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The power and limitations of televised presidential debates: Assessing the real impact of candidate performance on public opinion and vote choice

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ABSTRACT

A growing literature establishes that presidential candidates can help and hurt themselves through their performance in televised debates. Debate performance, however, is a somewhat elusive concept. Voters' post-debate assessments of the participants may be heavily colored by pre-existing attitudes toward candidates, parties, and the incumbent president. This paper attempts to tease out the "true" impact of debate performance, i.e., those times in which the candidates' superiority or inferiority on stage breaks through voters' cognitive filters. We find that debate performance is responsible for only about half of the variance in viewers' assessments of winners and losers; that it is possible to be declared the winner in the post-debate polls based entirely on factors exogenous to the debate itself; and that even a highly successful performance might yield only a narrow win in the post-debate polls. We also present evidence that, when measured properly, debate performance can actually alter candidate preferences.

1. Introduction

Over half a century after John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon first took the stage in 1960, general election presidential debates continue to captivate journalists, the public, and, to an increasing extent, social scientists. Even today, in an era in which the variety of entertainment choices far surpasses anything imaginable fifty years ago, televised debates still generate the sort of ratings more typical of hit comedies and major sports championships. Not only do politicians and their handlers continue to treat debates as significant campaign events, but a growing scholarly literature suggests that they are right to do so (see, among others, Lanoue, 1992; Holbrook, 1996; Shaw, 1999; Hillygus and Jackman, 2003; Fridkin et al., 2007).

Americans tend to remember debates in terms of winners and losers, usually measured by public opinion surveys taken shortly after each confrontation. In politics, as in all pursuits, it is, perhaps, human nature to work the maze backwards, to begin with the final outcome and then to seek the data necessary to explain that result. If one candidate wins a debate by, say, twenty points, this must necessarily be a function of his or her superior physical appearance, rhetorical skills, or ability to deliver some particularly memorable *bon mot*. As a consequence, every election year brings a new analysis of the personal attributes and dramatic moments that have supposedly shaped the outcomes of these events and turned certain debates—rather than others—into milestones in American political history: Richard Nixon's make-up woes in 1960; Gerald Ford's gaffe about Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in 1976; Ronald Reagan's grandfatherly dismissal of Jimmy Carter's verbal assaults ("There you go again…") in 1980; Michael Dukakis' oddly robotic response in 1988 to a

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question about the death penalty that invoked the hypothetical rape and murder of his wife; Al Gore's dismissive sighs in 2000; and, more recently, Barack Obama's unruffled self-confidence vs. John McCain's nervous intensity (see, e.g., Lanoue and Schrott, 1991; Schroeder, 2000).

The difficulty with this sort of analysis-by-anecdote is that it assumes, at least implicitly, that candidates invariably win or lose debates on the strength of their performances. This, however, flies in the face of what we know about the impact of the mass media on public opinion. Some of the earliest systematic research on politics and the media demonstrates clearly that significant cognitive filters act to diminish the power of broadcast messages (Klapper, 1960). Foremost among these is the importance of cognitive consistency, the drive to interpret information in a way that conforms to one's pre-existing preferences and biases (see, e.g., Festinger, 1957).

From the earliest days of presidential debate research, scholars have recognized the critical importance of cognitive consistency theory and cognitive dissonance theory in shaping our understanding of televised debates. In an individual-level analysis of the first Kennedy–Nixon debate in 1960, Lang and Lang (1962) find that pre-debate Kennedy supporters were far more likely to name the Democratic nominee as the winner when compared to pre-debate Nixon supporters. As for partisanship, Katz and Feldman (1962), summarizing multiple cross-sectional studies, report that "individuals with a party affiliation…declare their own candidate the winner far more than they choose the opposition candidate". (p. 198) Writing over thirty years later, Holbrook (1996) agrees that "there is a very strong tendency for people to think that their preferred candidate won the debate." (p. 199) see, also, Sears and Chaffee (1979) and Lanoue and Schrott (1991).[1]

It is apparent, on the other hand, that some debate performances *are* so effective or deficient that they can—at least to some degree—overcome even the most powerful cognitive filters. Lang and Lang (1962), for example, while spotlighting the impact of cognitive consistency, also show that a substantial number of pre-debate Nixon backers were either able to acknowledge Kennedy's superior performance or at least to declare the result to be a tie. Similarly, in 1984, Walter Mondale was seen as the winner of his first debate with Ronald Reagan by an overwhelming margin of 54%–35%, despite the fact that he trailed Reagan by an almost identical percentage (55%–39%) in the pre-debate "horse race" polls. Clearly, some Reagan supporters were impressed enough with Mondale's performance to overcome their biases and pick the Democrat as the winner. (Nevertheless, even in this relatively extreme case, Reagan likely "held on" to roughly 2/3 of his backers, who insisted—in the face of a nearly unanimous pro-Mondale verdict from the press (Lanoue and Schrott, 1991)—that the Gipper had bested his rival.)

Pre-existing candidate preferences are, of course, only one of several cognitive filters that presumably influence the way viewers judge presidential debates. As noted above, party identification may also serve to activate a voter's latent biases, even in cases in which no firm commitment has been made to either nominee. That is, when faced with a direct confrontation between a Democrat and a Republican, the voter may find herself reflexively siding with the candidate representing her favorite party. In addition, satisfaction with the current administration might also filter viewers' candidate assessments, especially when the sitting president is a participant in the debates.

Therefore, if we wish to measure debate performance, we must first establish a baseline expectation of success, since many of the factors that influence viewers' assessments of winners and losers are exogenous to the content of the debates themselves. For example, if we imagined a hypothetical debate in which the performances of the Democratic and Republican candidates were objectively equal, we would still not expect 100% of the viewing audience to declare the outcome a tossup. Rather, we would assume that pre-existing biases would color voters' assessments, and that public opinion polls would reveal a debate "winner" even though the candidates had performed identically well. (Obviously, in real life it is not possible to define, much less tease out, "objective performance", but we use this example to illustrate the larger point.)

Schrott and Lanoue (2008) make an initial attempt to develop a baseline expectation by looking at each candidate's pre-debate standing in the polls. They measure "over-performance" and "under-performance" based on whether the percentage of respondents naming a candidate as the debate winner exceeds or falls short of the percentage naming that candidate as their preference in "horse race" surveys. Thus, Walter Mondale, in the first 1984 debate, over-performed by 38%, while Ronald Reagan under-performed by 36% (p. 515). The authors find that under-performance is far more common than over-performance and that debates are typically lost, rather than won.

In this paper, our focus is on developing a model of the exogenous factors that influence debate evaluations, so that we can isolate, to the extent possible, the unique impact of debate performance itself. This will, in turn, allow us to address several questions. First, roughly how much of viewers' evaluative reactions to presidential debates can be explained by variables that are unrelated to the performance of the candidates? Second, to what degree do the nominees, by virtue of their performance alone, help or hurt their own cause? Third, are there cases where public opinion polls name as the winner a candidate who actually fared worse in the debate than his opponent?[2] And finally, to what extent, if at all, does the "real" performance of debate participants affect their standing in the horse race polls?

[1] Looking beyond the American case, Schrott (1990) demonstrates the impact of party identification and candidate evaluations on individual-level perceptions of debate winners in Germany, and Lanoue (1991) does the same with respect to party ID and debate evaluations in Canada.

[2] We use the masculine pronoun here and below because every participant in a general election presidential debate to date has been male.