Review

Television Debates as a TV Typology: Continuities and Changes in Televised Political Competition—The Case of the 2023 Pre-Election Debates in Greece

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Abstract: In the USA, for the first time in the 1960s, and in a very systematic manner from 1976 onwards, pre-election debates (televised presidential debates) have become a fundamental and integral method of communication for political parties, as well as an institution of American democracy that contributes significantly to shaping a culture of public political dialogue at a relatively high level, through which citizens accumulate knowledge about political figures and their parties' positions within a very short period of time before the elections. In Greece, on the contrary, these television programs have not sparked significant interest to date. The subject of this study is the television debates in Greece, evaluated through a brief historical overview and commentary on their structure, culminating in the two televised confrontations that took place within a five-month period during two electoral contests in 2023. Firstly, the reactions to and reception of the two televised debates by citizens on platform X and, secondly, the commentary on the two debates by journalists, columnists, and renowned analysts, reveal the differing interests of both sides. The research results confirm that, in addition to the performance of politicians, citizens are also interested in the conditions and form in which these pre-election televised debates are staged.

Keywords: political communication; television debates; social media; newspapers; journalism

1. Introduction

In the early years of radio, specifically during the 1920s, the League of Women Voters in the USA began organizing weekly debates on various serious issues, but did not yet include presidential debates (Jamieson and Birdsell 1998). These debates were conducted by the League during the presidential elections of 1976, 1980, and 1984, while from 1988 to the present, the debates between presidential and vice-presidential candidates have been organized by the Commission on Presidential Debates, an independent, non-profit organization.

Ancient Athens, with its Ecclesia and the sophist Protagoras, is considered by many to be the originator of the early debates (Matsaganis and Weingarten 2001). Greek philosophers believed that true arguments can always appear more persuasive than false ones, if the conditions under which they are presented are organized, such as within the framework of a dialogue with rules, so that all participants have equal opportunities, e.g., in regards to response time. Therefore, they argued, if two equally powerful speakers have equal time to present their conflicting arguments on an issue, the audience should be able to distinguish truth from falsehood and reach the correct conclusion (Kraus 2000).

In modern times, the USA stands out as the country that has exhibited a culture of public political dialogue since the 19th century. The American political system has matured alongside the debate format, starting with rhetorical contests in major universities and subsequently evolving into political dialogues, with the pinnacle being the public

debates between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858, which began as a form of political spectacle (Perloff 2014). With the evolution of communication, the audience for this spectacle became massified through radio and later, television.

This study focuses on political debates in Greece, specifically comparing the public and media discussions surrounding the two debates held in the country in 2023. More precisely, 368 tweets and 39 articles published in mass media, were studied using the content analysis method. We aim to identify the key players in these discussions and the topics most emphasized by both social media users and journalists–opinion leaders. By examining these elements, we will ultimately look for the extent to which online discussions about the debates are reflected in media coverage (main research question).

2. The Impact of TV Debates on Political Communication

A principal "effect" of communication is that it generates more communication. Live media events, such as debates in the USA during the 1970s, are considered to be an evolving institution significant for the electoral process (Chaffee 1978), as they provide condensed doses of political knowledge and increase awareness levels among the broader public (Lanoue 1991, 1992). Even those who did not watch these dialogic confrontations are engaged in their discussion simply because others talk about them and because the media extensively assesses the results of the debates after they occur (Kennamer 1987). The post-debate effort, such as "meta-debating" or the so-called "debate after the debate" itself, is an integral part of the televisual combat process, with a considerable influence on public opinion until the moment of judgment, or until the exercise of the electoral right (Kennamer 1987). However, this discussion, like the debate itself, constitutes points interacting within a linear progression—a nexus—that also includes the psychology, beliefs, and biases of individuals; the prevailing political climate; and certainly, the process of "priming" or "priority judgment" on the part of the media (Graber 1978; Blumler et al. 2017).

The findings on which most studies converge, those related to the characteristics of the impact of debates on the public, are that (a) debates rarely bring about dramatic and immediate changes in voting during an electoral campaign (Lang and Lang 1962) and that (b) they reinforce the pre-formed political opinion of politically active and highly involved citizens (Jamieson and Adasiewicz 2000; Benoit and Hansen 2004; Perloff 2014). In simple terms, this means that the voter who judges that Candidate X won the debate was already a supporter of Candidate X before the debate took place. People generally prefer to expose themselves to information they agree with rather than to that with which they disagree (Benoit et al. 2003).

So, despite the media hype about an upcoming debate, it is more likely to attract supporters who have already decided which candidate they will support and who mainly watch the debate in order to cheer for their own candidate. Voters who have already formed an opinion about the candidates may not find it easy to change it based on the results of one televised debate. Finally, some voters with little interest in politics who are still undecided may not even watch the debate. Thus, a victory in a debate by a candidate considered an outsider may not influence voters' decisions at all.

In most cases, debates simply solidify the frontrunner's position (Perloff 2014), and the success of a debate is considered to be whether it manages to capture the attention of non-supporters, non-active politically engaged voters, and certainly, undecided ones (Mulder 1978; McKinney and Carlin 2004), especially in countries like Greece, where it is believed that the main channels of political information and the primary sites of persuasion and consensus-building between politician and citizen are traditional family, church, baptisms and weddings, and general social relationships, essentially involving interpersonal contact and interaction (Weaver 2003).

The so-called "format" of American debates is not written on Moses' tablets, and over the decades, it constantly changes, although the historic 1960 debate between Kennedy and Nixon served as the "precedent" that has since been repeated with more or fewer modifications (Kraus 2000).

Debate is not simply a matter of "dramatization" (Reinemann and Wilke 2007) of electoral campaigns, according to this perspective. The invasion of television into the realm of political communication and electoral campaigns radically changes the setup, structure, and objectives of debates. In Greece respectively, this occurred with significant delay, during the 1990s, coinciding with the emergence of private television. According to Vamvakas (2006, p. 47), however, the introduction of television into the arena of political confrontation "does not signify a radical change but an evolution, an individual manifestation of the modern pre-election practices of political parties". The "turning point" for political communication in Greece is considered to be 1996, as in the particular national elections of this year, (a) the "balcony", i.e., the podium for the political leader's speech, moves to the square (Vamvakas 2006, p. 19), (b) negative political advertising by parties increases significantly (Papathanassopoulos 2000), (c) the distribution of television airtime is strictly regulated to ensure equal exposure for all parties on both public and private channels, and (d) a debate between the two prime ministerial candidates, Kostas Simitis and Miltiadis Evert, takes place, historically, for the first time in a television studio.

The American presidential debates vary, from discussions between the two candidates, with a moderator and without journalists, with journalists present, with an audience submitting questions, with candidates either fixed on podiums or free to move in a "town-hall" format, with lower or higher podiums for the candidates, etc. (Kraus 2000; Polsby et al. 2012). A "rule" that was violated twice, in 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan debated Independent John Anderson, with Democrat Jimmy Carter absent; and in 1992, when Republican George Bush debated Democrat Bill Clinton, with Independent Ross Perot also taking part, was rule that participants in presidential debates would be limited solely to the heads of the two major parties, Democrat and Republican. In conclusion, despite being institutionalized and mandatory in the USA, in his book on the history of two decades of American televised debates, Kraus (2000) concludes that "candidates (i.e., presidents) control the negotiating process, primarily by threatening non-participation or by the ability to publicly expose sponsors and journalists". There is a risk in a given electoral context that a major candidate may refuse to participate in a debate, as Carter did in 1980.

However, the same level of commitment to participating in presidential debates does not exist in any other country in the world, just as it does not exist in Greece. A primary factor that may act as a deterrent for holding a pre-election televised debate is the incumbent or outgoing leader. The advantages of participating in a debate are always comparable and never the same among candidates. "Who" will participate in a debate is obviously a fundamental condition that affects the entirety of a confrontation (The Racine Group 2002). From the early history of the institution in the USA, it is argued that even when there was no incumbent president, the one presumed to be ahead in various polls had very little to gain by legitimizing an opponent in a face-to-face confrontation (Jamieson and Birdsell 1998; Maier 2023).

To the extent that they could influence the election outcome, debates are more likely to harm incumbent leaders than their challengers. The latter may earn the respect of the public simply by maintaining their composure and delivering a flawless performance, solely because they will be on equal footing with the holder of a high public office (Polsby et al. 2012). Nixon wrote in his autobiography, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (1978), that he received advice against debating Reagan from all sides of his campaign team, including from his boss, President Eisenhower, but he argues that if he had done so, the other side and the media would have turned his refusal into a central campaign issue (Self 2005). A similar sentiment was expressed about the Bakoyannis–Doukas debate, which we will discuss further later on.

3. X (Formerly Twitter) as a New Political Communication Tool

Social media can contribute to shaping public opinion, as it allows direct communication between citizens, as well as between citizens and politicians. In this respect, it can

contribute to the political process because it provides a public sphere platform and because it allows direct communication (and indeed discussion) on matters of common interest (Siapera 2017).

According to Karlsen and Enjolras (2016), Twitter allows individual candidates to organize their campaigns independently of the central party, thereby influencing power relationships within political parties. The findings of Kruikemeier (2014), moreover, show that the use of Twitter has positive consequences for political candidates. Specifically, candidates who used Twitter to engage with citizens during their political campaigns received more votes than those who did not use Twitter interactively.

3.1. The Role of X (Twitter) in Election Periods

The rise of Twitter internationally as an important factor in election campaigns, although a relatively recent phenomenon, has already been documented by international academic research (Christensen 2013). Jürgens et al. (2011), as well as Bruns and Burgess (2011), revealed that messages with political content published on Twitter are usually related to a political event, increasing in number as the specific event approaches (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013).

Research on the role of Twitter in pre-election periods could be divided into three categories: (i) research that analyzes Twitter as a means of predicting and/or influencing election results, (ii) research that approaches Twitter as a public sphere that encourages consultation regarding related issues, and (iii) research that focuses on unmediated communication between the two poles of political communication, politicians and citizens.

Holding a dominant position in the research concerning the use of Twitter as a tool for pre-election campaigns are the election periods in the USA. For example, Jablonski (2014) studied the 2014 election contest and demonstrated that social media could significantly increase political campaign financing, influence undecided voters more than traditional campaigns, and minimize the cost of communicating with voters. A few years later, Barack Obama's successful campaign in the USA in 2008 made history with its massive use of participatory Internet tools and turned Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and other social media into integral elements in the political campaign toolbox (Tumasjan et al. 2010). Not a few analysts attribute Obama's particular victory to his online campaign conducted through social media, since realizing their important role, the communication staffs of the two candidates of the 2008 election tried to use the possibilities of Twitter to their advantage. This was the first election period in American history when US presidential candidates used participatory websites so extensively that they were considered tools of the political campaign and Twitter became an official communication channel in the political arena (Tumasjan et al. 2010).

But it was in 2012, when with the description of the election as "the most publicized political event in the history of the USA", the weakening of the role of the press and radio in the mediatization process of politics was observed (Christensen 2013). The real "battlefield" had now moved the power which was recognized and used by both traditional media and political campaigners to the internet.

Christensen (2013) captures a broader picture of how the minority party (Republican Party) candidates in the 2012 US election used Twitter in their election campaign. The goal was twofold, as at the same time, it attempted to identify the issues that led citizens to participate in "conversations" using the new instrument.

Going a step further, recent research provides evidence that the content of messages posted on social media can be used to validly predict political campaign outcomes (Tumasjan et al. 2010). In Germany, Tumasjan et al. (2010) examined whether Twitter is used specifically as a forum for political consultation in the case of the German Federal Election. The results of his research demonstrate that indeed, citizens do not choose Twitter only to spread their political views, but also use it extensively as a means of political discussion with other users. In addition, he argues that the number of messages alone reflects voter preferences. The references to the parties (mentions) during the pre-election period reflect

the result of the elections, while in particular, the references of the publications to the two dominant parties go hand in hand with the political ties and alliances of the offline world. It also shows that the results offered by the analysis of the messages published on Twitter are very close to those of traditional polls, with the opinions expressed through the platform showing a response to the programs of the political parties. As a result, Tumasjan et al. (2010) analyzes how Twitter activity can be used to predict the popularity of parties and coalitions in the real world.

On the contrary, Bruns (2017) examining the use of Twitter at the state level in Australia, concludes that any attempt to predict election results from the relevant activity on Twitter should be approached with great caution. It also highlights the limited usefulness of measuring mentions made in political accounts, as it offers relative visibility of the phenomenon, without investigating in depth the context in which these names are mentioned. As for hashtags, they are dominated by a small community of less than 1000 users, whose interactions, while interesting in terms of the high level of engagement between users, are not representative of the electorate.

In conclusion, it seems that Twitter has already turned into a key tool for candidates' election campaigns in Western countries. Politicians very quickly realized the positive contribution of Twitter to direct communication with their voters and adapted from the beginning to the new communication rules set by the medium. In fact, in some cases, we notice that it is the politicians who seek this direct communication with citizens, encouraging the democratization of political communication.

3.2. X (Twitter) as a Public Sphere in Pre-Election Periods

According to Denton and Woodward (1990), political communication is the public discussion of the allocation of public resources, official authority, and official sanctions. Aiming to investigate Twitter as such a space, i.e., a public sphere, Jürgens and Jungherr (2015) demonstrated that during the 2009 German Federal Election campaign, Twitter not only served as a source of news for the media, but it also turned into a public stage for politically active users, a pluralistic sphere of public communication that creates hopes for a non-ideological, decentralized, and more egalitarian diffusion of political information (Jürgens and Jungherr 2015).

In the case of Austria, Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) present a series of insights into how national policies are debated on Twitter and how participants in these debates network with each other through the public sphere. The findings show that in general, the Twitter sphere, in terms of political discussion, is dominated by famous journalists, pundits, and politicians, or in other words, "opinion leaders". These important players in Austrian politics form their own dense and influential sub-network in the wider Twitter sphere. Non-professionals in politics and journalism can participate in this network, with conditions. The conclusion he reaches is that as a medium, although Twitter facilitates connections between politicians and citizens, giving "ordinary" citizens the opportunity to engage in discussions, it is essentially a field for the already established actors of political communication.

In Italy, the findings of Vaccari (2013) concluded that there is a strong correlation between political issues discussed in online social media and those observed in interpersonal political communication. The research concerns the messages published by citizens during the Italian General Elections of 2013. The main conclusion of the study is that Twitter users often relay online the face-to-face political conversations they encounter in everyday life (Vaccari 2013). He also points to the possibility that as more citizens begin to use social media to communicate about political issues, offline political discussions will also increase. The results of the research clearly show that what happens in online media does not stay in the online environment, but is transferred to offline communications, affecting the face-to-face conversations of citizens (Vaccari 2013).

The research findings reviewed demonstrate the powerful role of Twitter in the public sphere during pre-election periods. In fact, in the countries of the West, much of the public political debate has been transferred to Twitter, providing the opportunity to participate

to a large proportion of the citizens. It is also important to note, that in confirmation of the results of the research we examined in the previous section, the Twitter sphere, in terms of political discussions during pre-election periods, is dominated by journalists and politicians. However, as far as Greece is concerned, the media and journalists have not effectively embraced the communication challenges arising from advancements in social media, particularly during election cycles (Gioltzidou et al. 2024a).

4. Methodology

The subject of this study is the political debates in Greece. Specifically, through the study of the two debates held in the country in 2023, the study attempts to compare the discussion taking place regarding the debates, both in the public sphere and in the media.

This study delves into the realm of the political debates in Greece, specifically examining the public and media discourses surrounding the two debates held in the country in 2023. The research aims to identify the key individuals who initiate discussions on the social media platform X during these televised political debates. Additionally, it explores the thematic foci of these social media discussions and compares them to the topics emphasized by journalists, pundits, and political analysts in online media coverage. By analyzing these elements, the study ultimately seeks to determine the extent to which online discussions about the debates are reflected in media coverage.

The two periods studied include the two debates held in Greece in 2023: (a) the 10 May 2023 debate between political leaders, held ahead of the first national election showdown, and (b) the debate between the candidates for mayor of Athens, Kostas Bakoyannis and Haris Doukas, on 11 October 2023, which was held on the occasion of the repeat round of the municipal elections.

First, the participation of X users in discussions concerning the specific debates is studied. Emphasis is placed on the identity of the users, the content of their messages, and the elements that highlight certain messages as influential (number of retweets, comments, etc.). To map the dimensions of users' identity and the topics they discuss, we collected user activity data (tweets, etc.) for the period of one week after each debate. We aggregate the set of tweets published during the two periods under consideration, using the Twitter API (application programming interface), which collects tweets in real time. The purpose of the study was to select appropriate, popular hashtags, determined by careful observation of Twitter communication. To select the popular hashtags, we systematically monitored the network and the conversations during the debates, as well as during their evolution. In the next stage, users of X (formerly Twitter) were categorized based on Lotan et al.'s (2011) study, "after several phases of coding". The main groups of users identified are three, and the definition of each user in the respective category was created according to the short self-presentation that X allows them to add to their profile. The three categories of users are: citizens, politicians, and journalists. The messages posted by the users were then analyzed. The classification of the messages into categories was based on the empirically grounded theory method (Lotan et al. 2011). After continuous readings of the published messages, we identified seven main categories of content, using content analysis as a method (Table 1). The seven content categories are: positive/negative comments about the politicians participating in the debate (e.g., He reminds me of an unread student in exams who discreetly looks at the prescription at his feet... UNREADABLE Mr. Doukas #Μπακογιαννης #ERTDEBATE), positive/negative comments about the journalists participating in the debate (e.g., Yesterday, Tzima, asking Tsipras about pensions, made a very serious mistake, which those who heard her, believed her like the fools that she is. He charged the SYRIZA government with 22 pension cuts. We know very well that they did not happen on SYRIZA. Too bad Tsipras didn't answer her #debate), positive/negative comments about the format of the debate, and the "other" category (e.g., The success of #ERTDEBATE is due to @KBakoyannis @h_doukas accepting the journalists' terms. Until now, the exact opposite has happened. This model was implemented by @kouviek in the

pre-election period and is the only creative path for candidate confrontations), which refers to messages that do not fit into any of the other categories.

Table 1. Variables of content categories.

Content Categories	
Positive comments about the politicians participating in the debate	Negative comments about the politicians participating in the debate
Positive comments about the journalists participating in the debate	Negative comments about the journalists participating in the debate
Positive comments about the format of the debate	Negative comments about the format of the debate
Other	

Subsequently, articles on online media, published up to one week after the debate, were searched to identify similarities and differences in the issues that concern citizens and journalists, columnists, and analysts. The search was performed using keywords in major news websites of different political directions. Reports about protagonists' responses during the two televised debates were excluded from the corpus of our research.

We found 24 texts, posted within a week of the debates, related to the political leaders' debate on 10 May 2023. They are written by journalists, a university professor, and two regular columnists, while two others are signed under pseudonyms. One of the articles is an interview with seven journalists that summarizes almost all of the days' criticism of the debate. For the debate between the two mayoral candidates of Athens, respectively, in the runoff for the October 2023 elections, we identified, in the same manner, 15 text articles. The same research methodology as that used for Twitter was followed, but since the authors of the articles were mainly journalists, we focused on their content. Their subject categorization was conducted according to the criteria discussed above for Twitter (Lotan et al. 2011).

5. Results

5.1. The Analysis of Conversations on X

Our research regarding the discussions on X yielded a significant finding: citizen-initiated discussions constitute the majority of discussions (Figure 1). Moreover, citizens not only initiate more discussions, but also contribute more actively to ongoing conversations. This finding highlights the platform's potential as a space for democratic discourse and the active role of citizens in shaping online conversations. It is crucial to emphasize the equitable nature of the discussions of the research. Unlike traditional forms of communication, where discourse is controlled by a select few, social media empowers every user to initiate and engage in conversations. This facilitates the expression of diverse viewpoints and fosters a multifaceted dialogue, as we observe in the present research. The research affirms the significance of equitable discussions. According to Jenkins (2006), the "participatory culture" cultivated on social media encourages active user involvement in content creation and opinion expression.

As we notice in the case of the debate for the local government elections (Figure 2), the dominant content of the messages were negative comments about the participating politicians (79%). This overwhelming negativity suggests a high level of public dissatisfaction with the candidates' performance or their stances on issues. However, there is an interesting counterpoint. Despite the dominance of negativity towards politicians, a relatively large percentage (12%) of messages contained positive comments about the politicians themselves. While this percentage is significantly smaller than that regarding the negative comments, it suggests that a portion of the audience found points worth commending in the politicians' performances. The analysis also highlights the public's relative indifference towards the debate's organization. Positive comments about the debate's format or struc-

ture made up only 4% of the total. This, combined with the fact that negative comments about the organization were particularly low, could be interpreted in two ways: either viewers found the debate well-organized and did not feel the need to comment on this element, or they were simply more focused on the content of the discussion itself. Viewers seemingly were not preoccupied with the debate's logistics and remained engaged with the core political exchange.
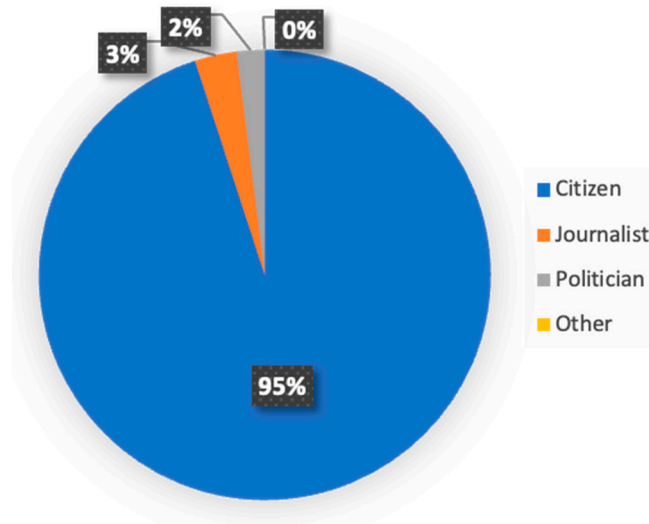

Figure 1. Frequency graph of user categories regarding political leaders—national elections 2023.
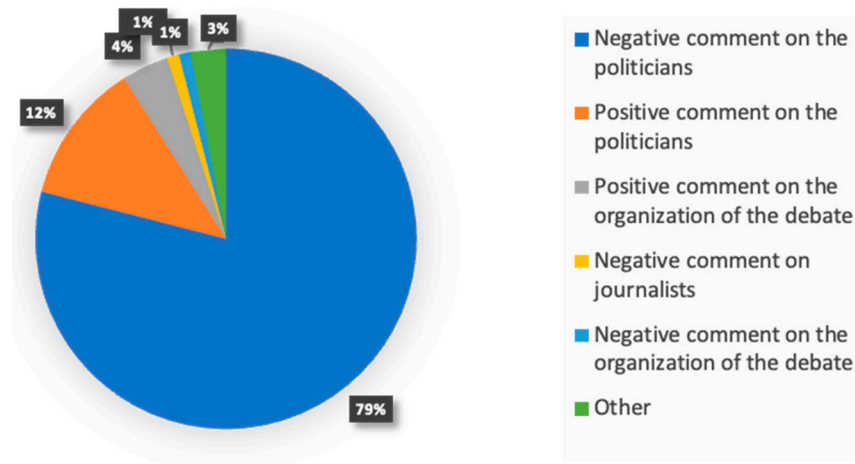
Figure 2. Frequency graph of content categories—local government elections.

In the analysis of Figure 3, we observe that negative comments about political leaders dominate (75%), almost reaching the levels of those regarding the local elections. The main types of negative comments about politicians include policy criticism, personal attacks, and disparagement of their general debate style. Negative criticism also extends to journalists (2nd most popular category), perhaps due to the unsuitable conditions for the debate. In contrast to the previous debate, positive comments about the organization and politicians are completely absent, while positive comments about journalists remain at the same level as that for the local elections. While positive comments about politicians are rare, there may be positive comments about aspects of their performance (e.g., strong arguments, engaging personality).
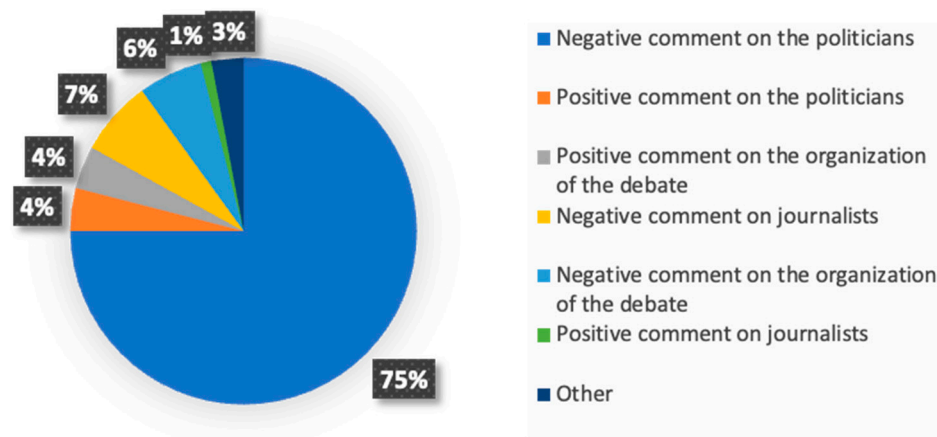
Figure 3. Frequency graph of content categories regarding political leaders—national elections 2023.

Moreover, a popular feature of Twitter is the ability for users to reply to another user's message (Table 2). The responses show the degree of desire of users to participate in discussions, to express their opinion, or to learn the opinion of other users. The more replies a message receives, the more popular it is. In the table below, we notice that the average for the periods we are examining is 3.5 responses per message. The maximum number of replies was 184, a particularly large number, considering the short lifetime of messages on X. However, the analyze of the distribution of replies reveals that most messages receive few replies, and a small number generate a large volume of responses. This suggests that a small percentage of tweets drive a significant portion of the engagement on the platform.

Table 2. Number of comments on tweets.

Comments	
Max	184
Average	3.585831

A second function of interest to us in this research is message reposting (Table 3). As a tactic, it is used to indicate the user's identity regarding a message posted by another user. The purpose of the analysis is to determine which topics generate the most interest among Twitter users, with "retweet" defined as the motivation to promote the message to followers or mark it as a "favorite". In the following table, we notice that users are highly united in the opinions they express and identify with the positions of other users to a great extent. The maximum number of reposts is 397, while the average is particularly high, reaching 139.15 reposts per message. However, the analysis of the distribution of retweets reveals that only a small percentage of tweets (10%) received the majority of retweets (80%). This suggests that a small fraction of content drives a significant portion of the sharing activity on Twitter.

Table 3. Number of retweets.

Retweets	
Max	397
Average	139.153005

5.2. The Analysis of Journalists' Articles in Online Media

Regarding the articles published in the online media concerning the May 2023 debate for the national elections, it is essentially an analysis of the performance of the protagonists of the debate, evaluations of their responses (in 15 of the 24 texts), and a determination of

whether the televised debate generated news or not, with a general assessment of whether there was a winner, a loser, or if anyone was missed. In addition, these articles criticize issues that, according to the authors, should have been discussed during the political leaders' discussion but were not, as well as questions raised by journalists.

The main focus of the articles regarding the debate among political leaders is on the performance of the protagonists and their responses, aiming to determine the winner (Figure 4). To a much lesser extent, criticism is directed towards the topics of the debate, as they are agreed upon and well-known in advance, through meetings of the cross-party committee. Even less frequent in the articles is criticism regarding the questions and the performance of the debate's journalists.
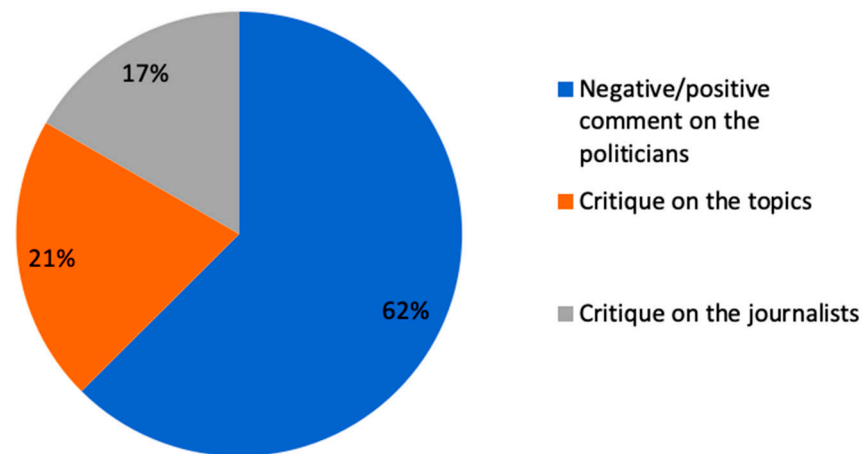

Figure 4. Frequency graph of content categories regarding political leaders—national elections 2023.

Additionally, the texts contain, either directly or indirectly, a reference to the structure of the debate, which overwhelmingly expresses negative criticism regarding the methods of conducting the televised discussion of 10 May (Figure 5).
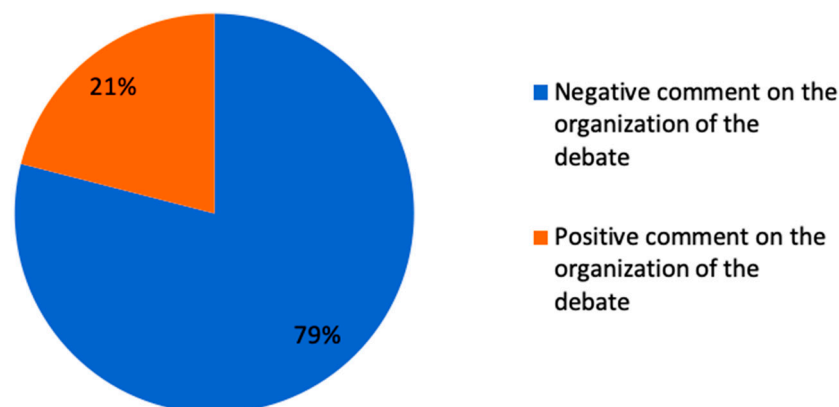

Figure 5. Frequency graph of content regarding political leaders—national elections 2023, including comments on the organization of the debate.

A common denominator of most neutral analyses is that even this particular debate among political leaders could not influence the outcome of the May 21 elections, as it lacked significant mistakes or impressive responses that could have shaped the opinion of some undecided voters. A characteristic feature of this debate, according to the analyses, was that the political leaders mainly played defense[1]; their primary concern was not to concede goals.

The restrictive framework of the discussion is a feature that most analyses note, with slight variations. For example, in the dismissal of one leader's speech that some people

should go to prison for a wiretapping case, there was no right of reply to the accuser to ask whom the accuser meant. Although in the analyses, it was considered very significant and unexpected for many, the prime minister's public admission for the first time that it is a scandal, after many months during which the wiretapping case involving the National Intelligence Service (EYP) and illegal software occupied the political agenda, remained unanswered, providing only fodder for commentary on X.

"Soup"[2], "languor", "tedium"[3], "dull and flat television performance", "pre-cooked" dialogue, "tragedy", "Eurovision of political leaders"[4], and "parallel monologues" are words used to describe the specific discussion among Greek political leaders, both as a television product and in terms of its political content.

The debate encapsulates condensed opinions, programmatic positions, and oppositional arguments, all of which have been heard from political leaders during their tours, stated in interviews, posted on X or in videos on TikTok, and are simply reiterated here within 1.5 min statements.

For most analysts of the debate, this is seen as negative. However, one of them disagrees with this opinion, correctly arguing that the journalistic commentary that usually follows debates, stating that "they don't make us wiser" and that "we don't learn anything new", is a rather egotistical approach of professionals managing news: "For citizens who do not detest politics and are somewhat interested in public affairs, the debate is an opportunity that allows them to hear all the candidates and their proposals"[5].

The televised showdown between the two mayoral candidates of Athens, which took place on ERT on 11 October 2023, four days before the polls opened, was requested by the unequivocal winner of the first round of municipal elections, Kostas Bakoyannis, in a letter to the president of ERT. In hindsight, the televised "duel" between the two was considered by many as a catastrophic strategic mistake by Kostas Bakoyannis[6] due to the visibility it provided to his opponent. Between the two mayoral candidates and the ERT team, a very different format for the debate was agreed upon, so that "The specific debate on ERT marked a step from which we cannot and should not go back", as stated by the moderator Giorgos Kouvaras the next day to the Athenian-Macedonian News Agency[7].

In the very large majority of cases, the articles in our study refer in a laudatory manner to the organization of the debate among the mayoral candidates on 11 October 2023 (Figure 6).
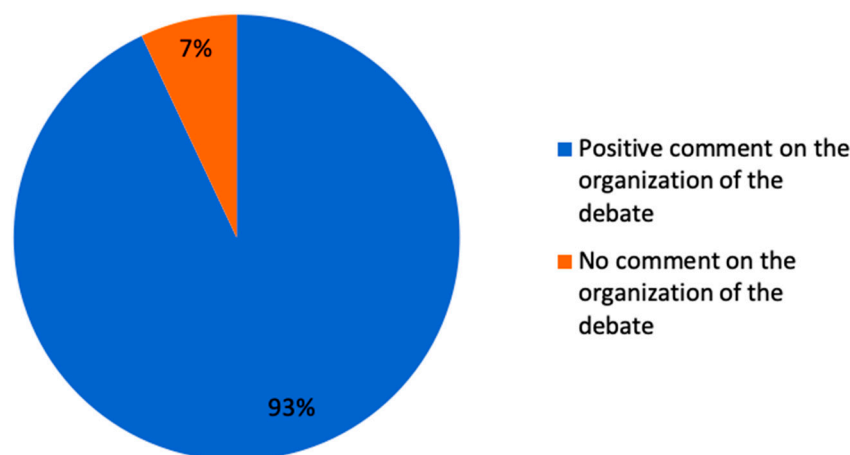
Figure 6. Frequency graph of content regarding mayoral candidates—local government elections 2023, as well as comment on the organization of the debate.

The real concept of the televised clash, the quintessence of American-style debates, found its expression in a televised confrontation between two Greek candidates, with a moderator and only two questioning journalists, an event hailed as capable of infusing the pre-election publically television dialogue and finally changing the way pre-election debates are conducted in our country.

Observing the confrontation without party or factional lenses, or to put it differently, without ideological filters, we notice that both candidates gained something from the debate (Figure 7): Bakoyannis showed that he knows Athens very well after four years of mayoralty, regardless of the mistakes he largely admitted, while Doukas "secured a political capital on a nationwide scale"[8], as a recognizable political figure, with the technocratic competence, however, of a university professor. Dialogue with arguments prevailed; the clash for the sake of conflict proved to be a lost cause from the start. Courtesy between political opponents and respect for the audience are self-evident in a civilized society and not a cause for praise[9].
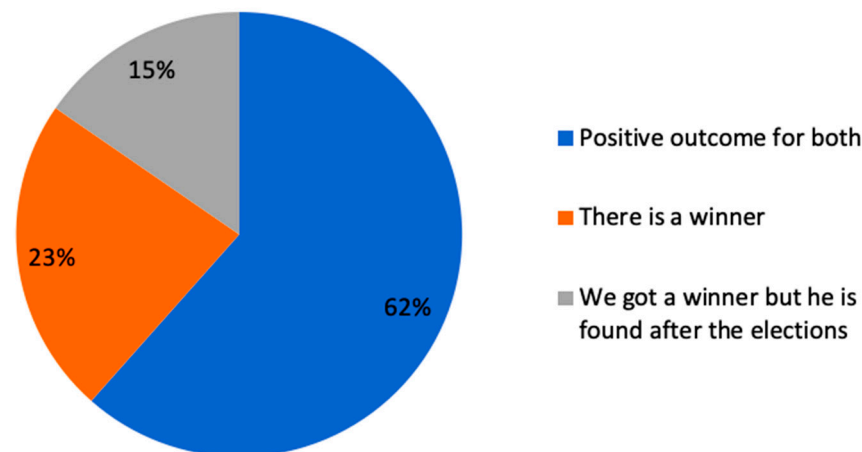

Figure 7. Frequency graph of content regarding mayoral candidates—local government elections 2023. Do we have a winner?

The unmediated dialogue and the confrontation of arguments made the programmatic differences between the two mayoral candidates transparent—focusing on the political framework and avoiding general statements—which may have indeed provoked the supporters of both sides and led some of our researchers to judge them harshly. However, it provided the opportunity for the conscience of the calm viewers and voters to see with whom they agree and with whom they do not[10]. This is what matters in this particular type of political television broadcast: the opportunity for everyone to pass judgment based on what they see and hear[11].

As has previously been mentioned and as seems largely logical, citizens are not interested in the technical characteristics of the televised dialogue but in the political outcome. The structure of pre-election televised debates is a particular issue for Greece, as well as for most countries where pre-election debates are not institutionalized, unlike the situation in the USA. However, it is an equally important issue as part of the pre-election activity, which, if demanded by citizens and journalists with consistency and intensity, could potentially compel the country's political personnel to make serious decisions that would recognize the role of this specific form of political communication.

6. Conclusions

This study delves into the relationship between citizen discourse on X and media commentary during televised debates, uncovering a degree of convergence of topics and framing. Our findings unveil that citizens are actively engaged in much the same political discourse through social media platforms (Gioltzidou 2018). This highlights the interconnectedness of the public sphere, where X has emerged as a powerful tool for citizen engagement, complementing and sometimes even influencing traditional media coverage. However, the results of the survey agree with those of other studies that have shown that unlike the countries of America and Northern Europe, the politicians and journalists of Greece do not seem to understand and utilize the communication possibilities offered by

the digital communication platforms, especially X, as they do not widely use social media to comment on political events (Gioltzidou et al. 2024b).

The study of reactions on social media platform X revealed that televised debates rally partisan audiences and primarily engage party supporters and candidates' followers. This scientific assumption, established in the United States for about half a century, was confirmed by the sample of reactions from X users that were analyzed.

From the analysis of user posts on platform X, it appears that Greek voters do not show interest in the terms of conducting the debates, even though this issue is crucial for either the overall success or failure of the televised event and for the ultimate victory, if such occurs, of one of the candidates participating in the debate. At this point of interest in our study, there can be no direct correlation with the literature concerning debates in the USA, because the issue of the format of debates is, in a way, resolved there.

This issue, on the contrary, concerns journalists, analysts, columnists or what we call, in general, opinion leaders, and it is raised by the latter in public discourse. Unfortunately, the conversation concludes when the cameras of the ERT studios are turned off after the end of a pre-election debate.

In summary, the second part of our research revealed that few people are interested in the format adopted by debates in Greece. It constitutes an axiom in the pre-election public discourse in our country, that the nature of political leaders' televised confrontations is banal. Therefore, the novelty of the televised showdown between the two candidates for mayor of Athens prompted individuals from the media to demand a change in Greek debates.

While X is a prominent social media platform, examining other platforms could provide a more comprehensive understanding of citizen engagement in political communication. Moreover, the limitations of the research include the fact that the research is focused on a specific time period and was conducted by examining the tweets published under specific hashtags. This may neglect messages that were posted on this topic but could not be included in the study because they did not contain hashtags.

However, the findings of this study demonstrate a significant alignment between the topics discussed by citizens on X during televised debates and the commentary provided by journalists in traditional media outlets. This suggests that both citizens and journalists are engaging with the same core issues and framing the debates in a similar manner. Of course, it is reasonable for media professionals to be more concerned with specific issues regarding the way political communication is conducted, matters that are not so apparent to ordinary citizens, and therein lies the localized difference found between the topics of X and the digital media of our research.

The study's findings help to investigate the dynamics of political communication in the digital age. They underscore the importance of X as a platform for citizen engagement and highlight the potential for convergence between citizen-generated content and traditional media coverage. Future research should explore the factors that contribute to this alignment, examine the impact of this convergence on public opinion formation, and investigate the potential for using X to enhance traditional media coverage of political events.

Notes

1 Giorgos Karelias, www.news247.gr. Available online https://www.news247.gr/gnomes/allo-o-xamenos-tou-debate-kai-allo-i-itta-stis-ekloges/ (accessed on 11 May 2023).

2 Aris Ravanos, www.tovima.gr. Available online https://www.tovima.gr/2023/05/11/opinions/osa-den-eipothikan-sto-ntimpeit/ (accessed on 11 May 2023).

3 Pepi Ragkousi, www.in.gr. Available online https://www.in.gr/2023/05/13/apopsi/variemai-variemai-variemai/ (accessed on 13 May 2023).

4 Lefteris Xaralampopoulos, www.in.gr. Available online https://www.in.gr/2023/05/11/apopsi/apotimontas-ti-eurovision-ton-politikon-arxigon/ (accessed on 11 May 2023).

5 Aris Portosalte, www.liberal.gr. Available online https://www.liberal.gr/portosalte/mono-i-kanonikotita (accessed on 12 May2023).

6 "Adonis Georgiadis: Kostas Bakoyannis shouldn't have participated in the debate", www.protothema.gr. Available online https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/1424449/adonis-georgiadis-o-kostas-bakogiannis-den-eprepe-na-kanei-to-dibeit/ (accessed on 16 October 2023).

7 «ERT—G. Kouvaras: "With this debate, we have now taken a step from which we neither can nor should go back"», www.amna.gr. Available online https://www.amna.gr/home/article/767634/ERT---G-Koubaras--Me-to-debate-auto-egine-pleon-ena-bima-apo-to-opoio--oute-mporoume--oute-prepei-na-pame-piso (accessed on 12 October 2023).

8 Giorgos Evgenidis, www.protothema.gr. Available online https://www.protothema.gr/blogs/giorgos-eugenidis/article/1423412/tolmoun-na-epanalavoun-auto-to-debate/ (accessed on 13 October 2023).

9 Soti Triantafyllou, www.athensvoice.gr. Available online https://www.athensvoice.gr/epikairotita/politiki-oikonomia/819442/eduposeis-apo-to-debate-bakogianni-douka/ (accessed on 13 October 2023).

10 Manos Anthoulakis, www.parapolitika.gr. Available online https://www.parapolitika.gr/politiki/article/1310223/epitelous-ena-debate-me-ousia-ta-kerdi-apo-tin-tilemahia-bakogianni-douka/ (accessed on 12 October 2023).

11 Aggelos Kovaios, www.protagon.gr. Available online https://www.protagon.gr/apopseis/poios-kerdise-sto-debate-sigoura-i-ert-44342807046 (accessed on 12 October 2023).

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