

Spring 1-1-2013

# Who Really Controls the Message of Presidential Debates?

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WHO REALLY CONTROLS THE MESSAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES?

by

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B. A., University of Wisconsin, 2009

M. A., University of Colorado, 2013

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in  
fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Masters of Arts

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

2013

Signature Page

This thesis entitled:  
Who Really Controls the Message of Presidential Debates?  
written by Mary Cornell  
has been approved for the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

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Chair: Professor Elizabeth Skewes

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Date: August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

## Abstract

Cornell, Mary (M.A., Journalism & Mass Communication)

Who Really Controls the Message of Presidential Debates?

Thesis Directed by Associate Professor Elizabeth Skewes

Presidential debates have played an important role in the American campaign process but it has been debated on whether or not the message is more controlled by the media or the candidate. Response type, level of criticism and measure of evasiveness are the variables used in this research in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the debate message.

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## INTRODUCTION

The 2012 presidential debates were tenuous but enlivening. The first debate saw a viewership of more than 67 million, breaking a 32-year record. Pundits declared the first of the three fall debates a victory for Republican candidate Mitt Romney, giving him some new momentum in the final months of the campaign. He was forceful and relentless, they said, making President Obama appear tired and apathetic. The media portrayed the event as a decisive victory for Romney, claiming that it could create enough momentum to turn the election. The second debate, however, took a different tone. Obama entered prepared and ready to fight, illustrating his desire to win the election, and the media picked up on that, claiming he came prepared and hungry to win. The third debate was not as eventful as the first two, and media pundits did not declare a winner. The debates were full of jabs and candidate stances that wavered a fine line between fact and fiction. Not only were the candidates under the microscope of public scrutiny, but the moderator's performance also was closely examined. During the second debate, moderator Candy Crowley, a CNN political correspondent, intervened at one point to fact-check Republican candidate Mitt Romney about his comment regarding President Obama's statement on the Benghazi attack (Mirkinson, 2013). Republicans believed this overstepped the boundary of the moderator's role, while Democrats argued the moderators should have the liberty to exercise journalistic freedom.

Over the years, presidential debates have become an integral part of the complex campaign cycle. While scholars have tried to decipher what influences voters to act the way they do and what encourages their voting behavior, debates have played an additional role in the voter's thought process. Political scientists have tried to uncover the cognitive filters that arise with debates, meaning voters often interpret the comments in a way that lends support to

their preferred candidate (Hellweg et al., 1992). Additionally, scholars have longed to learn if the debates do indeed influence the electorate's decision-making process. Many scholars deemed the introduction of televised debates into the political landscape as a revolution for campaigns. They provided a new opportunity for audiences. Televised debates allowed Americans for the first time to see the nominees side by side for an extended period of time, during which they were forced to deal with the issues of the day.

While televised debates have not consistently been used as a campaign platform since 1960, they have served as a vital resource for voters when they have been aired (Hellweg et al., 1992). Debates enable candidates to have significant "face time" with voters, at least through television, and allow candidates to set their message in contrast to their opponent. They facilitate an easier way of comparison for the voter since the issues are more clearly laid out and the candidates are able to directly address their differing stances (Hellweg et al., 1992). The candidates meet face to face to argue their positions on the issues. Debates enable the candidates to make a more personal connection with the viewers and provide a range of information about their leadership potential, the issues, the campaign, and the parties represented by each of the candidates. Debates also are significant because they are sometimes the only opportunity voters have to see the candidates interact on the same stage without the media and campaign staffers helping with every word. Debates also allow for human error to occur, especially if a candidate seems not as well prepared as his or her challenger, risking embarrassment, audience rejection and media judgment. The debate landscape has changed drastically since the first televised debate in 1960. Some scholars argue that they now seem more like a press conference rather than a debate in which hard issues are discussed (Hellweg et al., 1992). The current format minimizes confrontation, requires brief responses and spreads discussion too thin, which ultimately

sacrifices the power of the televised debate to educate voters about substantive issues (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). Candidates have been given too much control, and rule changes have allowed them to manipulate the system, enabling them to determine the outcome of the debate.

This paper examines the complex relationship the media play in presidential debates and whether the media have control over the candidates and the message or if the candidates have control. Since the introduction of television, the media have been given more power through their influence over voter perception. The media and political pundits criticize most statements and mannerism made on behalf in order to declare a “winner” and create a newsworthy story. Additionally, the moderator is selected from a pool of journalists and media representatives. But the candidate is also given a lot of control through the ability to set the debate agenda and to shift answers to highlight his or her preferred stances. But the question remains whether the candidates are able to control the message in order to give them leverage and a decisive debate “victory.”

My thesis takes a historical look at three presidential cycles –1976, 1992, 2012 – in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the control over the message in the context of the presidential debates and how it has changed over time. My research questions are:

RQ1: How often and in what ways do the candidates respond to or evade the moderator’s question? Has this changed over time? Are the candidates more evasive in later years, or does the moderator interfere with them being able to be evasive?

RQ2: Have the candidates become more critical of each other throughout history? Are they critical in hopes of gaining control of the debate?

RQ3: When candidates don't respond directly to a question, do they do so to expand on a previous topic or to raise a new topic? Have candidates become more responsive to moderator questions in later years?

## HISTORY

Throughout presidential debate history, candidates have utilized different systems to elicit more control over the debate message and voter perception. While the first televised presidential debate occurred between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960, the most famous historical debates actually occurred in the 1858 U.S. Senate race between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas (Al-Khatib, 2012). During that election, seven debates took place between the two candidates. In the debates, the two candidates were face to face without a moderator, and one candidate would open with an hour-long speech then his opponent would give an hour-and-a-half long speech to rebut the first candidate. The first candidate would then close the debate with a thirty-minute speech (Al-Khatib, 2012). The debates were both influential and controversial because during this time, U.S. senators were elected by the legislatures of their respective states rather than by the popular vote. This made the debate message different from what is more commonly heard in contemporary times, since Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas were trying to appeal to their colleagues rather than the electorate. They knew going in what would win the support of their colleagues and what needed to be said.

In 1948, the first broadcast debate occurred on radio between Republicans Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen for their party's presidential nomination (Hellweg et al., 1992). This one-hour encounter featured 20-minute opening statements and 8½- minute rebuttals from the

candidates. It drew an audience estimated to be between 40 and 80 million, making it one of the largest audiences in radio history (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). It focused on a single issue—the question of outlawing communism in the United States, since both candidates had taken clear and opposite positions on outlawing the Communist Party (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). The issue was of particular concern to the American public due to the implications of the Cold War. The debate was instrumental in the primary because it helped define where the candidates stood on the issue of communism, clarifying their differences. Ultimately, the debate rhetoric helped Thomas Dewey secure his party's nomination. Dewey was able to get his message across in a precise manner since the debate covered only a single topic.

The single question format was beneficial, yet also limiting. Because the candidates were limited to a single topic, voters were not able to gain an overall understanding of their positions on a range of issues. Still their position was more clearly stated and understood than a multi-issue debate would have allowed. In 1956 intra-party debates were held that covered a plethora of issues ranging from foreign to domestic. Critics argued the debates were not as beneficial because the candidates found little to disagree on. Political scholars encouraged the format of the 1948 single-issue debate since it allowed the issue to be more clearly contrasted (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988). Political Scientists Kathleen Jamieson and David Birdsell (1988) argue that the format of not focusing on a specific issue hinders the effectiveness of debates. Candidates are not able to advocate for their stance on an issue because the questions don't delve deeply enough.

However, the single-issue format did not stick, and in the 1960 general election four debates were held between Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard Nixon. The one-hour Kennedy-Nixon debates were all nationally broadcast and were sponsored by the three broadcast networks – NBC, CBS and ABC. They also were moderated by broadcast news

personnel (Hellweg et al., 1992). The format included opening and closing statements, as well as rebuttals, but did not allow for follow-up questions by the candidates.

While the debate format in 1960 did not allow for increased candidate control, the introduction of television created a new campaign influence for scholars to study. Researchers have grappled with the idea of what influences the electorate for years. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was believed that a voter's predisposition – his or her inclination to vote based on party affiliation, parental influence, income, religion and other political socializing factors – were the primary determinants of voter choice (Boydston et al., 2012). These predispositions formed the voter's preferences on issues and candidates. In 1940, a study conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, which was published in 1944 as *The People's Choice*, reinforced the idea that voters' prior preferences had a greater impact on their electoral decisions than the media did. The study found that exposure to the mass media did not lead to a change in the mind of the voter, and instead it tended to reinforce the individual's original decision (Krauss, 1977). In fact, the authors stated, voters were more typically influenced in their voting decision by their parents or friends. Most voters, the study found, read, listened to and remembered information that was compatible with their previously held political views (Krauss, 1977). Neither radio nor newspaper changed these inherent views, according to the study.

However, in 1952 – 12 years and three election cycles after the data was collected for *The People's Choice* – the influence of television became evident through the introduction of television commercials as a campaign mechanism. At the time, television was being touted as a medium that was destined to unite us, educate us and, as a result, improve the quality of actions and decisions of the polity (Hellweg et al., 1988). In 1960, the role of television as a debate platform further reinforced the claim that it would be an important campaign resource.

Television manifests a unique symbol system, which fundamentally shapes what is communicated to receivers through images and pictures, apart from the content, and it has changed the very nature of presidential debate discourse (Hellweg et al., 1992).

Television is able to serve a more intimate role with the audience member than previous mediums could. While radio was able to give the candidates a voice, it still required listeners to use their minds to bring what the candidates were saying to life, whereas television does that job for the viewer. Television exercises influence in a manner more similar to interpersonal communication than does radio, print, or traditional public address communication (Pfau, 1990). It allows the candidate to enter the personal space of the voter's home. Additionally, it is not only used as a medium for communication, it also has been adapted to serve as a way to control the agenda for the viewers. It has become the primary source of political information for most people, which has enabled politicians to have more control over the message than they previously had with radio or newspaper. Television is easy to access and allows for politicians to directly engage and connect with the viewer (Hellweg et al., 1992). Television enables the voter to reduce the amount of thinking they have to do since they have a more direct connection with the candidate. Radio broadcasts challenges the voter to create a visualization of the event and also decipher the context of the dialogue. Viewers who watched the 1960 debate came away with a different perception of who won than radio listeners due to being able to see the candidates (Krauss, 1977). The glowing appearance of Kennedy on television enabled viewers to believe he was the winner due to the stark contrast in the appearance of the candidates (Krauss, 1977). This was because Kennedy created a more personal and calming connection whereas Nixon elicited a nervous disposition. However, radio listeners deemed Nixon the winner because they focused on the candidate's respective ideas and stances on issues (Krauss, 1977). Politics was once a

pastime where citizens would engage in conversation about current events and deliberate among their peers, but it has now become a privatized event with television serving a more important role (Hellweg et al., 1992).

Additionally, the 1960 debate highlighted Kennedy's image. It also illustrated the power of good looks, a good speaking voice and a commanding presence (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). During the debate, Kennedy wore makeup and appeared tan, which was a stark contrast to Nixon's pale complexion. The cameras also heightened the impression that Nixon was nervous by highlighting his sweaty appearance. The Kennedy campaign reinforced those differences between Kennedy and Nixon by using debate clips in advertisements and campaign propaganda. Nixon, in contrast, used radio clips that highlighted their differences on salient issues (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). While both candidates were able to use television, Kennedy's appearance portrayed him as a telegenic and commanding leader. Debates became even more important with the widespread adoption of television in the American home. More control was given to the media due to their ability to commentate, discuss and criticize the candidate's performance to a wider audience.

Message control changed a bit in 1976 through a debate process that is similar to what is used today. The general election debates that year were sponsored by the League of Women Voters and were comprised of three 90-minute encounters featuring incumbent President Gerald Ford and Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter (Hellweg et al., 1992). The debates were organized under the themes of domestic policy, foreign policy and an open topic platform. They differed from the 1960 debates with the introduction of a live audience. They were also pivotal in three aspects. First, Ford initiated the participation of an incumbent president in debates, countering the argument that an incumbent candidate cannot risk giving the opponent credibility through the

debating process nor can he debate issues of foreign policy, as this might put the nation at risk. Second, when Carter ran for re-election in 1980, it was hard for him to avoid engaging in debates since he had previously done so as a candidate in the 1976 election. Finally, it marked the initiation of vice-presidential debates (Hellweg et al., 1992).

While the current debate platform remains similar to that established by the League of Women Voters, in 1987 the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) was formed by the two major parties with the purpose of sponsoring both presidential and vice-presidential debates beginning in 1988. The parties were looking for an opportunity to have more control over the debate format. The CPD is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that was created in hopes of educating voters and regulating debates. The CPD proudly claims independence from the major parties – despite being formed by them – and encourages objectivity in selecting who will debate and under what conditions. However, when the CPD took over, it allowed the major party candidates to control the details of the format. Every four years, negotiators for the Republican and Democratic parties meet behind closed doors to draft debate contracts (“Candidates Control the Debates.”) Since the CPD took over, the debate contracts have changed both in size and in depth. The contracts discuss everything from podium height to time limits on responses. However, the CPD has raised many eyebrows and is criticized for encouraging a two-party system and for being run by the groups that benefit from it. Further, the CPD selects and controls the rules with the help of the political parties, allowing for controversial subject matters to be left off of the agenda and more control in the hands of the candidates.

Control changed once again in 1988 when the League of Women Voters withdrew its sponsorship claiming too much control was being placed in the hands of the political parties. Prior to that, a Memorandum of Understanding was generated by the LWV and the

representatives of the two presidential candidates, Republican nominee George H. W. Bush, the incumbent vice president, and Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis before the debates season started. However, on October 3, 1988, the League of Women Voters withdrew its sponsorship from the second presidential debate, scheduled for 10 days later in Los Angeles. The LWV argued against the terms stipulated in the Memorandum of Understanding presented to it. The League spokesperson argued that the new terms were unfavorable to the sponsors and were taken over by the campaigns. The main point of conflict was the inability to use follow-up questions. Since the LWV relinquished sponsorship, it gave control to the CPD.

In the 1992 election cycle, the media and campaigns began to utilize public polling more so than they had in the past and it was a year of greater-than-usual voter turnout for a modern election (Krauss, 2000). While polling had been around for a while, it was during this period that scholars began to poll viewers based on the effects of the televised debates (Krauss, 2000). More than fifty-five percent of the country's eligible voters turned out for the general election, the highest since the 1972 election (Krauss, 2000). The CPD was in full control of the debates and it created a debate schedule with specific sites, formats, and operational details. The two candidates were incumbent President George H.W. Bush and Democratic nominee Bill Clinton, the governor of Arkansas. Both were required to agree to the terms set forth by the commission, but getting there was not easy, since both candidates wanted to debate on their own terms and struggled with an agreement.

Another historical shift has been the occurrence of campaigns becoming a full-time job every year, rather than something a candidate does every four years. Presidential campaigns have become a permanent fixture, as witnessed in recent elections. Campaigns now are controlled by professional campaign managers, who have replaced the colleagues and friends that previously

assisted candidates. The campaign managers are hired with an intention to win, and once the election is over – win or lose – most immediately start working on the next election cycle. Their primary focus is to control the candidate’s message and media portrayal, since that ultimately will affect the voter. In 2000, Democrat Al Gore, the incumbent vice president, and Republican George W. Bush ran against each other in a highly contested presidential campaign. Through the debates, some of Gore’s idiosyncrasies, such as loud scowls and verbal responses, stuck out, which many believe played a role in the close election and inevitably hurt Gore’s chances at becoming president (Krauss, 2000). The mannerisms enabled his opponent to be portrayed as more calm and collected. The debate illustrates how campaign managers are not able to control every move of the candidate. Contemporary presidential campaigns feature at least one person and typically several people whose primary job is to manage the candidate’s media image (Skewes, 2007). The introduction of television enhanced the media’s ability to persuade and facilitate campaign rhetoric. Television quickly became a key source of information for voters, thus political consultants were needed to help control the message (Skewes, 2007). While they can’t control the press and what journalists write, they can control the flow of information to the media by framing the issue for the press before it is investigated or by keeping the candidate away from the press altogether (Skewes, 2007). These consultants are hired before the candidates even begin to campaign in order to begin researching the candidates, including potential opponents, and to avoid potential bad stories or bad press. They create a series of messages for the candidates that are then used throughout the campaign with only a few alterations to adjust to the changing landscape. This is viewed as a commercialization because it takes away from the personality of the individual candidate and makes him or her more of a brand. Often, the debates are viewed as the one place where the candidate is responsible for his or her message without the

immediate assistance from their managers and consultants, allowing them to show more of an authentic side. However, the debates can also be a risk since a potential gaffe or poor performance can hurt the candidate.

## MODERATOR, PANELISTS AND FORMAT

Panelists and moderators have served an important yet tenuous role in presidential debates. Prior to 1980, the idea of panelists dominated the realm, but the moderator was introduced in primaries and eventually became the dominant choice. The role of how moderators should interact with the candidates has been debated, regardless of the form of panelist or moderator. The tendency in earlier presidential debates has been for the panelists to enter somewhat of a third-party role, taking up quite a bit of time in asking questions, directing some hostility toward the candidates in the content of the questioning, and choosing questions that do not invite debate, thus reducing the impact of the actual debate and the control the candidates have to show their stance (Hellweg et al., 1988). Candidates are not given the opportunity to argue their issue and actually “debate.” Additionally, moderators have differed in their presentation as well as their tone during debates. Many believe the moderator should be silent and let the candidates debate, while others want them to play a more aggressive role. Moderators should be more than just a timekeeper, since they are there to moderate and give both candidates an equal opportunity to participate (Gilbert, 2012). But instead the blame game gets played out, with criticisms thrown their way by the parties represented by the “losing” candidate in the debate (Gilbert, 2012). For example, during the first and second debates between President Obama and Governor Romney, many said the moderator’s role was controversial. Moderator Jim

Lehrer was criticized for not having control over the candidates and letting the dialogue get out of context and out of his control. Additionally, Frank Fahrenkopf, the Republican co-chair for the CPD, claimed it was a “mistake” to choose Candy Crowley as the moderator for the second debate (Mirkinson, 2013). He was not pleased when Crowley corrected Romney on a statement he made in efforts to refute Obama (Mirkinson, 2013). Parties also tend to blame the moderator for not giving each candidate a fair amount of time or for being tougher on one candidate over another (Gilbert, 2012). The LWV deemed the role of the moderator as someone who should represent the sponsor, enforce the rules and introduce the proceedings and the participants. Others contend the moderator is important because he or she serves as a buffer between the two candidates. Recently, the moderator has often played a more substantial part by asking the candidate questions, challenging the answers through follow-up questions, and controlling the give-and-take of the encounter.

Not only is the role of the moderator scrutinized, but the selection of the moderator is just as controversial. Myles Martel argued in 1983 that print media journalists are likely to be more penetrating in their questioning and more substance-oriented; broadcast panelists, particularly ones who are well-known, tend to be more image oriented and focused on debate appearance (Hellweg et al., 1988). If the candidate prefers the “attack” style, he or she would more likely want a print media journalist over a broadcast journalist to serve as the moderator. Reporters – either print or broadcast – are assumed to be more knowledgeable and skillful in follow-up questioning and less intimidated by the cameras, a national audience, and the presence of political heavy-weights, so many prefer that reporters ask questions of the candidates (Jamieson and Birdsell, 1988).

Similar to moderator concerns, an issue of concern since the CPD took over has been issue exclusion and what topics are discussed at debates. Many argue that since the CPD takeover, issues have not been salient and the questions do not include contentious topics. In 1976, the majority of the debate discourse—defined as 50 percent or more of the words spoken by debating candidates—focused on eight issues. But in 2000, the majority of discourse focused on only five issues (Farah, 2004). Voters watch the debates in hopes of gaining insight into the minds of the candidate (Farah, 2004). However Farah argues that there are four categories that presidential debate questions revolve around. There are fundamental issues, which are non-controversial topics, such as tax plans and leadership experience. The second category is transient issues, which refers to issues unique to specific historical time periods, such as the Iran-Contra affair or the Cuban Missile Crisis. The third refers to the more contentious systemic issues – topics that relate to how the executive branch should work in dealing with Congress and foreign policy. Finally, the fourth category consists of narrow issues, which are the topics targeted at specific voting populations, such as immigrants or urban voters (Farah, 2004). With these categories in mind, only two are typically used in modern debates, fundamental and narrow. Instead of speaking about topics that would impact and potentially persuade the voter, candidates are known to stick to the minutiae of tax cuts and farm subsidies rather than delving deeper into the controversial issues (Farah, 2004). The issue dilemma can be attributed to both the failure of moderators to encourage debate over important issues and the pre-debate negotiations between the political parties and CPD that limit the scope of each debate.

## AGENDA SETTING

Mass communication serves an important role in informing the public about events. Mass communication is defined as the process where professional communicators use technological devices to share messages over great distances to influence large audiences (Sanchez, 2002). Through this process, the media have the ability to set the public agenda. Agenda setting argues that the media play a large role in influencing the audience by choosing stories that they consider newsworthy and giving time and prominence to those issues. As far back as 1922, newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public that the public would readily accept (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, and they focused on two elements – awareness and information. They assessed the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They concluded that the mass media exerted significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign.

There are key assumptions and statements that help garner a better understanding of the implications of agenda setting. At the core, agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (McCombs, 1972). The media shape and highlight stories around important events in hopes of garnering more attention and awareness to the issues that matter.

While much has been done in hopes of gaining a better understanding of what makes people vote the way they do, it is still uncertain whether the news or other media programming is successful at making people change their opinions on various topics. But research has shown that the media are able to make people change their views on the relative importance of different issues (Vavreck, 2009, McCombs and Shaw, 1972). So, while it is understood that the media are successful most of the time in telling people what to think about, it is still uncertain if they are capable of telling people how to think and to act on those thoughts.

Candidates also have the capacity to do this. For example, in the 1992 campaign, then-Governor Bill Clinton focused on the economy to win the election. Clinton was able to keep his campaign message centered on the national economy rather than the war that was occurring in the Middle East. The coverage of economic issues dominated the media and enabled voters to be more concerned with that issue rather than the impending war. George H. W. Bush, however, had a strong track record with his handling of the war, so he hoped to shift the focus towards international affairs rather than the dire economy. In 2008, when then-Senator Barack Obama ran for office, he referenced the Lily Ledbetter case multiple times in his third debate against Senator John McCain (Zelinsky, 2008). The case dealt with equal pay for women and the right to not be discriminated against (Zelinsky, 2008). Due to Obama's reference, the case was discussed and talked about multiple times in the media and gained momentum with female voters, illustrating Obama's power to set the media agenda. Candidates seek to focus the agenda on topics that are more advantageous to them rather than ones that favor their opponent.

Others argue that the format of the debate hinders the ability to set an agenda because the candidates are forced to respond to questions posed by the moderator, and occasionally by members of the audience (Boydston et al., 2012). They have little control over what questions

will be asked, but it is easy to anticipate many of the questions since the candidates are given a narrow focus. But candidates do have the ability to shift their answers to the questions to a topic that is more favorable. Moderators or panelists will ask questions only to have the candidates respond by raising or highlighting topics that are more advantageous or that give them a chance to expand on a previous question rather than simply answering the question at hand, giving the candidates the ability to control the questions.

## DEBATE FRAMING

Along with agenda setting, politicians also frame the debate to their advantage. Some argue that to win a policy debate, politicians frame the issue strategically so that they highlight topics that will mobilize public opinion behind their policy position (Jerit, 2007). Theoretically this makes sense, as it can be advantageous for the candidate who is able to frame the issue in a positive light for the public. Candidates want to shape the issue in a way that is most beneficial to the public, meaning issues that highlight their interests and meet their needs. But it is harder than it seems in the context of a presidential debate because during a debate neither side is given full control. Framing allows political elites to take advantage of the ambivalence with which most citizens view political issues (Jerit, 2007).

Prior to the debates, the CPD meets with representatives from both the Republican and Democratic parties to discuss the logistics, along with what questions will be asked. Since salient issues – such as civil liberties, government waste, or what are often referred to as the contentious issues – are rarely asked, Farah argues it hurts the integrity of the debates and diminishes the value to voters. While debates are still beneficial to viewers, the substance of the information is

reduced due to the lackluster questions. During negotiations with the CPD, candidates avoid polarizing and controversial issues, such as religion, women's health and social rights, because they are afraid the issues are too contentious and will hurt their ability to win more votes (Farah, 2004). Candidates attempt to control debates through their leverage and their agreement with the CPD. Scholars argue this positioning is dysfunctional to the electorate because it hinders the integrity of the debate (Krauss, 2000). It is in the candidate's interest to designate preferred moderators, selecting journalists who are sympathetic to their candidacy and rejecting those who are not (Krauss, 2000). The level of candidate dialogue during a debate tends to make the debate more similar to a joint press conference rather than a real debate of issues. Many argue that the media need to be more influential in controlling the format of the debates and the questions so that integrity is not compromised (Krauss, 2000).

However, despite the practice of the debate format being determined by the CPD and the candidates, the media have attempted to control the debates in a different sense. Voters have learned to depend on the news media to inform them about events. Thus, they tend to believe the media regarding the winner of the debate (Krauss, 2000). During the 1976 debates between Carter and Ford, Ford made a gaffe regarding foreign policy, twice insisting that Eastern Europeans were not under the domination of the Soviet Union (Krauss, 2000). Voters who actually watched the debate believed that night that the error was not big enough to hinder Ford's performance, but the media decisively declared Carter the winner due to Ford's misstatement (Krauss, 2000). The public made their initial assessment of the debate, but changed their minds after hearing the media's perception (Krauss, 2000). Thus, voters who watched the debate and immediately responded thought Ford was the winner. However, voters who responded a few days later, presumably after being exposed to media coverage of the debate, declared Carter the

winner. G. Lang and K. Lang concluded that the group exposed to media coverage believed Carter the winner, but voters that actually watched the debate thought the opposite (Krauss, 2000, Lang and Lang, 1978).

Voters have allowed the debate to be turned into a game of winners and losers. But the actual substance of the debate is not to be depicted in that sense. The issues that are discussed are intended to serve as a means of clarification on what each candidate believes, not a game with the purpose of winning. The media reduce the message and issues by framing the debates as a contest.

#### DO DEBATES MATTER?

While the televised debate has become an essential part of presidential campaigns, the value and merit of debates is continued to be questioned by political scholars. Generally, the claim is that debates matter in a way that is similar to the conventions and television ads – with limited impact on voter attitudes and long-term opinions. However, they do have short-term advantages, such as the ability to show the two candidates on the same platform, giving them a chance to clarify their stances on issues and to persuade voters to turn out or become engaged. Debates provide exposure and help inform the electorate. Debates are important to the campaign since they serve as a visual aid to voters, but they also come at the end of the campaign when a lot of voters have already made up their minds (Jones, 2005). Televised debates allow candidates to expand and develop their opinions on various issues in ways that campaign speeches do not (Jones, 2005). Jones argues that the debate platform allows a candidate to deviate from his or her stock campaign speech, increasing exposure to the candidate's real stances on issues.

Research suggests that regardless of the election year, debates provide useful information to the voter (Krauss, 2000). Studies and surveys done on the 1976 presidential campaign suggest that debates produced a more informed electorate than would have existed had the debates not been held (Krauss, 2000). Since the 1976 debates were the first televised general election debates held since the 1960 Kennedy election, many scholars studied them thoroughly to understand their effects. Researchers did not attribute much influence on voting behavior to viewing the debates; however, they did find that the debates provided voters with more information about the candidates than they previously knew, helping to eliminate the “Carter Who?” problem that many believed would hinder his chances at the presidency (Krauss, 2000). Additionally, it was found that debates have more impact on voters than other forms of televised political communication, such as advertisements and news programs (Krauss, 2000). Other scholars have found that while debates can produce gains in a voter’s knowledge, the gains are not uniform across the electorate and often are too minimal to make a difference. In 2004, incumbent President George W. Bush was hampered by low poll numbers and his debate performances did little to make up any ground. However, he was still able win the presidency (but there were – as always – a variety of factors at play, including the post-9/11 “stay the course” mentality and John Kerry’s relatively weak performance as well). The 2004 debates serve as an example of the minimal impact of debates regardless of any gains made across the electorate.

Other studies have shown that debates increase knowledge in the more informed voters but not the less informed, ultimately increasing the “knowledge gap” (Krauss, 2000). The candidates want to use the debates as a platform to inform and persuade all citizens, so they attempt to discuss and push issues that they believe will be most appealing to voters and beneficial for themselves (Krauss, 2000).

The 2012 presidential debates had a short-term effect on the campaign. After the October 3<sup>rd</sup> debate, Mitt Romney was highlighted in the media for having dominated the debate. And according to Gallup polls, no other candidate from JFK to the present ever approached the 52-point favored candidate accorded to Romney declaring that if the election were held on that day, the voter would vote for him (Gallup, 2012). Two days before the debate, Obama led the “horse race” by four points in the Real Clear Politics average of polls; 10 days later, that same survey reported a 1.5 percent edge for Romney implying that he was able to pick up more than five percentage points due to his debate performance (Pew Research Center, 2012?). Romney’s “victory” in the first debate illustrates how debates can help candidates who are judged to have a strong performance, allowing voters use the debate performance in order to rethink their choices if they are truly undecided or uncertain about their preferred candidate. So the debate enabled Romney to get a temporary bump in the polls, but it was not a deciding factor when voters took to the polls a month later on Election Day, which could also be attributed to outside factors. Since each election cycle is different, it is hard to generalize across debates regarding their overall impact. Audiences bring different informational needs to each campaign, as well as to each debate, and those needs affect what sense voters make of the information available in the debates. Voters’ needs vary based on their economic standing and vantage point on social issues. Voters with a lower socioeconomic status tend to have different information needs and tend not be as exposed to all the media outlets.

Polling has become an increasingly integral part of televised presidential debates. It determines who is eligible to debate during the primary season, and it also signifies to voters the perception of winners and losers after a debate performance. In order to appear in a debate, the CPD requires candidates to reach 15 percent in pre-debate polls, as determined by five selected

national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations most recently publicly-reported results at the time of the determination (Farah, 2004). Media stations, which typically sponsor the primary debates, also tend to have a threshold, albeit a lower percentage. While there are still questions regarding the impact of polling and its long-term effects, it does play a role in momentum and candidate encouragement. The candidate's standing in the polls can be impacted by a good or bad debate performance, such as Romney's performance in his first debate. Polling does not ultimately decide if the debate was able to persuade, but it helps give important feedback to the candidates on their performance and the preferences of the voters. Additionally, polls play an important part in developing strategies and preparing presidential candidates for televised debates because they are able to highlight important issues and topics concerning the electorate (Krauss, 2000).

A poll by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press conducted in November 2012 asked voters how helpful the 2012 presidential debates were in helping them decide what candidate to support. Among the respondents, 29 percent claimed the debates were very helpful, 37 percent said somewhat helpful, 14 percent said not too helpful, three percent did not watch the debates and one percent refused to answer the question (Pew Research Center, 2012). The results are somewhat ambiguous because it is not prefaced with the level of knowledge the voter had going into the debate and because a "socially desirable" response would be to claim watching the debates and being influenced by them. It is clear that debates do stimulate the retention of information about candidates, but their long-term effects are still unclear.

## PURPOSE

My thesis will examine how control of the debate format and questioning has changed over the years. It will study whether candidates or moderators have gained more control over the message in recent years. It will study how debates have changed over time by delving into debate transcripts to gain a better understanding of who controls the debates and how that may impact the framing of the debates in the media. My research questions will be as follows:

RQ1: How often and in what ways do the candidates respond to or evade the moderator's question? Has this changed over time? Are the candidates more evasive in earlier or later years?

RQ2: Have the candidates become more critical of each other throughout history? Are they critical in hopes of gaining control of the debate?

RQ3: When candidates don't respond directly to the moderator, do they do so to expand on a previous topic or to raise a new topic? Have candidates become more responsive in later years?

The questions raised will provide answers and insight to the messages that come out of the debates and how they are shaped.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology I used for my thesis is a quantitative content analysis of multiple presidential debates. The content analysis helped me analyze the communication between the

candidates in a systematic way. A code sheet was developed in order collect data on key variables. I also explored whether the candidate responds efficiently to the moderator or tried to advance his own agenda.

The content analysis covered the 1976, 1992 and 2012 presidential elections. I selected 1976 because it was the first year the debates took place in a general election since the 1960 campaign. I chose 1992 because it was a highly contested election between incumbent George H. W. Bush and Governor Bill Clinton, and the debate format changed due to the demands of the candidates and the rules set forth by the CPD. Finally, I chose 2012 because the first debate between President Obama and Governor Romney was identified early on as a key event in the election.

The key variables studied included the length of each statement by a candidate, criticism type, response types and evasiveness. The length of statement and number of statements made on behalf of the candidates helped indicate how much exposure and control they had during the debates. A candidate who speaks longer and more often is more likely to have more of an influence. The response type was coded to determine whether the statement was a direct response to the moderator, the opposing candidate, or someone else, or whether it was a follow-up response to the moderator, opposing candidate or someone else. This variable analyzed the message and content of the statement. It helped show whether the candidate responds to the moderator or evades the question. I looked at the content of the response and what its intentions were on behalf of the candidate, as well as whether the response framed the issue advantageously for the candidate, or if it evaded the subject altogether. For statements that are critical, I looked at whether the criticism was directed at the candidate's opponent or the moderator. The variables studied provided insight and answers to the research questions raised.

## RESULTS

RQ1: How often and in what ways do the candidates respond to or evade the moderator's question? Has this changed over time? Are the candidates more evasive in earlier or later years?

Evasiveness was measured in order to gain an understanding of how directly the candidate answered the moderator's question. The variable is important in understanding how the candidate tries to evade important issues. Evasiveness is a complicated variable to define, but the coders determined it by rather the answer was all or nothing. If the response was confusing, vague, or strayed from the topic in any way, it was deemed to be somewhat evasive. There was then a scale put in place to determine the level of evasive. The Scott's pi value for evasiveness was .82.

Table 1. Percentage of times candidate gives evasive answers during election cycle.

Debate Cycle	Evasiveness	% of time candidate is evasive		
		Carter	Ford	
1976	Answers Question	51.3%	57.1%	
	Partly Answers Question	43.6%	46.9%	
	Answers but changes topic	5.1%	0%	
1992		Clinton	Bush	Perot
	Answers Question	80.4%	67.3%	48.1%
	Partly Answers Question	10.7%	32.7%	46.2%
	Answers but changes topic	0%	0%	1.9%
	Ignores question entirely	8.9%	0%	3.8%
2012		Obama	Romney	
	Answers Question	74.6%	70.2%	
	Partly Answers Question	23.7%	19.3%	
	Answers but changes topic	0%	0.3%	
	Ignores Question Entirely	1.7%	7.0%	

The table illustrates whether over time the candidate adequately answers the questions he is asked. Candidates find a variety of ways to avoid the question at hand. They can answer the question entirely, partly answer it, give a quick answer but then change to a different topic, or ignore the question entirely. This variable is important because it helps illustrate who is really controlling the message of the debate. After I coded the transcripts, it is more common for candidates to partly answer the question, but give a very vague response. For example, during the second debate of the 1992 election, President Clinton responded to a question regarding domestic policy, but instead of answering the entirety of the question at hand, he just alluded to his success as governor and equated that with him being a successful president. His exchange with Jim Lehrer of PBS, the debate moderator, and Ann Compton of ABC News, one of three panelists asking questions, follows:

COMPTON: Mr. Perot, you talked a minute ago about rebuilding the job base. But is it true what Governor Clinton just said, that that means that unemployment will increase, that it will slow the economy? And how would you specifically use the powers of the presidency to get more people back into good jobs immediately?

LEHRER: Governor Clinton, one minute.

CLINTON: This country desperately needs a jobs program, and my first priority would be to pass a jobs program, to introduce it on the first day I was inaugurated. I would meet with the leaders of the Congress, with all the newly elected members of the Congress and as many others with whom I could meet between the time of the election and the inauguration, and we would present a jobs program. Then we would present a plan to control health care costs and phase in health care coverage for all Americans. Until we control health care costs, we're not going to control the deficit. It is the number one culprit. But first we must have an aggressive jobs program. I live in a state where manufacturing job growth has far outpaced the nation in the last few years, where we have created more private sector jobs since Mr. Bush has been president than have been created in the entire rest of the country, where Mr. Bush's labor secretary said job growth has been enormous. We've done it in Arkansas. Give me a chance to create these kind of jobs in America. We can do it. I know we can.

Clinton partly answers the question in this example but also steals the question from Ross Perot. He doesn't go into detail about using the powers of the presidency, but instead he shifts to his own success and uses it as a way to attack Bush. While he doesn't completely ignore the moderator, the candidates in later years adopt this approach of Clinton's.

While the numbers do not illustrate a significant change in evasiveness over time, a textual analysis of the transcripts alludes to more change. In 1976, Carter and Ford answer the question roughly 51 and 57 percent of the time, respectively. However, in 2012, Obama and Romney answer the question 74 and 70 percent of the time, respectively. This gives the perception that over time candidates are more apt to stay on topic and respond more directly. But, this is not necessarily the case. An analysis of the transcripts shows that candidates in later years were more likely to talk over the moderator and engage in dialogue solely with the other candidate. One example from the second debate between Obama and Romney shows this:

CROWLEY: (Inaudible) in the follow up, it doesn't quite work like that. But I'm going to give you a chance here. I promise you, I'm going to.

And the next question is for you. So if you want to, you know, continue on but I don't want to leave all ...

ROMNEY: Candy, Candy

CROWLEY: sitting here

ROMNEY: Candy, I don't have a policy of stopping wind jobs in Iowa and that they're not phantom jobs. They're real jobs.

CROWLEY: OK.

ROMNEY: I appreciate wind jobs in Iowa and across our country. I appreciate the jobs in coal and oil and gas. I'm going to make sure

CROWLEY: OK.

ROMNEY: we're taking advantage of our energy resources. We'll bring back manufacturing to America. We're going to get through a very aggressive energy policy, 3 1/2 million more jobs in this country. It's critical to our future.

OBAMA: Candy, it's not going to

CROWLEY: We're going to move you along

OBAMA: Used to being interrupted.

This exchange illustrates how the candidates completely talk over the moderator. In 1976, the debates were much more civil, as the candidates seem to respect the moderator more and not engage in outside dialogue or talk over them. In 1992, there was more talking over the moderator and in 2012 this escalated even further. As mentioned previously, the 1976 debates were the first debates to occur between candidates from the two parties since the 1960 debates. This could factor into why the candidates were so well “behaved” and did not engage in as much outside discourse between questions.

In 2012, if the candidates had a qualm with something that either the moderator or their opponent said, they were more likely to completely ignore the current discussion. During the first debate, moderator Jim Lehrer tried repeatedly to get Governor Romney back on track and stick to his time limit. However, Romney ignored Lehrer’s request and insisted on attacking President Obama. During these episodes, more often than not, the candidates would ignore the current topic and choose something more preferable to discuss. The moderator would eventually reel them back in to proceed with the debate agenda.

LEHRER: All right.

ROMNEY: Jim, let me just come back on that...on that point, which is these...

LEHRER: Just for the... just for record...

(CROSSTALK)

ROMNEY: ... the small businesses we're talking about...

LEHRER: Excuse me. Excuse me. Just so everybody understands, we're way over our first 15 minutes.

ROMNEY: It's fun, isn't it?

LEHRER: It's OK, it's great. No problem. Well, you all don't have... you don't have a problem, I don't have a problem, because we're still on the economy. We're going to come back to taxes. I want move on to the deficit and a lot of other things, too.

The example illustrates Lehrer trying to get Romney back on topic. This type of dialogue continued through the next two debates. During the second debate, the candidates continued to control the debate by ignoring the question format and not staying on topic. In response to one question about continuing the policies of President George W. Bush, Governor Romney said, "Thank you. And I appreciate that question," but then he went on to respond to the previous topic about contraceptives.

CROWLEY: I want to move us along here to Susan Katz, who has a question. And, Governor, it's for you.

QUESTION: Governor Romney, I am an undecided voter, because I'm disappointed with the lack of progress I've seen in the last four years. However, I do attribute much of America's economic and international problems to the failings and missteps of the Bush administration.

Since both you and President Bush are Republicans, I fear a return to the policies of those years should you win this election. What is the biggest difference between you and George W. Bush, and how do you differentiate yourself from George W. Bush?

ROMNEY: Thank you. And I appreciate that question.

I just want to make sure that, I think I was supposed to get that last answer, but I want to point out that that I don't believe...

OBAMA: I don't think so, Candy.

ROMNEY: ... I don't believe...

OBAMA: I want to make sure our timekeepers are working here.

ROMNEY: The time...the time...

CROWLEY: OK. The timekeepers are all working. And let me tell you that the last part, it's for the two of you to talk to one another, and it isn't quite as (inaudible) you think.

But go ahead and use this two minutes any way you'd like to, the question is on the floor.

ROMNEY: I'd just note that I don't believe that bureaucrats in Washington should tell someone whether they can use contraceptives or not. And I don't believe employers should tell someone whether they could have contraceptive care or not. Every woman in America should have access to contraceptives. And...and the...and the president's statement of my policy is completely and totally wrong.

OBAMA: Governor...

ROMNEY: Let me come back and...and answer your question.

The example illustrates Romney taking control of the debate and the moderator. This was not a lone occurrence; the candidates simply did not abide by the rules set forth for them. Thus, the numbers presented through coding are not able to appropriately decipher the amount of evasiveness during debates. While the numbers may show the candidates in later years are equal to the evasiveness of earlier years—or in some cases, less evasive—I believe the candidates were able to take more control in more recent years.

Additionally, the candidates in the 1992 debates did not engage in much outside dialogue and I believe this can be correlated with the fact that there were three candidates, which enabled the moderator to have a bit more control and oversight. Ross Perot's debate performance was unusual for a couple of reasons, but most importantly, he was an Independent and most debates are held between candidates of the two dominant parties—Democratic and Republican. Perot was not critical of the other two candidates, but his answers were the most evasive of the three. As an Independent, he did not take a strong stance on the issues like the other two candidates. Perot was more ambiguous with his response, which made him appear more evasive. A lot of his

responses alluded to the fact that he was a third party candidate and that the American people wanted him to be there. He focused on the issue of being there rather than the issues at hand.

Table 2. Number of times of evasive response per debate cycle

	Number of times of response per debate cycle		
	1976	1992	2012
Evasiveness			
Answers Question	49	107	84
Partly Answers Question	32	48	25
Answers but Changes Topic	2	1	2
Ignores Question Entirely	0	7	5

Table 2 also illustrates that the number of evasive answers has not really increased over time. The 1992 debate is not a good indication since there were three speakers, which created more speaking time and allowed for an unequal distribution of answers. But there has been an increase in ignoring the question entirely, which was noted earlier. The candidates seem to have less respect for the moderator in later years.

Table 3. Political Party's correlation with evasiveness

Evasiveness	Political Party		
	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Answers Question	70.8%	67.7%	49.1%
Partly Answers Question	24.0%	28.4%	45.3%
Answers but Changes Topic	1.3%	1.3%	1.9%
Ignore Question Entirely	3.9%	2.6%	3.8%

*Pearson Chi-Square: 9.628, p=ns*

Table 3 shows the correlation between political party and the percentage of times candidates from the respective parties gave evasive responses. Again, there is no real correlation and the most noteworthy party is the Independent, which is represented in this instance by Ross Perot. However, these numbers are bit deceiving since there was only one Independent candidate coded and it was an unusual debate cycle.

RQ2: Have the candidates become more critical throughout history?

Table 4: Correlation with Increasing Criticism Over Time

Debate Cycle	Criticism	Candidate		
1976		Carter	Ford	
	No criticism	28.2% of the time	58.1% of the time	
	Criticism against Carter	0% of the time	41.9% of the time	
	Criticism against Ford	69.2% of the time	0% of the time	
1992		Clinton	Bush	Perot
	No Criticism	58.9% of the time	61.8% of the time	98.1% of the time
	Criticism against Bush	35.7% of the time	0% of the time	1.9% of the time
	Criticism against Clinton	0% of the time	36.4% of the time	0% of the time
	Criticism against Perot	5.4% of the time	1.8% of the time	0% of the time
2012		Obama	Romney	
	No Criticism	28.8% of the time	42.1% of the time	
	Criticism against Romney	71.2% of the time	0% of the time	
	Criticism against Obama	0% of the time	56.1% of the time	

1976: Pearsons Chi-Square: 50.652, p=.000

1992: Pearsons Chi-Square: 84.145, p=.000

2012: Pearsons Chi-Square: 72.275, p=.000

Table 4 indicates there is no correlation with increasing criticism over time. For intercoder reliability, the Scott's pi was .91. It interesting to note that the candidate that is more critical—at least in these three election cycles—has won the election. The impact of negative campaigning has been disputed, particularly since voters say they oppose negative campaigning and would rather hear the real issues. But, Carter, Clinton and Obama were all more critical during the presidential debates than their opponents and ended up being victorious. Candidates hope to gain control over their opponents by being critical and pointing out their weaknesses. But, this is not an idea that has evolved recently.

Table 5. 1976 Topic Criticism

Candidate	Topic	Criticism Type		
Carter		No Criticism	Criticism against Carter	Criticism against Ford
	Domestic Policy	81.8%	0%	52.2%
	Foreign Policy	18.2%	0%	47.8%
Nixon		No Criticism	Criticism against Carter	Criticism against Ford
	Domestic Policy	68.2%	46.7%	0%
	Foreign Policy	31.8%	53.3%	0%

1976: Topic Criticism: Pearsons Chi-Square: 4.269, p=.118

In 1976, Governor Carter entered the debates as the unknown. President Ford had been serving the remainder of President Nixon's term, starting his presidency in August 1974. But, many Americans were still upset with the Watergate scandal and believed government to be corrupt. Many Americans were also frustrated with the fact that Ford pardoned Nixon for Nixon's role in Watergate. Carter was able to take control of the debate by pointing out the flaws of his opponent's domestic policy and that re-electing Ford would be a continuation of his

administration's tired policies. The table below illustrates that Carter shifted his criticism towards domestic policy and the fact that Ford was still a remaining chapter in the Nixon scandal since Ford was Nixon's vice president. Carter was able to take control of the debates and ultimately win the election by linking Ford to the Nixon administration and by attaching himself to the Democratic Party. This is similar to the platform that Clinton used when running against Bush. President Clinton was able to control the message and make it about the economy rather than his inexperience abroad.

Table 6: Clinton/Bush Criticism in 1992 Debate

Topic	Criticism	Candidate	
		Clinton	Bush
Domestic	Criticism against Bush	81.3%	0%
	Criticism against Clinton	0%	87.5%
Foreign		Clinton	Bush
	Criticism against Bush	18.8%	0%
	Criticism against Clinton	0%	12.5%

Clinton criticized Bush's economic record and claimed that if Bush was re-elected, it would not be much different. He pledged to turn the economy around and used his background as governor to illustrate the change he would be capable of making. Table 6 illustrates that when Clinton was critical of Bush, 81.3 percent of the time it was in regards to his domestic policy

while only 18.8 percent of the time it was about his foreign policy. Consequently, Bush had to shift his message towards criticizing Clinton’s inexperience on domestic and foreign issues. This is important because it shows how Clinton was able to control the message and make it about the economy.

Table 7: Amount of Criticism Responses on Behalf of Political Party for each Debate Cycle

Political Party	Year		
	1976	1992	2012
Democratic	20	21	43
Republican	27	20	32

Table 7 depicts the increase in criticism during each debate cycle. These numbers are a bit deceiving, however, because they do not show the number of statements made on behalf of each candidate and how, over time, the debates became increasingly longer and more verbose. The table makes it seem that the number of critical responses stayed stagnant and then increased in 2012. However, in 1992 the number of responses were actually divided by three candidates, so each candidate did not have as many opportunities to speak, consequently reducing the number of critical responses. Additionally, in 2012, the debates were longer and more verbose, giving the candidates the chance to speak more often, which increased the amount of times they could be critical. However, it is interesting to note the parallels between the parties and number of critical statements. The candidates are becoming more critical over time and it is helping them win. After I read the 1992 debate transcripts, Perot’s lack of criticism made him appear too affable

and not willing to take a strong stance as President. Both Governor Clinton and President Bush were aggressive and pointed out important flaws in the other that made themselves appear as the dominant candidate. While voters may not support the debate jabs, the numbers illustrate they work.

Table 8: Analyses of 2012 Debate Criticism

Date	Criticism type	Obama	Romney
First Debate- October 3, 2012	No Criticism	22.2%	33.3%
	Criticism against Romney	77.8%	0%
	Criticism against Obama	0%	61.1%
Second Debate- October 15, 2012	No Criticism	26.3%	29.4%
	Criticism against Romney	73.7%	0%
	Criticism against Obama	0%	70.6%
Third Debate- October 22, 2012	No Criticism	36.4%	59.1%
	Criticism against Romney	63.6%	0%
	Criticism against Obama	0%	40.9%

First Debate: Pearsons Chi-Square= 22.667, p=.000

During the 2012 Presidential debates, the media declared that the first debate was a decisive victory for Romney because he came out on the attack and was relentless. However, the data shows that Obama was actually more aggressive than his opponent. In contrast to the

Carter/Ford debates, the 2012 debates show that the opponent that is the most critical is not always deemed the winner.

RQ3: When candidates don't respond directly to the moderator, do they do so to expand on a previous topic or to raise a new topic? Have candidates become more responsive in later years?

The table below illustrates the different types of responses the candidates had to the moderator. The response types provide insight into how the candidates hoped to control the agenda and how they shifted their answers to frame their responses. The Scott's pi value for response type was .87.

Table 9: Candidate's response type

Debate Cycle	Response Type	Candidate		
		Carter	Ford	
1976				
	Direct Response to Moderator	51.3%	53.5%	
	Direct Response to Other Candidate	0%	2.3%	
	Follow Up to Moderator	48.7%	41.9%	
	Follow Up to Other Candidate	0%	2.3%	
1992		Clinton	Bush	Perot
	Direct Response to Moderator	37.5%	38.2%	32.7%
	Direct Response to Other Candidate	1.8%	1.8%	0%
	Follow Up to Moderator	42.9%	49.1%	65.4%
	Follow Up to Other Candidate	10.7%	7.3%	0%
	Interruption	7.1%	3.6%	1.9%
2012		Obama	Romney	

Direct Response to Moderator	28.8%	38.6%
Direct Response to Other Candidate	1.7%	0%
Follow Up to Moderator	30.5%	24.6%
Follow Up to Other Candidate	18.6%	22.8%
Interruption	20.3%	14.0%

Table 9 illustrates how a candidate responds to a question – whether it is a direct response to a moderator, follow up to another candidate or an interruption. The data is important since it reflects the control the candidate has when answering questions. The numbers illustrate that over time, candidates were more apt to take more control and ignore the moderator. In 1976, candidates were not recorded as interrupting the moderator or each other to respond; however, in 1992, roughly 13% of the responses were interruptions and this rose to 34% in 2012. These findings are similar to what was found when studying evasiveness. While evasiveness is harder to decipher, the findings were consistent with the conclusion that over time, the candidates were more likely to take control over the message.

Additionally, in 1976 both candidates responded to the moderator roughly 50% of the time. This number decreases throughout the next two election cycles. In 2012, Obama and Romney responded directly to the moderator 28.8% and 38.6% of the time, respectively. As mentioned earlier, their responses tie in to evasiveness. During the later elections, the candidates overlooked the role of the moderator and just engaged with each other; thus, contributing to the fact that they were less likely to respond to them. During the second debate in 2012, a couple of times President Obama said, “Wait, wait, one minute Candy,” and would then go on and respond to Governor Romney’s previous statement. This is important to take into consideration since it plays a role in who is perceived to have more control in the debate.

Additionally, while doing the research I found a couple of interesting things that are important to the findings. The first is the amount of time candidates speak. I thought this would help illustrate more of the control and if a certain party spoke more often and longer than others. I hoped to find a strong correlation between parties and the length they speak.

Table 10: Length of statements made on behalf of party

	Numbers of times they spoke	Mean	Standard Deviation
Democrat	154	336.64	166.983
Republican	155	320.51	139.198
Independent	53	263.15	141.703

Table 10 is interesting because the two parties are relatively equal in amount of times spoken and average statement length. But while reading the debates, it appeared certain parties spoke more often than others. By taking the mode for speaker for each debate, I was able to find that Republicans spoke more often in 1976 and 1992, but in 2012, the Democrat spoke more. This is not that critical in helping understand the control, but it is just interesting to take into consideration in terms of which party spoke more. Additionally, I was able to find the average length of statement per each debate cycle. In 1976, the average length was 408 words per statement, in 1992 it dropped to 256 and in 2012 it rose back up to 342 words. These numbers correlate with what I mentioned in terms of evasiveness. In 1976, the candidate's answers were much more on point. They answered the question entirely and then the moderator moved on to the next question and candidate. But, in 2012, the candidates would interrupt each other and only answer part of the question, which enabled shorter responses.

Table 11: ANOVA Table of Multiple comparisons between parties

Party Affiliation	Party Affiliation	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig
Democrat	Republican	16.133	17.294	1.00
	Independent	73.492	24.206	.008
Republican	Democrat	-16.133	17.294	1.00
	Independent	57.359	24.186	.055
Independent	Democrat	-73.492	24.206	.008
	Republican	-57.359	24.186	.055

Table 11 shows a more in-depth comparison between both parties. The only strong correlation that is significant are the Democrats compared to the Independents at .008. However, this is not relevant in the big picture since the debates used only measured one independent candidate, throwing the numbers off.

Another topic of interest while reading the debates was the respect for the moderator. All the candidates were respectful, but in later years the candidates begin to overpower them and not abide by the rules. This was especially noticeable during the 2012 debates. During the first

debate, moderator Jim Lehrer had to ask multiple times for the candidates to get back on track and answer the question or move on to the next topic. This did not occur as much during the earlier years. A few times during the 1992 debates, candidate Ross Perot had to ask the moderator if he could speak because he did not believe he was getting the equal time provision that the other two candidates were given. One example is:

LEHRER: Mr. Perot.

PEROT: Is there an equal time rule tonight?

BUSH: Yes.

PEROT: Or do you just keep lunging in at will? I thought we were going to have equal time, but maybe I just have to interrupt the other 2. Is that the way it works?

Additionally, in 2012, moderator Candy Crowley interrupted a conversation between Romney and Obama about the Benghazi scandal that occurred under the Obama administration. Crowley corrected Romney on his comment and pointed out that Obama was indeed right in his statement. This created a lot of controversy because Republicans believed Crowley overstepped her boundaries as moderator, while others argued that the moderator has the right to intervene and fact-check (Mirkinson, 2013). Crowley wanted to fight back in order to show she had more control than Jim Lehrer had while moderating the previous debate (Mirkinson, 2013). Conservatives argued that her willingness to fight back made it appear she was siding with President Obama since they believed it appeared she was siding with him on some issues. Additionally, conservatives argued that she was attempting to influence the electorate by making President Obama appear more credible than Governor Romney. This is very different than the previous moderator Jim Lehrer appeared during the debate. Lehrer seemed too deferential while Crowley was not afraid to insert herself into the debate when questionable facts were being

discussed. However, regardless of how the moderator acts, it is hard for them to escape criticism in today's age.

## WHY IT ALL MATTERS

The debates of 1960 were revolutionary in setting the stage for how voters would see and interpret the candidate's message. It provided a new platform for voters to make their decision due to the introduction of candidate's appearing on television and addressing the voters more directly. It allowed the voters to have another tool in helping make their decision. The results help illustrate and explain who controls the debates – the media or the candidate. The prominent theory discussed in this paper relates to agenda setting, and the idea that the media – by virtue of what they cover extensively – sets the issue agenda for the public. They set the agenda for the issues they believe the most important. In regards to debates, scholars believe that both pre- and post-debate, the media dictate what issues should be discussed during a debate and names their winner after hoping the public will agree on the same winner. While I believe the media do indeed have an influence on the debate and the perception voters walk away with, I think the candidates have a lot of control over what is said during a debate. Due to the contracts set forth by the CPD, the candidates are allowed to control the majority of the format and the questions asked. Further, through being evasive and using various response tactics, the candidates are able to control what goes on during the debate more so than the moderator. In a way, the candidates operate as a balance on the media. They cover the issues the media poses, but then they are able to further control the message through the tactics covered by this paper.

My results show that candidates from both parties use different methods to set the agenda. Rather it be through being evasive or by switching topics mid answer in order to make sure that their issues get discussed. The coding illustrated that the candidates enter debates with a certain mindset and framework of the key issues they want discussed. Candidates find a way to discuss these topics even if the moderator does not pose questions regarding them. The findings show that these issues and responses are not as drastic as the media often portrays, the candidates do not go completely off topic all the time but they find a way to make sure their agenda is discussed. I thought going into the research that I would find the candidates completely off topic and ignoring their opponent and moderator more often. The literature made it seem that salient issues were not discussed due to the CPD and candidates not wanting to discuss anything contentious. The results were a bit contradictory since the moderators have been given a bit more control in recent years through their own doing.

#### HOW IT WOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

There are a couple of things I would do differently with the analysis. First, I would study more debates. I wasn't able to study as many as I would have hoped due to time constraints. The coding process was very tedious, which forced me to focus on a few select debates. I also would have looked at more media studies to see how they interpreted the debates and what they found to be most influential. I think future research could look at coding along with media interpretation where you would have actual transcripts from the media's post debate dialogue and compare it to what actually happened in the debate. A textual analysis over a coding analysis may provide more insight into how they control the debate and why they respond in certain ways. It would help give an explanation of how the media interpreted the debate and if

that actually came to fruition. If the candidate that “won” the debate was actually the candidate that was most negative and so on. Rudeness would also be an interesting variable to study. But, it is hard to determine how “rude” a candidate is through a coding analysis and without watching the candidate’s mannerisms. Additionally, actual video transcripts would provide added resources as they would illustrate the candidate’s mannerisms and physical appearance which many believe plays a role in voter perception. The candidate that appears most confident is more likely to be victorious.

However, this study has shown through three debates the different ways the candidate is able to have control over the debate. It enabled a more in depth look into the debate dialogue that often isn’t focused on through the media. It has shown that both parties year after year find different ways set the agenda and create a form of control.

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