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Do Issues Decide? Thematic and Partisan Ideational Strategies in Electoral Debates*

Abstract: The importance of ideas compared with other factors that shape social processes was a subject of controversial debate over the history of social thought. This article will focus on the influence of previous ideas towards new ideas, the influence of ideas on actions and the ideational content of electoral debates. There are many ideational strategies that can be addressed in a public debate aimed at audience persuasion, but this study will focus only on the partisan and thematic strategies. The distinction between partisan and thematic ideation is based on the addressability criterion. The main question is to what extent voters' own perceptions and their perceptions regarding party's positions on certain issues are influenced by the pre-existence of partisan orientations. The major research finding of this article that used the final British electoral debate from 2010 between D. Cameron, G. Brown and N. Clegg as a case study is that where there are clear ideological positions, candidates will rely on the path dependency of voters and will resort to partisan ideation, instead of concentrating on issue voters.

Keywords: political debates, content analysis, political ideation, thematic and partisan strategies

1. Introduction to political ideation

The fact that ideas matter in politics is beyond doubt. Knowledge, ignorance and uncertainty often make the difference between success and failure of policies. In a broader sense, ideas can advance social change, as Enlightenment played a role in triggering the French Revolution, or help maintain the *status quo*, as the doctrine of the Divine right of kings to govern in post-medieval Europe had done. However, the importance of ideas in comparison with other factors that shape social processes was a subject of controversial debate over the history of social thought. A final answer to the question regarding how ideas influence social action cannot be offered, although

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some answers bounded to certain developments and circumstances may elucidate the way in which ideas make the difference, the conditions for them to have more or less influence, and how ideas interact with other factors that matter for both social change and stability.

Ideas may have, primarily, a *cognitive character* being descriptions of social political, economic situations and tools for understanding how things work. Moreover, ideas can have a *normative nature* which consists in ideals, values and norms that define what is good or bad. A third category of ideas that are currently distinguished regards the desires that form *people's preferences* (together with the cognitive and normative ideas). It is important to distinguish between these three types of ideas, but they are different just in analytical sense, in discursive and perceptual reality they not only interact but form stable systems. Determining the meaning of ideas inevitably involves their interpretation. Hermeneutical problems are interesting when we deal with explicit and detailed formulations, but they become even more challenging when less information is available.

The studies concerned with the role of ideas involve complex assumptions about the aim, significance and consequences of ideas. The hypotheses are tested through multiple investigative procedures, often non-standardized. Many of these assumptions are not portable outside a specific context. However, complex dialogue between empirical and theoretical evidence that characterizes such studies is built, most of the times, within some *theoretical frames*. These are not theories in the classical sense, they consist of integrated series of theoretically tested sentences. Rather, they establish a perspective on the issues under discussion. According to Rueschemeyer, "theoretical frames consist of a number of clearly explained concepts identify a set of relevant factors for explanation" (Rueschemeyer 2006). They provide justification for a particular conceptualization and often offer arguments that support the selection of relevant causal factors. The value of such theoretical frames lies in their usefulness for empirical research. While they can not be judged as true or false in a direct sense, their quality depends on their correspondence to the reality which is studied. We argue that much of what we consider progress in social and policy analysis is more about choosing the appropriate theoretical frame for specific problem areas.

A model for the analysis of ideas from a community of discourse belongs to Robert Wuthnow. First, the author highlights the need to identify the components of intellectual action: social and cultural environment, institutional framework and action sequences within these contexts. Then the analysis concentrates on producing ideas in a discourse community, on their selection in a broader society and on the institutionalization with the help of the resources and communication channels that are currently available. All these turn the analysed ideas into a stable feature of a historical period (Wuthnow 1989). Further, for the analysis of ideas, the author distinguishes between the way social and cultural environment is perceived and analyzed ("social horizon"),

how new ideas are crystallized as opposed to individual features of the *status quo* (“discursive field”) and how problems can be solved through ideas and prototype actions (“figural action”).

The impact of ideas must always be perceived in the context of other factors that create results as previously suggested by the consensus of multidimensional analysis. Even cognitive ideas with great utility potential, must meet a context of favorable factors before being accepted and, where is appropriate, institutionalized. This is especially true for social and economic ideas, because usually they have normative implications and affect broad interests. It is expected that they will induce an ideological appeal. The new normative ideas - values, ideals and innovations generally are facing the same situation in their struggle for acceptance. However, most of the times, new ideas may be based on normative achievements of empirical reality. For this reason, new ideas - both cognitive and normative, must be related to stable, legitimate interests and their bases in the institutional order. This understanding of the ideation concept leads us to the assumption that interaction of ideas with other factors which shape their impact is a huge research field, having the same extension as the analysis of social change. Ideational impact can be fully understood only if we take into account the wider audience’s ideas, and the influence of these ideas depends, to a large extent, on their grounding in institutions, groups and codes of daily life.

Explanations based on common sense often talk about the successes of intellectual innovations as “ideas whose time has come”. So ideas matter because other important factors were already established and anticipated or guaranteed their success. In fact, the ideas themselves can be shaped by other factors, as shown in the sociology of knowledge. In this case, the role of ideas themselves can vary from almost an insignificant contribution to a causal factor that motivates a substantially change that otherwise would have remained incomplete or could be established more slowly (if at all ...).

2. The influence of previous ideas towards new ideas

According to social constructivist theory, politics are social not only material (Wendt 2000), therefore the argumentation process understood as an attempt to convince with the help of arguments, is a central concern of politics. The argumentation’s content, namely the ideas that make sense or not, which lead people to act or remain unaffected, is fundamental for the process of persuasion. Many of the ideas that had considerable power to persuade and mobilize were presented as new ideas such as The New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt or the “new thinking” of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Beyond the seduction of new ideas, the previous ideas create requirements and constraints, influence subsequent ideas and shape the symbolic world. Previous ideas can affect the future in at least four ways: as the content of formal/official arguments, as the background of speech, as organizing principle for institutions and social structures and their association with existing feelings

(Crawford 2006). According to the most direct form of association between the previous ideas and the latter, are prerequisites of human reasoning by syllogisms or by analogy. We could not think in terms of formal logic (syllogism and inference) or by analogy if the previous ideas' content would not be available for us. Of course, all the arguments appear in a context, in a pre-existing discourse that claims to be understandable. Background beliefs taken for granted is what Jürgen Habermas calls "lifeworld" or "commonsense certainties", without which we would not be able to understand each other's statements. In this respect, previous ideas are starting points from which we construct the meaning of social world and evaluate new ideas. Similarly, Foucault's ideas about the role of social discourse, Max Weber's explanation about the role of *wertneutralität* or decisions according to absolute values, and the discovery of Thomas Kuhn regarding scientific paradigms structuring scientific research, all these demonstrate how previous systems of ideas can shape the perception and human judgment. The existence of schemes and frames that structure perceptions and subsequent assessments is also confirmed by cognitive psychology. In conclusion, since the previous ideas are the language of understanding, as the speeches are more or less closed, the more they affect responsiveness and evaluation of new ideas.

Ideas which involve the maintenance or the change of social order will be described as concrete steps for their implementation. Previous ideas can affect us when they are institutionalized in the routines and standard operating procedures of organizations and cultures (Goldstein 1993). The institutionalization process requires state actors to explain their understanding regarding a particular idea and its logical chains' and how they will implement it and measure its effects. Sometimes, the institutionalization of ideas requires the creation of new organizations, but most often, institutionalization occurs within existing organizations. Once institutionalized, ideas become part of social structure and determine other social actions and the development of new ideas.

The members of organizations see the world through their beliefs (and feelings) and use institutional guidelines for those interested in. Thus, institutionalization structures the knowledge construction and the concrete practices and resource allocations and become the extended social structure. In other words, the institutionalization of previous ideas helps in determining the shape and substance of social structures, which in turn influences the production of new ideas. Thus ideas become what Lynn Eden has called *organizational frames*. Moreover, the institutionalization of ideas means not only that ideas are internalized within organizations but are also externalized, as these ideas are adopted by other organizations and become social norms. Institutionalization is the first mechanism for the *path dependency*.

Finally, discourse and institutionalization of an idea are able not only to shape a rational trajectory and the social structure, but may cause an emotional association. When different ideas that people associate with some previous speeches or institutions reappear in a new context, perhaps under a new name, a

residue of feelings can be reactivated, influencing stakeholders' understanding and reception of new ideas and arguments. In other words, when individuals deliberate by analogy they import the feelings associated with the logical structure and the conclusions derived from it.

3. The influence of ideas on actions

Up to this part of the study we tried to emphasize the importance of ideation in politics and the analytical difficulties together with the need for building an appropriate theoretical frame for analysis. If the relationship between the previous conditioning ideas and the new ideas is an almost unanimous agreement between scholars, there are different approaches towards the relationship between ideas and actions which enhance controversial opinions. Summarizing scholars' views, we argue that ideas and actions can be linked in three ways: ideas may exceed the interests and therefore change how a person acts, ideas can justify interests and therefore reiterates its preference for individual action, ideas can shape the understanding of the person's interests and thus creates a new set of preferred actions. We further try to detail these links between ideas and actions previously identified.

In the first case, *ideas are above interests*. Starting from this premise, the central issue in determining the impact of ideas on such actions has a causal nature: how does one distinguish an idea from an action and determine which one affects the other and vice versa? Actions are intentional behaviors, followed steps to achieve a goal. Therefore, the most direct way to demonstrate that ideas affect actions is to support an idea that would lead to an action against an interest, which in turn would cause a different action, and to show that the first action is happening rather than the latter. The general idea is that people initiate actions based on ideas of morality, hope and caution, rather than to act in order to satisfy their interests in an absolutely rational manner.

In the second case, *interests justify ideas*. Ideas influence actions through consolidation, rather than ignore the interests, therefore lead a person to act firmly to what it intended to do anyway. We can not determine if the ideas respect or support their interests and justify them. The two perspectives belong to different disciplines, psychology and economics, and political scientists catch up ideas from both approaches. On the one hand, political psychologists like David Sears and Donald Kinder show how often the individual's political preferences are consistent with his interest in government policies on issues like taxes and jobs and support for war. Political scientists psychological guided, like Stanley Feldman, similarly show how the importance of values and ideology, rather than self-interest, is decisive in shaping attitudes and preferences for policies (cited in Feldman 2003). On the other hand, economists have built an entire discipline around the presumption that knowing a person's material interest one can predict how that person will behave, in general, in every arena of his life, including the preference for certain political candidates (Fair 2002) or

public policies. According to this perspective, ideas reinforce or even arise from interests and the interests determine actions.

Finally, it can be argued that *ideas sometimes create interests*. This simplifying assumption stated at the beginning of the chapter allows a more detailed examination. When interests and ideas coincide, we believe that the interests come first. This means that people have interests and reinforce or justify them with ideas, which then produce actions. But what happens when ideas first appear? What if people have conceptions about themselves and the world around them that lead them to perceive interests in a certain way? According to this perspective, actions are determined by the understanding of one's own interests derived from ideas or concepts about themselves in a particular context. As an example, thinking of one as being part of an oppressed group can lead to redefine his interests in a national liberation movement, with a clear link with the action. Redefining the meaning of the definition can change someone's identity, his own interests and appropriate further action.

The new field of behavioral economics abounds in demonstrations showing how people develop ideas that change the definition of their own interests beyond what classical economics would expect. As a reference frame, people can easily be induced to develop preferences that show how fluid their interests are (Kahneman and Tversky 2000). Behavioral economics findings can be extrapolated to the decisions in the field of political behavior.

Finally, the belief that ideas create interests and then lead to action is the central premise of *linguistic turn* in social sciences. From this perspective, the whole debate about whether and how ideas affect actions is fundamentally misleading, because the action - and any action related concept - arises from ideas. So, without language, ideas, abstractions, comparisons, interpretations, there can be no human action or at least not one human being recognizable. Ideas, and not the structures, processes or interests, are the engine of history.

Beyond trying to weigh the importance of how ideas cause actions, we must turn to an even more interesting aspect, namely, the contextual factors that build the relationship between ideas and action. There are at least three factors: history, institutions and leaders. Our study tries to determine the causality relationship between ideas and actions, by recalling the concept of *path dependency* introduced when we talked about the influence of previous ideas towards new ideas. Thus, the influence of ideas on actions can be detected by the operationalization of path dependence, defined simply as "the preceding steps towards a particular direction that induce a stronger move in the same direction" (Hochschild 2006, 293).

4. Ideational content of public debates

Televised debates became an almost mandatory exercise for electoral campaigns and referendums in a substantial number of democratic states and seem to be also a symptom and a cause of the acquired importance of political

communication today. They are one of the most spectacular illustrations of contemporary media coverage of politics, which seem to reduce politics to political communication and political practice is transformed also into a communicational practice. Thus, not surprisingly, after more than 40 years, televised political debates inspire a significant amount of scientific research based on heterogeneous and disparate theoretical perspectives and disciplines and often reach divergent results.

Although there are many approaches to the content of televised debates¹ in this part of the article our attention will be directed towards the public debates and electoral debates in particular. The ideational analysis of public debates has two sub-genres: content analysis of issues and debates' agenda analysis.

The analysis of issues is undoubtedly the most intuitive type of content analysis of debates. It consists in characterization of questions, issues or points that are discussed during a debate, often without the techniques or grids of an analysis. This approach to issues is the oldest form of analysis and continues to be approached. Some studies are built around a census that would target the main questions arising from the debate. For example, the work of Blitzer and Rueter (1980) which compile, in a comprehensive manner the issues covered by Ford and Carter during the 1976 campaign. The authors distinguished general and broad topics (*thematic issues*) of smaller and specific topics (*specific issues*). Other studies, such as that of Rewland (1986), address a more evaluative aspect, building a binomial grid - *style vs. substance*, which is commonly used in content analysis of discourses.

The second subgenre of thematic analysis can be exemplified by some studies addressing the topic of debate less intuitive and based on the framework of agenda-setting theory. At its origin, this theory emphasizes the selection and the treatment of actuality by media, stating the idea, now a commonplace, that media doesn't tell us what to think, but what to think at. The concept of public agenda is based upon the idea of forming a hierarchy of topics on the public agenda. Trying to deal with the issues of a debate from agenda setting theory, means not only to identify the main questions that are addressed, but also to study the development and mechanisms that make them the leading current. Inspired by the ideational approach towards debates, Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1979) have proposed a framework for analysis. One will need to consider three agendas in understanding the content of a debate: journalists' agenda who ask questions, the agenda of candidates who answer and electorate's agenda revealed by the opinion polls. The relationship between journalists and candidates / participants in public debate is an aspect that benefited from researchers' attention. This leads to a crucial issue of debates: the control over voters' agenda. To some extent, journalists try to force candidates to speak on

¹ There is an impressive volume of studies that were concerned with the content analysis of public debates, and the main areas of analysis are focusing on the effects of debates and political, formal, syntactic, semantic, argumentative strategies at the level of public debates.

those topics that they want to express. On the other hand, candidates are always free to respond according to their understandings of questions. To summarize, we argue that a debate is to some extent a double confrontation: between the candidates; and between the candidates, on the one hand, and the journalists, on the other hand, in order to control the voters' agenda. The study of Meadow inspired by '80s campaigns (the first Reagan-Anderson, second Carter-Reagan), argues that those who control the debate agenda are the candidates. This paper highlights how the candidates elude the questions in order to introduce the topics they wish to see debated. According to the author, candidates benefit from the debate by reinforcing their positions / statements, the ones stated in their communication campaigns, relying on prudence at the expense of spontaneity and originality.

In conclusion, ideation in public debates depends on agenda setting theory and the imperatives of political marketing and communication. Most of the times, there is a prevalence of substance over style and a focus on the spectacular dimension at the expense of reasoned political argumentation. However, beyond the specific persuasive mass communication strategies, participants in public debate also take into account other elements that contribute to the establishment of ideational approaches. In this respect, participants will relate to previous ideas of audience and their influence on the new ideas presented in debate, the social and cultural environment of the class *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991) and the path dependence.

5. Partisan ideation vs. thematic ideation

There are many ideational strategies that can be addressed in a public debate aimed at the audience persuasion, but this study will focus only on the partisan and thematic strategies. The distinction between partisan and thematic ideation is based on the addressability criterion. While partisan ideation is to express partisan ideas that have a political meaning and are designed to convince the public that shows a certain partisan or ideological loyalty or attachment, thematic ideation is addressed, in particular, to the public concerned about specific issues or, more precisely, to a particular interest of the public which is supposed to take advantage towards party or ideological loyalties. Whereas partisan ideation is closer to social constructivism and the *theory of habitus*² developed by Bourdieu, thematic ideation is inspired by rational choice theory. Based on this distinction, we identify a group of voters that can be convinced by appealing to partisan ideas and arguments (partisan voters) and another category of voters who are influenced by the ideas and arguments expressed on certain immediate interests.

² The notion of habitus is a key concept in Bourdieu's sociological theories, referring to all the acquired perception, appreciation and action schemes inculcated by social context.

In addition to the two issues presented we must analyze the role and the impact of long-term partisan loyalties and perceptions of party positions on key dimensions of problems. In contrast with issue voting theories, some authors argue that partisanship is a generalized force which contributes to the public perceptions about the positioning of parties and the proximity of these positions and their own issue preferences. According to Geoffrey Evans and Robert Andersen from the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (Oxford), partisan polarization on political perceptions plays a crucial role in conditioning the perceptions of a party's positions on an issue. From this perspective, partisan ideation is what ensures the success in a debate.

On a different position lies rational choice theory which considers that the public statements of the parties on certain issues are defining in what concerns the vote. The assumption is that voters have made independent evaluations regarding various issues and perceptions about where a party stands in relation to those problems. Such a perspective is the basis for many approaches linked to partisan competition, voting behavior, discursive strategies used in public debates. Beyond this, an alternative approach of "partisan contamination" will predict that voters' positions regarding the problems and their perceptions of parties' attitudes towards issues are influenced by their partisanship. It is argued that the common lack of well formulated voter's position on certain issues and a clear understanding of where the party stands is probably an expression of the extent to which they feel close to a party rather than an independent basis for deciding whether they will vote for a party. But to what extent voters own perceptions and their perceptions on party positions on certain issues are influenced by the pre-existence of partisan orientations? We should place more emphasis on the role of the partisan influence in trying to determine how the voters decide and on the role of the issues exposed, with subsequent implications for issue voting theories and the understanding of the process of political change.

Geoffrey Evans and Robert Andersen, in their study *Do Issues Decide?*, have tried to calculate the degree to which citizens are initially influenced by partisan attitudes. As variables they used voters' perceptions on The Labour Party policy on four major themes: redistribution, taxes, employment and European integration. The authors demonstrated that perception of issues is indeed fundamentally contaminated by other aspects of political beliefs system. In other words, the causal arrow between the perception of issues and the support for political parties is reversed.

Beyond these general considerations concerning partisan and thematic ideation, it is necessary to compare the two approaches regarding the nature and role of issues' perception vote built around the rise of issue voting and perceptual partisan polarization.

Many researchers have found that increased access of citizens to higher education will lead to a society in which citizens would have a higher level of cognitive complexity, they will follow the political complexity and thus they will act as issue voters. Himmelweit and colleagues have, explicitly, formulated

since 1985 an *issue voting model* which treated voters as consumers that select parties based on their subscription to some policies that produce immediate utility. According to these views, Sniderman and his colleagues (1991) argued that better educated and politically sophisticated people place more weight on issues as a base of their electoral decision, while less sophisticated voters rely more on partisanship and social suggestions.

Many scholars inspired by rational choice theory use scales for estimating the issue distance between parties, voters and subjects of interest. It is believed that voters have independent parties' preferences, perceive the parties' positions on certain issues in a neutral manner and vote for the party that is closest to their own position, "the theory believes that the voter recognizes its own interest, evaluates the candidates based on the criteria that will best meet their interests and expresses the vote to assess the most favorable manner" (Enelow and Hinich 1984, 3). Supporters of issue voting are drawn to its use as a means of understanding party competition and political change as the election context provides a characterization that allows estimation of costs and benefits in the positioning of parties for support on electoral issues (Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler 2000), and provides a basis for deductive theoretical predictions about changes in the structure of opportunities for parties and party systems (Kitschelt 2006). Summarizing, we can say that these are the approaches that support the use of thematic ideation in political debates. As stated in the first chapter on the influence of ideas on activities, interests and actions sometimes reinforce ideas derived from interests. Once the interests are identified, even in an early stage of awareness, the thematic ideation will crystallize opinions derived from those interests.

The second approach comes to support the partisan ideation, and has a long history in political science. Barelson et al (1993, 220) proved that the perceptions of voters about candidates' attitudes seem to be affected by their own preferences: "Every time respondents perceive the candidate's attitudes on a particular issue as being similar to their own attitudes and behavior and being different from an opponent ... This will suffer the effect of deformation - deformation in harmony with political predispositions". The authors of *The American Voter*, also, based their electoral behavior model largely on "the role of strong partisan commitments in shaping attitudes towards political issues" (Campbell et al. 1960, 135). This emphasis continued with Stroke and his observations on a party's ability to color perceptions and also with Converse's emphasize on the centrality of partisan attachments of voters' beliefs systems and peripheral nature themes. More recently, studies of such writers such as Markus (1982) and Zaller (1992, 241) have come to the conclusion that "people tend to accept what is close to their partisan values and to reject what is different", while numerous other studies have emphasized the role of partisan loyalty in the political information process (Rahn 1993). The mechanisms by which consistency between personal perceptions and the ones of the party occur might imply various processes: an expression of party loyalty, party role as a credible

source of information or simply a wish to maintain the appearance of consistency (Gerber and Green 2003). As a result, researchers have built models on changing attitudes and psychological persistence, emphasizing the cognitive costs of keeping some inconsistencies of opinion or cognitive trends in the information. More recently, in contrast to the implications of cognitive mobilization literature, with its emphasis on political knowledge in facilitating issue voting, Zaller (1992, 241) argues that the public sector which is better informed is most likely to be engaged in a partisan resistance “by removing information that does not conform to existing political predispositions”.

While analyzing the effects of electoral debate is the most common approach, however, it can not be determined with certainty, the effects of such debates on voting behavior and voter choices. So even if the public debate is built on the partisan or thematic strategies, the effects of discursive strategy can not be isolated from other contextual factors. The option for one of the two discursive approaches is determined by political marketing objectives and by market indicators such as target segments, social, political, economic context, market share of the party / politician; political competition.

6. Case study: Analysis of thematic and partisan ideational strategies used in Brown-Cameron-Clegg electoral debate (2010, U.K.)

The effects of political debates are neither obvious nor automatic, and as previously stated, they cannot be isolated from other contextual factors that may lead to the perception of a successful participant in a debate. Therefore, this case study will highlight rather whether applicants have taken a partisan or a thematic discursive strategy and we will try to identify the motivational springs for these options. The purpose of this application is not to evaluate the effects of the ideational strategy addressed by candidates, but to identify the types of ideational strategies (partisan or thematic) and to present some of their instantiations. The distinction between partisan and thematic ideation will be related to the analysis' model of ideas from a community of discourse proposed by Robert Wuthnow. The model described by the author begins with the identification of three elements that shape a debate: the social and cultural environment, the institutional framework and action sequences in these contexts. To analyze the ideas themselves, the author distinguishes between the way social and cultural environment is perceived and analyzed (“social horizon”), how new ideas are crystallized as opposed to individual traits of the status quo (“discursive field”) and how problems can be solved through ideas and action type (“figural action”). In the next section of the article, we describe the social environment in which took place the elections of 2010 in Britain, how the candidates advanced new ideas relating to ideas already expressed as norms in diverse partisan communities, pointing out the prototype ideas advanced by candidates intended to solve community problems.

6.1. The context of the British electoral debate

In 2010 three televised debates were broadcasted live by BBC News, between the candidates for the prime minister position: David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg. While attention has turned to the battle between the Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Conservative David Cameron, we highlight the unprecedented opportunity to get a high rating assigned to Nick Clegg, from the Liberal Democratic Party. Until the debate, Liberal Democrats had only 63 of the 646 seats at Westminster, but polls presented by Times, on the eve of the debate, credited the conservatives with 36%, with only 3% more than The Labour Party. In these circumstances, Nick Clegg's party could reach 21%, a situation which would give the Liberal Democrats a privileged position in a future coalition, if either of the two main parties do not get a clear majority.

General political context of elections considered in this case study is one in which trust is subject to doubt after 13 years of Labour government holding power with three consecutive terms. The fight to win a fourth term for Labour is difficult. Prime Minister in office and candidate of The Labour Party, Gordon Brown, is a politician who was treated harshly in the media age. He is not easy charm and charismatic qualities demanded by television, Internet, Twitter and other new media. Brown called for a debate on substance, but style and substance are now indivisible. The main rival is the conservative David Cameron. Disbelief in Cameron is directly related to distrust in the prime minister. If Brown was unable to defend his own proposals to the government, the Conservative leader failed to set an agenda to convince the opposition. Conservative leader promised an "efficient and calm" government, a promise once used by Brown. The third candidate, Nick Clegg, a kind of Obama in a British version, prefigures a remarkable performance for the Liberal Democratic Party leader in the campaign that can be measured by percentages revealed by opinion polls. Given the peculiarity of British electoral system that favors The Labour Party and the Conservatives, the Liberal Democratic Party is expected to get the third place, no matter its candidate performance in campaign.

To summarize, the context of the electoral debate in Britain is characterized by a distrust of the electorate in the main election rivals and ambiguous messages addressed to the partisan voters and the issues ones. The third debate, and last, was therefore an opportunity for the candidates to express clear statements towards their electorate.

6.2. The structure of the electoral debate

The final electoral debate in Great Britain was held at the University of Birmingham and took over the debate format with a moderator and questions from the audience, which had focused the dialogue on certain topics. The literature concerned with communicative attitudes during town-hall debates argues that this type of televised debates are characterized by less aggressive

attitude, disposition to dialogue and diminished conflicting attitudes (Bernier and Moniere 1991). Perhaps these considerations were the main reasons for adopting this format of the debate. The debate structure was the following: opening speeches of candidates, questions from the audience and candidates' answers, a dialogue moderated by the host of the debate; the candidates' final speeches. The whole debate lasted 90 minutes. Eight questions introduced different topics on the agenda of the debate, as follows:

Question 1 (Q1): Can you be honest about cuts in government spending?

Question 2 (Q2): If you are elected, what will you do about taxes?

Question 3 (Q3): What will you do about bank bonuses?

Question 4 (Q4): How do you rebuild the manufacturing capacity of our country?

Question 5 (Q5): Are you aware that politicians were removed from the people's worries about immigration?

Question 6 (Q6) What will your party do to help families with housing problems?

Question 7 (Q7): What will you do to limit the abuse of state benefits?

Question 8 (Q8) What will you do to ensure that disadvantaged young people have equal life opportunities with others?

The topics proposed for discussion are, mainly, general issues - budget spending, taxes, industry, housing, aid, equal opportunities, but there are some specific issues such as bank bonuses and immigration. We note that all general topics introduced in the British debate allow a different positioning taking into account the party lines and ideological traditions of action. The following figure shows, in a graphical synthetic form the issues proposed for discussion and their relationship with the categories of voters, respectively the ideational strategies used.

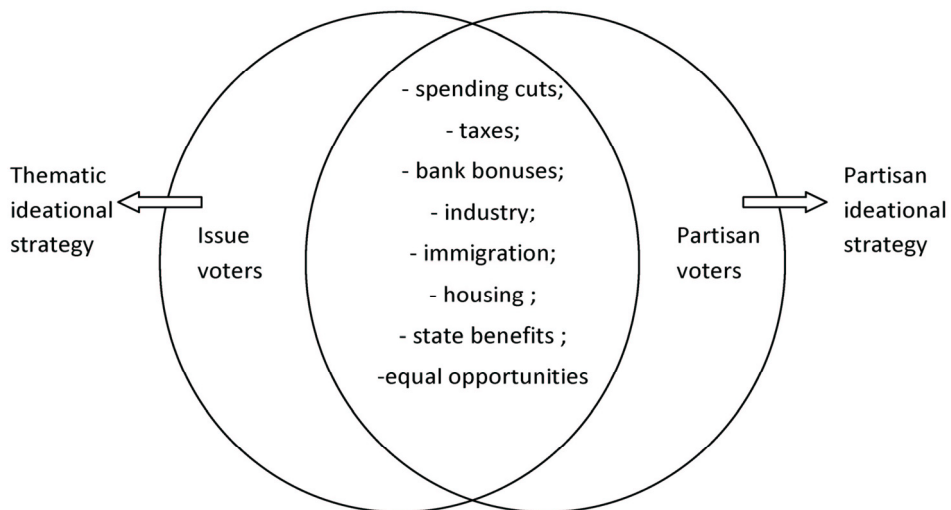


Figure 1: Ideational strategies, debate issues and categories of voters

Thus, the organizational frame and the ground for path dependency were created by setting some general topics of debate. Of the six general themes that can be valued both by partisan ideation and thematic ideation, we choose for a more detailed analysis the topic of spending cuts.

6.3. The Topic of Spending Cuts

The subject of cutting the currently governmental spending is present in the ideologies of the three parties represented in the analyzed electoral debate. At the question: *Can you be honest about cuts in government spending?*, each candidate had four discursive interventions in which they had the opportunity to express either partisan or thematic ideas inspired by the subject under discussion. Forward, we analyze the ideation of the three participants in the electoral debate, holding that the discursive construction is aimed to convince the audience.

The first of the three participants who was given the word was the representative of Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, who expressed the following ideas:

- A1: the efficient spending of budget savings are insufficient so there is a need to give up various projects;
- A2: proposal to bring together political leaders to work on this issue;
- A3: people will not accept these measures only if they are correct;
- A4: the need to introduce a reverse charge so that people with low income, ordinary income, to benefit from a £ 700 tax break, they will not pay any income tax for the first £ 10,000 earned;
- A5: if there isn't fairness at the basis of everything will be very difficult to overcome the difficulties;
- A6: proposal to bring together chancellors and vice chancellors of parties, to form the Financial Stability Board to deal with this situation together.

In order to correctly interpret Nick Clegg's ideation from his answers, as a partisan or thematic one, it is necessary to present some fundamental principles of liberal-democratic ideology. As a political philosophy, liberalism has developed around the belief in individual rights and freedom of choice. This idea has developed into a modern political movement that gave the state an important role in achieving equal opportunities and reducing poverty and discrimination. Liberal Democrats are a political party that supports constitutional and electoral reform, progressive taxation, wealth taxation, human rights, cultural liberalism, banking reform and civil liberties. The first paragraph of the preamble of the doctrine of liberal Democrats say: "Liberal Democrats exist to build and defend a fair society, free and open, to try to balance the fundamental values of freedom, equality and community and no one should be enslaved by poverty, ignorance and conformity." Social liberals, in electoral campaigns in general, argue for the increase of government spending on disadvantaged classes and increasing taxes for the rich. The economic view of social liberals supports the need for a welfare state.

We note that of the six ideas expressed by Clegg on reducing spending, four refer to thematic ideation (A1, 2,4,6), while the two approaches (A3, 5) are reminiscent of party ideology. In fact, partisan ideation present at this level of debate can be found in the same terms, in the party's political program suggestively titled: *Change that works for you-building a fairer Britain*.

The second candidate, the Labour Gordon Brown, answered to the issue of reducing spending by advancing a number of ideas:

A1: deficit reduction plan for four years beginning in 2011;

A2: increasing of the taxes correctly, spending cuts that are equitable ; encouraging growth that is essential for economic recovery;

A3: raising taxes on incomes over £ 100,000, raising taxes on pensions in excess of £ 100,000 and increase of National Insurance;

A4: a principle that won't be violated: reducing the cost of National Health System (NHS), schools and police;

A5: support for the economy this year, if we fail to support the economy, it will face a recession twice as severe;

A6: will be cuts but not the NHS, schools or police, we undertake to keep the front-line services;

A7: reduce capital investment;

A8: payments of public services will increase as they did in previous years;

A9: the pension system will be reformed;

A10: we should support the economy, we can not afford to lose jobs and businesses;

A11: you must maintain recovery and support, not to make the mistakes that had been made in the years 1930, 1980 and 1990;

A12: support for economy until recovery is assured;

A13: international institutions warns: do not withdraw support to the economy, it will not recover;

A14: the reduction of the deficit should be made when the economy recovers;

A15: if the economy is sinking, if we contract it, if we make the mistakes of 1930, we lose jobs, lose economic growth, lose business;

A16: we should support the economy until it is fully recovered;

A17: to get money out of the economy at this moment, for ideological reasons, is to put recovery at risk.

The first intervention of the Labour prime minister is quite extensive and consists of successive iterations of ideas. To understand the ideational logic of the Labour candidate, we should recall several ideological considerations. The Labour Party was formed in order to represent the working class. Two highlights of the Labour political program, over the years have been the welfare state and the nationalization of key industries. Since 1979, The Labour Party has entered a long period of opposition (18 years), when the Conservatives and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to power. The latter have won four consecutive general elections. In response to successive loss of the election, it appeared "new Labourism" directed against traditional forces and their commitment to socialism. In a symbolic break with the past, *clause four* of the party's ideology regarding

the commitment to nationalization was eliminated. Positioned as a center-left party, the Labour Party won elections in 1997 in a time when conservatives seemed to be out of ideas. As a center-left party on its policies, The Labour Party has been labeled as a party of “capitalist workers “. Historically, the party was clearly in favor of socialism, as mentioned in clause four of the original constitution of the party, and advocated socialist policies such as public ownership of key industries, government intervention in the economy, redistributing wealth, increased rights for workers, the welfare, health systems and public funded education. Starting in the late 80s and until today, the party adopted free market policies, this approach leads many political scientists to describe The Labour Party as a social-democratic or Third Way, rather than democratic socialist.

In the current political agenda of The Labour Party (*A future fair for all, Rebuilding economy*), social protection, strengthen public services by supporting society-education, health, immigration, green energy, innovation, communities, are party’s priorities for action. Of the 17 ideas listed by Brown, five can be included within the thematic ideation (A1, 2,3,7,15), but even those involve a partisan discourse. The remaining ideas expressed are inspired by partisan ideation emphasizing the need for support for preserving jobs, social services and redistribution of revenues. Partisan appeal is obvious and sustained throughout the discursive interventions.

Conservative candidate David Cameron addresses an ideational strategy with 14 points:

A1: freezing public sector wages in 2011;

A2: people will have to retire a year later beginning with 2016;

A3: you must begin to make efficiency savings to reduce taxation on jobs next year;

A4: hiring people again in the UK;

A5: to make economy work to help us with the deficit;

A6: if you save 6 billion this year, we reduce jobs taxation next year, that means to save one pound per 100 pounds on the government spending;

A7: the recovery’s risk is not to cut losses;

A8: the risk is increasing National Insurance for every job in the country;

A9: to eliminate further losses and to reduce taxes, this will help the economy to move;

A10: there are 5 million unemployed people benefiting from state aid, this are people who could work and we will give them training and work;

A11: if you don’t accept to work, you should not claim for benefits;

A12: stop the government wasting in order to put money back in people's pockets;

A13: to save £ 1 spent in a hundred is what government should do as families, small businesses, large companies have already done in this country;

A14: taxes will not increase for those earning 20 000 - 21 000 pounds, they are not rich people, they wouldn’t have to pay for government mistakes.

Like its main opponent, David Cameron used a mostly partisan ideation in answers regarding the plans to reduce governmental spending. Its support for free trade and financial stability are in fact two ideas that were the foundations of modern conservatism. One of the fundamental principles of the party is the opposition to state intervention in private economy. Free trade, euroskepticism, reducing direct taxation and support for the idea that the country needs a dynamic and competitive economy are other main objectives of conservative doctrine, with the vision of development that any growth should be divided between tax cuts and higher public investment. Other guiding principles that we find in the conservative doctrine refers to restoring discipline, promotion of private property and entrepreneurship, maintaining a strong military component and preserve traditional values and cultural institutions. In line with party doctrine, conservative political program developed in the elections of 2010 (*Invitation to join the government of Britain / we have all in this together*) focuses on economic macroeconomic stability, encouraging employment, entrepreneurship, reform of public services for an amount more money and promote the national interest. Of the 14 ideas presented by Cameron, only two (A1, 2) convey a thematic ideation, the rest are designed to enable the party loyalties and ideological middle class and small business sectors' loyalties.

After analyzing the ideas expressed in relation to budgetary expenditures we note that representatives of parties with strong ideological polarization choose partisan positions occupying obviously divergent ideation. Liberal Democrat candidate, Nick Clegg, has an ideational strategy that proves a more balanced relationship between the thematic approach and partisan one, perhaps because his party's ideology is ambiguous towards spending cuts combining the political principles of right and left as well. The conclusion drawn from the ideational analysis of the first topic in this electoral debate is that where there are clear ideological positions, candidates will rely on the path dependency of voters and will resort to partisan ideation. The time allocated to topics under discussion proves the growing interest of candidates for topics that may be ideologically colored.

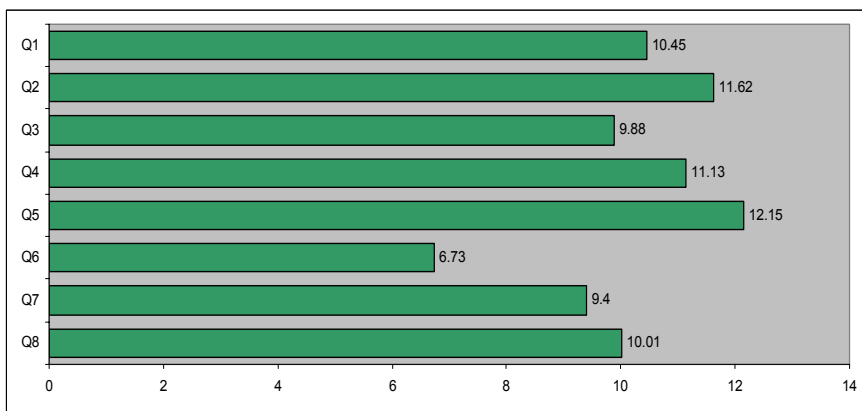


Chart 1: Time spent per questions

The specific topic of immigration is one that has benefited from an extended time period for debating, although the immigration issue invites thematic ideation, followed by the subject of taxes, industry and spending cuts, the latter having an ideological foundation. Another quantitative evaluation of interventions can demonstrate the interest of the Labour and Conservative candidates for ideological themes that can be capitalized. The chart below shows the amplitude of the candidates' responses to questions in debate.

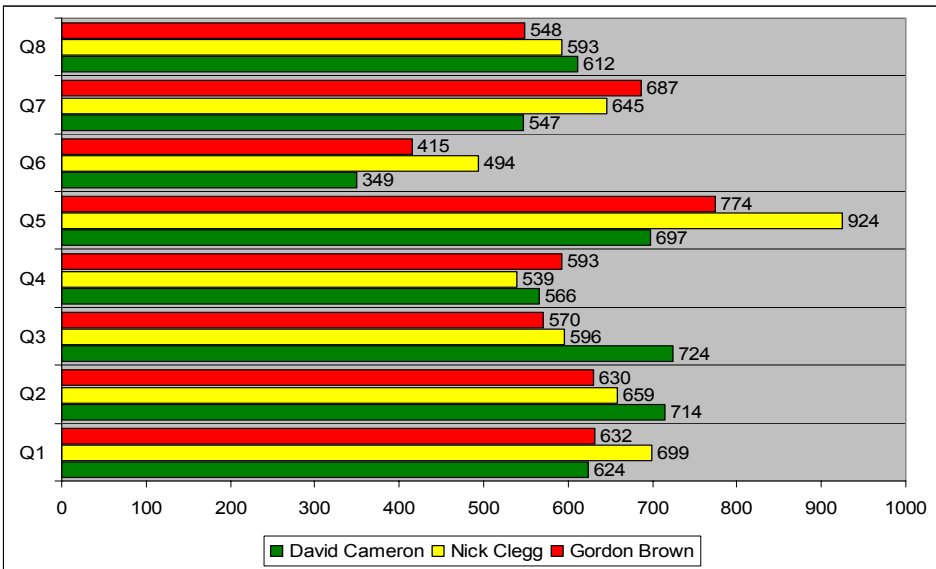


Chart 2: Number of words uttered by candidates for the questions

Although candidates' answers and questions were raised in the presence of a moderator, noted that those subjects who achieved the ideological core of the candidates have received more extensive answers. Thus, Cameron has paid attention (in comparison with political opponents) to subjects as taxes and banking policy in line with conservative ideology, while Brown gave a sample of partisan ideation on state benefits. Nick Clegg distinguished himself by a thematic strategy, relying on a broad approach of specific topics, like immigration. This issue has occupied the largest time unit of all themes and interventions of the Liberal Democrat candidate. It is easy to highlight the thematic ideational strategy of the latter.

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