candidate’s approaches on different domains, the ideological approaches, the beliefs, the values, the attitudes, the approaches to some problems

15 Loara Ștefănescu, *Retorica argumentării în discursul politic contemporan*, Ed. Universității din București, București, 2008, p. 57.

16 *Ibidem*.

17 Daniela Roventța-Frumușani, *Ipostaze discursive*, Ed. Universității din București, București, 2009, p. 50.

18 *Ibidem*.

and the solutions that come along with them. On the other hand, we might be surprised to see abdications from a party's ideology. This is bound to happen in moments of great pressure.

Final debates represent a great study case, which is why they are very attentively prepared. Due to the great amount of media audience, the language is quite simple and less ideological, as a consequence of the number of TV watchers. A higher number of TV watchers requires an easier language. Setting a scene for the candidates is also a very important aspect of this story. Arranging the podiums on the main stage gives the impression of an arena or an active, deliberative space. Moreover, the settling can establish a participant's zone and an audience zone. Also, the settling can express a sort of "*a symbolic nudity*": it is thought out in order not to distract the audience's attention regarding the verbal interaction between the politicians and the journalists.¹⁹

It is a very common fact that there are a lot of interrogations that give authenticity to direct interaction, but, at the same time, it can create moments of great pressure, that can only be managed by good politicians. The conflict is part of a show and represents a moment that all the viewers expect from a debate. As we already have said, an essential element of a debate is approaching a unique theme. But, on the majority of the cases this thing doesn't happen and it couldn't happen as a result of the communicational field that the politicians establish. They get into an exchange of arguments and ideas, on various themes, as the mutual attacks point out different thoughts and states of the two participants. As a result of these affirmations we can say that, during the years, there were set some premises for the mediated debates. Firstly, there are some efforts in what explaining the main points of the political agenda concerns. This thing should be done through a rational discourse and has the following format: convincing the audience, less arguments, but repeatedly said, selecting the important aspects, the most important of the program, opposed to those of the political opponent, in order to set a clear difference with the adversary, underlining the "*weak*" points of the opponent's program, in order to attack them, the effort of building the argumentation on the counter candidate's ideas, rather than on your own ideas, underestimating the opponent by breaking into his speech, attacks and the need of counter-balancing them, argument-based interventions, short interventions, an informational and counter-balanced structure: a wider use of contrastive topics and focus.²⁰

The aim of such a debate is to present two candidates, who are supposed to reveal their image as politicians and their electoral program. In this particular case, the image seems to be much more important. The power rate between the two is

19 Daniela Roventă-Frumușani, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 61.

continually changing, even though we assume that their initial power is the same. A very important role is given to the moderator of the show, as it is in his power to control and to manage the debate. The candidates have to take into consideration the audience's choice and their decision of voting. This is a reason why the pressure is so high in this kind of debates. The main purpose of the whole debate is to defeat the opponent and to persuade and seduce the audience.

Methodology

For this paper we have selected the document analysis, the secondary data interpretation as a research method. The analyzed documents are video recordings of final debates in Romania and USA. The selected method seems to be the best in this case, as it is bound to be the most accurate for validating or invalidating the hypothesis we have stated.

For the theoretical part of this paper we have used the framing theory. This theory refers to the approach that mass-media uses, in order to transmit information and its influence upon audience's way of understanding the information.²¹ Furthermore, the theory talks about different type of perspectives of identical situations and their way of influencing the viewer's capacity of evaluating a situation and similar circumstances. *"So, the framings are interpretation frames that work as cognitive structures for journalists, when talking about media frames, and the purpose of these structures is to contribute to the selection processes and highlighting some information. The framings are selective perspectives upon media themes or events."*²²

Final debates are generally perceived as presented through media, but their interpretation depends on different factors. The data interpretation part of this paper presents the influence that media puts upon understanding information. This theory explains as well as possible the paper's theme, as the debates depend very much on the media influence. Taking into consideration the setting of the debate, the scenery, the background, the recording of the debate, the moderator's position and all the other elements, we assist at a final confrontation that has all the qualities of a movie-making process. One of the most important roles, perhaps the leading role of the whole "movie" is played by the media, which has an important contribution in receiving and understanding the information.

Data interpretation

Romania's electoral campaign, 2009

In Romania, the second polling round from 2009, presented two major political actors: Traian Băsescu, representing the Liberal, Democrat Party and Mircea

21 Delia Balaban, *Comunicare mediatică*, Tritonic, București, 2009, p. 126.

22 *Ibidem*.

Geoană, representing the Social Democrat Party. Both of them approached different campaign themes. While, Băsescu went for referendum, state issues and political class reform, the fight with the moguls that took all the state's resources, Geoană went for the so called "vision for Romania" theme, which meant implementing immediate economic measures, for those who were strongly affected by the recession: the poor, those with bank loans, those being low-paid, elders and young people. Moreover, he presented his intention of reconciliation of the political Romanian class. The two politicians have selected these themes according to the party's ideology. While Geoană's approach seemed to be much more social, as he talked about the economical crisis, Băsescu's approach can be set on the right of the political spectrum. His campaign themes have been centered on reforming the state and the political class.

The location of the final debate was the Parliament Palace of Romania and the format of the debate was very constraining. Furthermore, the location was neutral from a political point of view and the framing was official and institutional, at the same time. The final confrontation between the two actors was transmitted through Realitatea TV cast and Antena 3 cast. The official name of the final debate was "*The Final Confruntation*" and the rating points were enormous. The number of viewers reached around 4.9 million and a number of 2.9 million were located in the urban area²³. The rating points were only exceeded when the exit-polls were announced. The moderator of the debate was the journalist Robert Turcescu. Directing the debate was quite a challenge and setting the appropriate scene was very demanding. The two actors were set at a small distance, one from each other, in front of the moderator. The debate lasted for three hours. The two candidates started with a five minutes speech, where they were supposed to present their presidential program. The debate's themes have been established before time: the country's foreign policy, national security, economy and the economical crisis, justice and corruption. During the debate, the two candidates had the opportunity to address each other a question and this moment represented the major interest of the whole debate. The debate had a very complex format. The candidates had to answer to some questions of journalists that weren't even there; they had to take the oath on the Bible, they had to answer to a question that was addressed by the moderator. The end of the debate was similar to its beginning, as the candidates were supposed to have a five minute speech²⁴, in order to convince the people to vote for them or to reinforce their beliefs.

The scene of the debate was very official and the way the debate was shot, had a great influence upon TV viewers. At the Realitatea TV cast, the shooting frames

23 Nicoleta Corbu, Mădălina Boțan, *Telepreședinți – radiografia unei campanii electorale*, Comunicare.ro, București, 2011, p. 93.

24 *Ibidem*.

were much closer and the two participants were shot from a close distance and they were presented in separate frames. This shows a proximity to the viewers and a more detailed presentation of the gestures and mimics. Meanwhile, Antena 3 cast shot much larger TV frames, the moderator wasn't a central piece and the candidates were shot from a greater distance, as well as the audience. Moreover, the shooting at the Antena 3 cast enlightened the architecture of the room, the design, which emphasized the importance of the moment. Robert Turcescu had the role of a professor or a conductor, who was supposed to control and to mediate the interaction of the two participants. The way in which the candidates were settled, offered an authority status to the moderator of the debate.²⁵ The two candidates maintained a serious attitude during the debate and they tried to address themselves to the audience. Each one of them tried to state and to assess his own points of view and arguments, but the moderator's intervention stopped their burst "*we expect from you... a confrontation of ideas and opinions, not personal attacks.*"²⁶ It is quite obvious that those moments were overcharged with extreme tension and the contradicting relationships were over boarded. The fact that close persons of the two participants were in the room amplified the moment and created a tensioned atmosphere. The water mark of the debate was the moment when Traian Băsescu addressed a question to his counter candidate, Mircea Geoană: "*Have you enjoyed your meeting last night with mister Vântu?*" a rather controversial Romanian businessman. Geoană's response to the question came after a time of notable hesitation and it sounded something like that "*yes, I had a meeting last night with mister Vântu.*"²⁷ This moment was one of a major importance and after that, a lot of political analysts considered Băsescu as being the winner of the debate. After his response, Geoană experienced a loss in his electorate.

The setting of the two candidates, the way the room was prepared, the lack of intimacy of the candidates due to the transparent desks, the timing on the prompter, the setting as a court room, the imposing attitude of the moderator, the pressuring questions of the opponent and of the journalists etc., put some pressure upon the TV viewers. The close frames created a sensation of intimacy and closeness to the candidates, while the elaborate shooting scenes emphasized the importance of the event and the greatness of the debate. The speeches of the two candidates, the contradictions and the personal attacks have contributed to a certain influence upon the electorate. The counter candidates exchanged some presents at the end of the debate. This element was a strategy which was meant to show the candidates as normal, simple human beings.

25 *Idem*, p. 104.

26 *Ibidem*.

27 *Ibidem*.

All in all, the way the debate has been shot, the speeches and the arguments of the candidates, but mostly the setting and the directing of the final debate, had a significant contribution upon the voting decision. Most of the journalist and analysts insisted on the fact that this confrontation determined the winner of the presidential elections in Romania. Even if the polls before the confrontation predicted that Geoană would be the winner, after the final debate took place, the PDL candidate was quoted with much more opportunities to win the election. Somehow, the final debate stated the winner in Romania, in 2009.

USA's electoral campaign, 2008

The electoral campaign in the USA set a confrontation between very powerful candidates: Barack Obama, the candidate of the Democrat Party and John McCain from the Republican Party. The final debate took place in New York and it was the third debate for the two candidates. In that period, John McCain was the governor of Arizona, while Obama was the governor of the state of Illinois. For both of them, that was the first time they would compete for such a position and the pressure would be much greater on Obama as he would be the first black person to become the president of the United States of America. The candidates approached a number of themes during the campaign. Obama went for the economical problems (the increase of the unemployment, the dollar's fall, the price of the gas, real estate crisis, the external debt of 9 trillion dollars, the recession). Moreover, he talked about terrorism, Iraq, the health insurance system, illegal immigration, the army's consolidation, finding alternative sources of energy, the oil dependency reduction. On the other hand, his counter candidate went for getting over the recession, nuclear resources, economy and health.²⁸ The two candidates talked about all these themes and during the final debate the themes they approached were foreign politics, national security and financial situation. It is a fact that there are differences between the American candidates as they have a different ideological background. It was considered that McCain took the position of a warrior, while Obama took the role of a priest. John McCain's attitude was based on his experience as a specialist in foreign politics and conflict management.²⁹

Barack Obama's campaign is considered to be the most expensive campaign in the USA history. One of the strongest weapons of the campaign was the internet. The candidate was provided with a lot of web sites, social sites and music channels. His campaign was launched on various web sites and the access to these sites was

28 Available at <http://www.mediafax.ro/externe/campania-electorala-americana-dominata-de-teme-majore-2362971>, seen on 7th.02.2012.

29 Neagu Maria-Ionela, *Decodarea discursului politic: o îmbinare de structuri de argument, metafore conceptuale și principii ale politeției, teză de doctorat nepublicată*, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, p. 11.

worldwide. The target of the campaign was the whole American people, but he addressed his message to the minorities as well and to the young people. This had an important contribution to the winning of the presidency. All in all, it is important to say that Obama and his campaign staff based their strategy on the online media, for promoting the presidential campaign. The online media worked in his favor. He succeeded to overcome his candidate and to be more accessible for the greatest part of the American people. Nevertheless, McCain went for the online media, but in a more moderate manner. Meanwhile, Barack Obama had the most expensive presidential campaign in the USA history. During his campaign, Obama emphasized the idea of dynamics and innovative ideas, youth and change. The media presence in this campaign had a much greater importance than in any other political campaign in the history of the USA.³⁰ Volunteers is a word that defined his campaign. The number of volunteers was huge, but it represented a strategically instrument for Obama's presidential campaign.

The final debate lasted for an hour and 30 minutes and the main theme was internal politics. The moderator of the final debate was Bob Schieffer, who had a similar role to the one Robert Turcescu had in Romania's final debate. His mission was of ensuring a calm climate and respecting the format of the show and, from a communicational point of view, he was superior to the candidates. The two candidates had a sober attitude and they transmitted openness, as they seemed to be peaceful warriors. They had argument-based answers and the flow of the debate was pretty normal. Each answer was given a two minutes period and after that, the candidates were interrupted if the given period was over passed. The setting of the debate and the setting of the two American candidates was a little bit different, in comparison to the Romanian debate. The two of them were standing on a common desk, in front of the audience and the moderator of the debate, having a small distance in between. The shooting frames were very close, giving the impression of an intimacy with the audience. The moderator of the show had a very relaxed attitude and during the debate, McCain used to take notes, giving the impression of extreme concentration, attention and very well prepared answers. The two candidates were presented in closed frames and the moment they were giving their answers they used to address those answers to the audience. The speech of senator McCain was marked in a few populist elements: Americans, people, us, we. This thing showed a commitment to the American people, as he presented himself as being part of the people and a solid solution for them. Anyhow, during the debate, the senator made clear the fact that he has the right plans and solutions for the people and he is the best option for USA. On the other

30 Max Friedman, Simulacrobama: The mediated elections of 2008, in *Journal of American Studies*, 43.2, August 2009: 341-356.

hand, Obama's answers were based on strong arguments and set a clear difference between his plans and those of the opponent. The arguments were presented in such a manner that he would accentuate his strong points, undermining the plans of his opponent, at the same time.

This type of debates set a new trend, as they seem to be more efficient. The moderator of the debate used to chose one question, he would give the necessary explanations and after that, the two candidates had the opportunity to present their arguments regarding the settled position. During the debate, the moderator approached eight subthemes, strongly affiliated to the main themes, internal politics. The relation between the moderator and the candidates seemed to be much friendlier than in the Romanian context. Moreover, it is important to mention the fact that the two candidates had previous meetings and they approached different themes of debate. The result of a study shows that both candidates had very good arguments and the voting decision was influenced by: political affiliation, given arguments, the voting decision before and after the debate.³¹ In the end, the winner of the debate was Barack Obama, who gained 8 points out of 8, for his arguments, while his opponent gained only 6 out of 8 points.³²

Obama, beside the fact he is a great speaker, is considered to be a trend setter in the communicational field. *"In this fashion, Obama, whose memoirs show that he holds no illusions about the actually existing class- and race-based obstacles to opportunity in the United States, deliberately participated in helping to erode the distinction between reality and representation. Personifying the possibility of national redemption with his gentle talk of overcoming racial division and rhetorical formulas drawing on patriotic and Christian imagery, Obama captured the imagination of not a few jaded journalists by reminding them of the youthful idealism that brought many of them to their calling during or after the social upheaval of the 1960s. Yet the story of the media's role in the 2008 election goes beyond this dynamic between the candidate and the old media, because this was the election in which the new media played a more important role than ever before in American history."*³³

The final debate in the USA emphasized many elements, not only media elements. The two campaigns had a great influence upon voting decision, upon the political affiliation. The arguments which supported their ideas and the debates had a great contribution to a strong and solid campaign strategy. Although, the debates didn't have such a great importance as in our country, but the elements presented above had their importance in the final voting decision. The background wasn't very important. A greater importance was given to the presence of the two counter

31 Jefferey W. Jarman, *The Effect of Format Changes on Viewer's Perceptions of Arguments Made by Obama and McCain in the 2008 Presidential Debates*, Wichita State University, p. 208.

32 *Ibidem*.

33 *Ibidem*.

candidates and their arguments, more than the setting of the debate. The symbolism of the final debate wasn't as important as in Romania and the arguments of the two actors were quite simple and easy to understand by the majority of the population.

Finally, we can say that the online media had a decisive role in the American electoral campaigns, as well as the voting system. Moving the electoral campaigns from a political reality to a mediate reality, especially to the online reality, had transformed and prepared a new generation of electoral campaigns. The American candidates have to be very good speakers and base their sayings on valid and sustainable arguments. With this being said, we have to appreciate the qualities of the democrat candidate, Barack Obama, who set himself as a very charismatic leader and a much appreciated public speaker. These qualities are more than obvious in an argument-based discourse.

The results of the research

According to the data from the document analysis, we can confirm the fact that the hypotheses are partially true. In what the Romania's final debate concerns, we can say that it has a great influence upon the voting decision and upon building a decision. The most important thing is that the arguments and the discursive elements can influence and even change a voting decision. The question for the opponent, in the Romanian case, had a great influence upon the final course of the campaign. Furthermore, the setting of the debate and the way it was directed had a significant influence on the results of the elections. Nevertheless, we can confirm the two hypotheses, in what Romania's final debate is concerned. The great significance of the final debate and the media influence upon the final decision were revealed after a carefully documented research. It is more than obvious that there are a lot of other elements in what the voting decision concerns, but the final debate had a huge influence upon changing some decisions or strengthening others. The hypotheses represented a starting point in observing the influence of the final debate and the main elements that meant to be analyzed. The hypotheses come to be true to some extent. The final debate has a certain importance in the strategy of a campaign, the media has a decisive role in what presenting the debate concerns, while the whole research shaped itself on the "*framing*" theory.

Considering the American final debate, the hypotheses couldn't be confirmed a 100%. The resources of the two campaigns were based on the media, the main responsible for the dissemination of all the information. The candidates attended three debates, with a very strict format. The moderator used to ask the questions, giving a two minutes time for the candidates to answer. There were no communicational or directed "*fireworks*", but argument-based answers and a very strong, well-placed speech. As other studies show, the voting decision in the USA was influenced by other factors such as political orientation, arguments, media influence, the ideas and

the plans that the candidates revealed. Talking about the final debate, its influence upon the voting decision was significant, but not as significant as it was in Romania. The second hypothesis is not valid in this case, as the final debate wasn't directed in order to reveal some elements that could influence the decisions, but strictly the elements that were supposed to reveal the arguments of the two candidates. What is very important to mention, is the fact that media played an important role in this campaign, and its influence was obvious in the Americans' voting decision.

Conclusions

To sum up, the final debates have a great influence in a campaign's strategy. There are differences from one country to another and from a political actor to another. Also, media plays an important role in a campaign, but mostly in a final debate. The final debates have the capacity of changing some voting decisions, of directing some existing decisions and of making more stable some beliefs. For the success of the final debate it is important to take into consideration the arguments, the way these arguments are presented, the themes of debate and the setting of the debate. The differences between debates are considerably large. We can talk about simple debates, based on a series of questions and answers, like in the USA, or we can talk about more complex debates, with a certain scenario and a very carefully preparation, like in the case of Romania. The opponents experience a lot of pressure and it is necessary to take some extra time to prepare a final debate. The public opinion can suffer an influence through such debates, the voting decision depending on the final debate.

The theoretical part of this research is based on the framing theory. This thing is meant to reveal the media influence and the manner in which some information is presented and the influence the public opinion suffers as a consequence of these facts. In both cases, in the Romanian and American case, the framing theory explains the exerted influence, as it comes to be true. Moreover, media has a remarkable contribution in receiving information, more particular, in the Romanian case than in the American one. All in all, we can agree upon the fact that the final debate has a great role in a campaign's strategy as the stake is very important: the electorate should take a certain decision and has to vote with a certain candidate.

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