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**CONTROLLING THE 2012 REPUBLICAN PRIMARY DEBATES:  
Why the Structure of the Television Moderators' Questions Matters**

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Why the Structure of the Television Moderators' Questions Matters**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

For my parents, both of whom always expressed their love for me and their pride in my pursuit of knowledge.

## Acknowledgements

Being a journalist is a privilege that involves great responsibility. For more than 30 years, I have been involved in telling stories about people who have helped shape our society to some degree. Most of the subjects of my stories have done that in subtle ways, others in very public settings. After sharing their stories, I would often receive feedback from readers, listeners or viewers that clued me in on the influence a reporter has. I must have told thousands of stories throughout my career, and yet it always seemed to surprise me that people were paying attention. And while I might have had the guidance of an editor or producer, the decisions behind how I shaped each story was all mine. Yes, I was trained to do the job, but it was only in recent years as a graduate student that I formally realized there was an entire area of study related to this very responsibility.

As I began my way through graduate school, at first I was a bit offended by all the criticism aimed at my chosen profession. In my mind, I wondered what would the “academics” do under similar deadlines and circumstances. But that’s the beauty of continuing one’s education. It didn’t take long for me to see that the criticism was constructive and very much in line with my beliefs regarding a business that was becoming, in some instances, superficial in a fractured media landscape. The journalistic responsibility entrusted to me can certainly be used to inform. But it can also lead to misinformation, or worse yet, cause harm.

As I learned how to research the effects of journalism during my first graduate course taught by Dr. Paula Poindexter, I dedicated myself to using this opportunity to do a better job as a reporter and to try and encourage my colleagues to do the same. And through my conversations with Dr. Poindexter, I was encouraged to follow my specific

passion of political reporting along my path toward my master's degree, and ultimately my doctoral degree. In fact, it was Dr. Poindexter who encouraged me to pursue my Ph.D. She has a knack for seeing an academic discovery you have made, even if you can't initially see it yourself. She did that as my teacher, first reader for my master's thesis, and as chair of my dissertation committee. I am forever grateful to her for not only her guidance, but also her professionalism and friendship.

I am also grateful for the inspiration I received from the person who helped develop agenda setting, the very theory I used for both my thesis and dissertation. Dr. Maxwell McCombs helped me as my second reader for my thesis, and actually planted the seed for my continued examination of political debates. His work in attribute agenda setting and the effects coming from tone in political stories was something I wanted to apply to the study of televised debates. Dr. McCombs not only pointed me in the right direction based on his experience, but he also pointed to another study regarding sources that became a critical part of my methodology. What an honor to have worked with him. It has also been such a meaningful experience to have learned from all of my University of Texas professors. It's been a collection of valuable lessons and information that I will always carry with me.

The other members of my committee have also been a source of support and guidance along this dissertation journey with their input both leading up to and during this study. My gratitude to Professor Tracy Dahlby, Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez and Dr. Talia Stroud for their input and suggestions that will also help me with my future research.

By the way, well before this examination of televised debates, as a journalist I moderated quite a few of them involving candidates seeking office for positions on the local, state and federal level. I knew firsthand how much autonomy I had in developing

questions for these events that can shape our government. I certainly made mistakes along the way and always tried to learn from them. So naturally as a graduate student, I wanted to examine this journalistic authority of a debate moderator. At the very least, my hope is that other moderators think twice before crafting their next set of questions. In a perfect world, I would love for my research to instigate wholesale changes in how debates are organized and carried out. It may be a pipedream, but I can push for that, right?

And all of this background leads to my final acknowledgement here. My family has listened to me talk about studying debates for about a decade now. While they may not share my passion for this topic, you'd never know it by looking at the expression in their eyes as I bounce ideas, frustrations, and findings off of them. They were always supportive in my quest to finish this work, and willing to sacrifice things like vacations, date nights, having guests over, and other day-to-day events that make up family life. Thanks Dodie, Wade, Emmett and Josh. Now it's my turn to listen.

# **CONTROLLING THE 2012 REPUBLICAN PRIMARY DEBATES: Why the Structure of the Television Moderators' Questions Matters**

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Viewership for televised presidential debates has grown in recent years. The debates involving the major party nominees remain the most-watched political events in American politics, and viewership for those held during the primary season are on the rise. During the 2012 Republican primary season, a record 20 debates were held. With millions watching the debates, they deserve scrutiny. The research on the effects of presidential debates up to this point has focused primarily on the first level of agenda setting related to questions and answers.

This research expanded that work by considering the second level of agenda setting, or attribute agenda setting. Through qualitative discourse analysis of the questions and responses, as well as measuring the amount of screen time provided each candidate, this study found that cumulatively, the more time a candidate received to answer questions, the less uncertainty there was about that candidate among voters surveyed in a national poll. It also found that debate questions structured with attributes that challenge presidential candidates do not correlate with negative voter preference for them. In fact, the opposite holds true. Implications for debate viewers and organizers are discussed.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Almost 56 years have passed since the first televised presidential debate between Republican Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy. In his influential book, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, Alan Schroeder (2008) points out that the “mythology” of that broadcast amplified greatly over the years, yet the moral of the story has never changed:

Presidential debates are best apprehended as television shows, governed not by the rules of rhetoric or politics but by the demands of their host medium. The values of debates are the values of television: celebrity, visuals, conflict, and hype.

More than 74 million people watched that first Nixon-Kennedy encounter, and ever since, the televised U.S. presidential debates involving the major party nominees remain the most-watched political event in American politics (Webley, 2010).

In the 2012 presidential race, even during a television era involving the advent of cable and more channels dividing viewership, more than 67 million people tuned in for the first debate between former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama ("Commission on Presidential Debates," 2013). That surpassed the 63.2 million people who tuned in for the second 2008 debate between Senator John McCain of Arizona and then-Senator Obama of Illinois, and the estimated 62.5 million viewers who saw the first debate between President George W. Bush and Massachusetts Senator John F. Kerry in 2004. And all of those topped the 46.6 million who watched the first debate between then-Governor Bush and Vice President Al Gore in 2000.

During the most recent presidential election, the numbers were astounding. The initial 2016 debate between businessman Donald Trump and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton drew a record 84 million viewers, surpassing the previous record of 80.6 million people who watched President Jimmy Carter debate former California Governor Ronald Reagan in 1980 (A. J. Katz, 2016). The trend is clearly upward.

And as the viewership for televised debates has grown in recent years, so too has their frequency when the primary season is entered into the mix. In fact, the 2012 debate season for the Republicans, the party looking for someone to challenge the Democratic incumbent, was the most active in our nation's history (Klain, 2013). The Republican Party held 20 debates involving journalist moderators that received national television coverage, setting records for the number of viewers for primary debates. Viewership for each ranged from 6 million to 8 million people. While this study focuses on 2012, the 2016 election season shows how the primary debates have gained attention. The very first Republican primary debate in August 2015 drew approximately 25 million viewers, a record for a televised primary debate for either political party (Levy, 2016). And even when Trump, who has been credited with attracting viewers, chose not to take part in Fox News Channel's January 28, 2016 debate, more than 12 million viewers still tuned in (Battaglio, 2016).

Moderators oversee the debates, asking questions designed to elicit answers that provide insight about the candidates which ultimately may influence voters. With so



many people watching presidential debates in the primary season and general election, presidential debates and their component parts deserve scrutiny.

### **DEFINING PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES**

Although presidential debates are studied by presidential scholars, reported on by journalists, and discussed by pundits and campaign operatives, there is no agreed upon definition for them. The present-day sponsor of the televised presidential debates during the general election season is the Commission on Presidential Debates. The CPD is an independent, non-profit group whose primary mission is to “ensure for the benefit of the American electorate, that general election debates are held every four years between and among the leading candidates for the office of President and Vice President of the United States” (“Commission on Presidential Debates,” 2013). Serving as the official sponsor of these debates, the commission acknowledges that these debates are not required or assured. Yet, since the CPD formed in 1988, to this day general election debates have been successfully organized and broadcast.

And while debate formats and rules have varied since the commission’s formation, the CPD announces guidelines ahead of time which must be adhered to by all the invited candidates. And as this study observes, regardless of the format selected, there are common elements shared by each of them. Specifically, televised presidential debates are made up of five components: the candidates, the moderators, the audience (in-person and at-home), the questions, and the answers. Each of these

components combined have resulted in more than 50 years of televised presidential debate moments that have shaped American political culture.

### **TELEVISED PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE HISTORY**

The rich history of presidential debates can be divided into five key debate periods: (1) Pre-Television, (2) Early TV and the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon Debates, (3) 1964-1972 No-Debate Era, (4) 1976-1996 Debate Format Evolution, and (5) 21<sup>st</sup> Century Debates. Looking back at these periods can explain how debates have become a staple of presidential elections, and thus important to continue to analyze in new ways. It also reveals the evolution of the moderator's significance in these telecasts.

#### **Pre-Television**

The pre-television debate period begins in 1858 with Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. However, that matchup did not pertain to the presidency and did not involve journalists. The two politicians squared off as part of the Illinois campaign for U.S. Senate that year. Douglas did have aspirations for the presidency when he accepted Lincoln's challenge, but it was Lincoln – virtually an unknown politician beyond Illinois – who gained notoriety from this series of Senate debates and ultimately ran for and won the presidency two years later (Mogge, 1999).

More than 80 years later, the idea of broadcasting a presidential debate was first planted in 1940 by Republican Wendell Wilkie, who challenged Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt to debate. But FDR declined because he did not want to give more exposure to his opponent. Wilkie wanted to challenge the president on the New Deal

policies he felt were anti-business. Roosevelt easily won re-election with 55 percent of the popular vote and 85 percent of the electoral vote (Leip, 2012a).

It was on May 17, 1948, when the first debate involving presidential candidates was broadcast by radio. It was the Oregon Republican Presidential Primary Debate between New York Governor Thomas Dewey and former Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen, broadcast on radio station KEX-ABC in Portland. Between 40 and 80 million people listened to the one-hour event. The format included 20-minute opening statements and eight-and-a-half minute rebuttals. Dewey went on to become the nominee, ultimately losing to the Democratic incumbent, President Harry Truman, by a margin of less than 5 percent of the popular vote but more than 20 percent of the electoral vote (Leip, 2012a).

In 1956, the Democratic candidates for president, former Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson and former Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, debated for their party's nomination, but the eventual nominee Stevenson did not debate President Dwight Eisenhower in the fall. The single topic during the Florida Democratic Presidential Primary Debate concerned outlawing the Communist Party in the United States and was broadcast on ABC Radio. It was the first and last presidential debate limited to a single issue. Eisenhower defeated Stevenson in the general election, with 57 percent of the popular vote and 86 percent of the electoral vote (Leip, 2012b).

### **Early TV and 1960 Kennedy-Nixon Debate**

As President Eisenhower's second term was winding down, the television era was gearing up. Less than 1 percent of homes had televisions in 1948, but by 1958, that

number grew to more than 80 percent (Baughman, 1993). Governor Stevenson, while unable to fulfill his own presidential aspirations, saw television as the ideal medium to inform citizens during presidential elections. Leading up to the 1960 election season, he wrote a magazine article that paved a path to regularly scheduled televised debates (Minow & Lamay, 2008). Stevenson proposed that the major party candidates receive a series of half-hour blocks of broadcast time on television and radio free of charge. Candidates of any other party who had won 20 percent or more of the popular vote in the previous election or “could demonstrate substantial national support,” would also receive the same free airtime. While what Stevenson had in mind were not debates involving moderators, it put the idea into motion.

Without an incumbent running in 1960, both Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy appeared open to the idea of a nationally televised debate (Minow & Lamay, 2008). And with momentum building in Congress surrounding Stevenson’s idea of free airtime for candidates to talk about issues, an experiment came together between lawmakers and the broadcast networks. The broadcasters were reluctant to give away time by means of a federal mandate (Minow & Lamay, 2008). At the same time, they reminded lawmakers about the often forgotten federal “equal-time” rule established in 1927. It mandated that all candidates, from parties large and small, had to be provided equal airtime for exposure provided to an opponent. An exception to that rule was if such exposure of any candidate came during a “bona-fide” news interview. The compromise involved Congress suspending the equal-time provision for the 1960 election only, giving

the networks the ability to host debates outside of regular news programs. However, the suspension of the rule was to only involve the 1960 general election candidates for president and vice president (Schroeder, 2008).

But before the exemption to the “equal-time” rule applied to the 1960 general election fall campaign, a test of the obscure rule came during the Democratic primary campaign season in the spring of that year. There was a televised primary debate featuring two of the Democratic contenders, Kennedy and Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. Kennedy had agreed to Humphrey’s challenge to debate ahead of the West Virginia primary in April. Kennedy had declined previous challenges to debate, but this reversal came after JFK narrowly won the Wisconsin primary after indications that his Catholicism was an issue to some voters (“Kennedy-Humphrey primary debate,” 2008). A complication occurred prior to the debate when CBS announced it would not carry the event because not all of the Democratic candidates were invited. NBC decided to carry it instead, pushing the interpretation of the “equal-time” provision that the event was in fact a bona-fide news event. The debate originated from WCHS-TV in Charleston and was retransmitted to four other West Virginia stations and a number of large-market TV stations across the country.

But by September, the networks finally did not have to take a risk since the equal-time exemption was squarely in place. The first televised presidential debate between the two major parties’ nominees took place on September 26, 1960 between Kennedy and Nixon. It would be the first of a series of four debates that election season. The initial

debate drew a huge audience of about 70 million viewers out of a U.S. population of about 180 million. The issues discussed are seldom considered historically. What is remembered is the personal appearance of each candidate (Gordon, 2012). Nixon, who had recently been ill and also campaigned vigorously hours before the debate, refused to wear makeup. He looked tired and as though he needed a shave. Kennedy, on the other hand, was fit and rested. The majority of radio listeners surveyed at the time believed Nixon won the debates, but most television viewers felt it was Kennedy who turned in the better performance. Kennedy won one of the closest presidential elections in history, gaining only 113,000 more votes than Nixon.

#### **1964-1972 No-Debate Era**

After the 1960 debates, though, the Federal Communications Commission went back to its strict interpretation of the equal-time rule. This happened partly due to the 1962 Michigan gubernatorial campaign. A radio station aired a debate between Democratic Governor John B. Swainson and Republican candidate George Romney. The uninvited Socialist Party candidate pressed for equal time. The FCC ruled that the equal-time exemption for the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates did not apply for the Michigan debate or any other future debates, setting up a precedent that would last for the next three presidential election cycles.

When President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was immediately sworn in as president. Running to return to the White House in 1964, Johnson was already on the record against presidential

debates, which meant important issues such as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War would not be discussed in a televised debate between the incumbent and his opponent, Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona (Kelley, 1963). Johnson easily won the 1964 general election with 61 percent of the popular vote (Leip, 2012b).

When Johnson decided not to run for re-election in 1968, Nixon returned to presidential politics and faced Democratic Vice President Hubert Humphrey. But like Johnson, Nixon too was against the idea of televised debates after his 1960 experience debating Kennedy (Minow & Lamay, 2008). An overwhelming favorite to defeat Democratic Senator George McGovern of South Dakota in 1972, Nixon again was against debates as he ran for re-election. Without debates, he went on to defeat McGovern with almost 98 percent of the electoral vote (Leip, 2012b).

While there were no general election presidential debates during this period, there were some *primary* debates on scheduled news programs, permitted under the equal-time provision.

One year before the 1976 presidential election, the FCC changed its interpretation of the equal-time rule based on a series of discussions on the televised debate issue, including by the Brookings Institution. The FCC reviewed the legislative history and concluded that Congress had meant to exempt all debates from the equal opportunity doctrine, not just the 1960 general election debate (*Petitions of the Aspen Institute Program*, 1975). But, the FCC also concluded that televised debates had to be initiated by non-broadcast entities. In addition, the timing was right politically. Incumbent

Republican President Gerald Ford was down significantly in the polls to the Democratic challenger, Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia. Both saw the benefit in debating before millions of Americans (Minow & Lamay, 2008).

### **1976-1996 Debate Format Evolution**

The 1976 election marked the return of televised presidential debates when Ford and Carter agreed to face each other. The League of Women Voters Education Fund sponsored them, serving as the non-broadcast host required to allow the telecasts to take place (Minow & Lamay, 2008).

Conventional wisdom indicated that Ford won the first debate, but made a major gaffe in the second one when he declared that “there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford administration” (*Debating the debates: Defining moments in presidential campaigns*, 1996). Ford’s momentum going into the debates stalled, and he lost to Carter by less than 2 percent of the popular vote (Leip, 2012b).

In 1980, President Carter did not receive the same type of “Poland gaffe” gift from his next Republican opponent, this time in Reagan. The two candidates were close in the polls leading into their series of televised debates. Carter was unpopular due to economic conditions and the Iranian hostage crisis. The Democrats portrayed Reagan as an ideologue who could not be trusted to keep the peace (Gordon, 2012). But Reagan came across as good-humored and not at all threatening. His now famous line, “there you go again,” was very well received and repeated long after the debate. And his question in



summation was also highly effective: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” Other politicians would use the line in the years that followed. Carter only carried six states, the least by a presidential candidate since 1932 (Troy, 1991).

Unexpectedly, Reagan did poorly in his first 1984 debate, this time seeking re-election against former Democratic Vice President Walter Mondale. But in the next debate, the incumbent rebounded when answering a question about his age and its potential impact on his effectiveness (Germond & Witcover, 1985). Those who watched initially believed Reagan was about to fumble the answer, but then said, “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.” The moderator, audience, and Mondale all burst into laughter at the response. Mondale later said that was the moment he lost the election, which he eventually did by a margin of almost 19 percent of the popular vote (Leip, 2012b).

While Reagan and Mondale went back and forth in their debates, it was actually the vice-presidential debate of 1984 that was historic. Democratic Representative Geraldine Ferraro of New York became the first woman on either major party’s ticket to participate in a televised debate when she faced Republican Vice President George H.W. Bush. Ferraro said she had to do two things:

I had to not only debate George Bush on substance, but I had to let the public know that a woman – this woman – was able to take over the job of president. (Schroeder, 2008, p. 152)

The 1984 debates are also historic because the League of Women Voters withdrew as a sponsor following their airing. Those with the independent organization said it was “because the demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetuate a fraud on the American voter” (Gordon, 2012). However, the debates were not left up for grabs. In 1987, the Commission on Presidential Debates was formed in an effort to take the debates away from the candidates’ handlers and place them in bipartisan hands. However, the leadership of both major parties was also involved in the commission’s organization structure, giving the parties negotiating power with broadcasters when it came to the dates, locations, formats and moderators for each debate.

Under these terms, televised debates continued for the next three election cycles. The 1988 debates were highlighted by a question posed by CNN’s Bernard Shaw, who made televised presidential debate history himself as the first African-American to serve as a moderator. Shaw asked Democratic candidate Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts hypothetically whether or not Dukakis would favor the death penalty for someone who raped and murdered his wife, Kitty (“1988 Presidential Debates,” 1996). Dukakis provided a rather lawyerly response. The Republican candidate, Vice President George H.W. Bush, defeated Dukakis in the popular vote that November, 53 percent to 46 percent (Leip, 2012b).

The four debates televised in 1992 were significant for the precedents they established. For the first time, three candidates shared the stage. This involved the incumbent President Bush, Democratic Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, and

Independent challenger Ross Perot of Texas. Each debate had different formats, breaking away from the traditional press panels of the past. The second of the four debates used the first-ever “town hall” format, allowing the audience assembled to directly ask questions of the candidates. That same debate also marked the first time a woman moderated a televised presidential debate when Carole Simpson with ABC News was selected (Schroeder, 2008). Simpson was also only the second African-American since CNN’s Bernard Shaw to moderate one of the debates. All four of the 1992 debates took place during a nine-day period, including the first one that attracted one of the largest audiences ever to watch a presidential debate with almost 70 million viewers ("Debate facts, figures and milestones," 2000). Clinton won with only 43 percent of the popular vote, to Bush’s 37 percent and Perot’s almost 19 percent (Leip, 2012c).

The 1996 debates were back to the traditional two-candidate approach, featuring President Clinton and the Republican challenger, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas. Perot once again ran, this time as a third-party candidate. But the Commission on Presidential Debates excluded him based on his poll numbers (Lewis, 1996). Without Perot, ratings were down. The second of the two debates between Clinton and Dole had the dubious distinction of attracting only 36.3 million viewers ("The debates '96," 1996). Clinton was re-elected with only 49 percent of the popular vote to Dole’s 40 percent and Perot’s 8 percent.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Debates**

Entering a new century, there was even more change for televised debates. First, given Perot's exclusion from the 1996 debates, the 2000 debates involved the announcement by the Commission on Presidential Debates that a higher threshold of 15 percent in pre-debate polling was now officially required for third-party and independent candidates to be able to participate ("An unreasonable man," 2006). Then in 2004, the commission became more autonomous, finally achieving its goal of keeping the parties and campaigns from having too much control. It was now the bipartisan commission – and not the parties -- that truly decided when and where the debates would take place, their format and subject, and who would moderate them (Birdsell, 2012).

As for the content of the debates themselves, the 2000 series of three debates featured one of the more memorable moments in televised debate history when Vice President Al Gore faced Republican challenger Governor George W. Bush of Texas (Woolley & Peters, 2012). Gore's sighing and rolling eyes shifted the focus from the topic of domestic issues to the candidates' styles, and appeared to hurt Gore in the first debate (Woolley & Peters, 2012). The election came down to the results in Florida, which were too close to call on Election Night. Bush went on to win when the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5–4 decision, stated that the Supreme Court of Florida had violated the U.S. Constitution when it ordered a recount only in certain districts, and by shifting methods of vote-counting. As a result, it ordered the recounts abandoned, effectively naming Bush the winner of the national election. While Gore won the popular vote by more than half a

million, Bush was awarded Florida's 25 electoral votes, providing Bush a controversial 5-vote Electoral College win (Leip, 2012c).

Four years later during the 2004 broadcasts, President Bush and Democratic Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts debated over a variety of issues in a series of debates. The first debate is remembered for a slight bulge that could be seen on Bush's back, as though something was underneath his jacket ("The debates," 2004). Some accused the president of having some sort of radio receiver to obtain answers through an earpiece, but this and other speculation was dismissed and never proven (Allen, 2004). During the televised encounter between Republican Vice President Dick Cheney and Democratic Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, the now late Gwen Ifill of PBS became the only African-American to moderate a vice presidential debate. The Bush-Cheney ticket won the election with a little more than 50 percent of the popular vote (Leip, 2012c).

The 2008 debates were historically significant when Democratic Senator Barack Obama of Illinois became the first African-American nominated by a major party to take part in a presidential televised debate. He debated Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona three times. And the vice-presidential debate between Democratic Senator Joe Biden of Maryland and Republican Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska also drew attention with Palin's selection by McCain to become the first woman to serve as a nominee on a Republican Party ticket.

But the rich tradition of televised presidential debates went beyond the general election encounters. Over these same debate periods, televised presidential primary debates have left their mark on the election process.

### **PRIMARY DEBATES**

Unlike the general election debates, televised presidential *primary* debates are not organized by an independent non-profit organization. The primary debates are now controlled by the Republican and Democratic parties (Hellmann, 2016). Leaders from the two major parties decide which broadcast or cable networks get to televise their debates. The two parties even determine how many debates will be allowed. If a candidate accepts an invitation to a non-sanctioned debate, the parties threaten exclusion from officially sanctioned ones. But despite this current environment of party control, presidential primary debates have become the norm in election seasons for a party whittling down its field of candidates as it tries to regain the White House, or both parties when an incumbent reaches the end of a second term. And there have been some memorable moments over the years (W. L. Benoit, M. McKinney, & M. Stephenson, 2002).

Former Democratic Vice President Mondale, along the way to the nomination, took on Colorado Senator Gary Hart during a debate on March 11, 1984 in Atlanta and referenced a Wendy's commercial when asking his opponent this question: "Where's the beef?" He was challenging Hart on his policy ideas (Jackson, 1015).

In 1992, then-Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas and then-former and now-current-Governor Jerry Brown of California traded zingers during one televised debate

(Bump, 2014). The highlight was Clinton showing his displeasure with Brown attacking his integrity by saying, “How dare you call me the prince of sleaze.” And another Brown-Clinton debate provided a memorable moment when Clinton admitted he had tried marijuana but “did not inhale.”

In 2008, after a string of multi-candidate Democratic primary debates, the last four featured only then-Senator Hillary Clinton and then-Senator Obama (Cohen, 2008). But it was one of the initial debates involving two other candidates, when Obama said Clinton was “likeable enough.” And as was the case for Obama, Clinton’s candidacy was historically significant. She became the first female presidential candidate to win a major American party’s presidential primary, coming in first in the New Hampshire Democratic Primary (“Center for American Women and Politics,” 2014). She would go on to win 23 contests and amass more than 17 million votes. Also during the 2008 primary season, CNN partnered with YouTube to establish the first nationally televised debates where citizens submitted questions through home videos posted to the Internet (McKinney & Rill, 2009). The use of YouTube and other forms of social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been occasionally used during primary debates ever since.

2012 saw a record number of primary debates as 10 candidates competed to become the Republican presidential nominee and face President Obama who ran unopposed. In all, 20 primary debates were held. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney emerged as his party’s nominee, only to lose to Obama. The incumbent won the popular vote by 3 percent, and had 332 electoral votes to Romney’s 206 (Leip, 2012b).

Following his defeat, Romney said, “We had 20 Republican debates, that was absolutely nuts. It opened us up to gaffes and to material that could be used against us in the general [election], and we were fighting these debates for a year, and the incumbent president just sat back and laughed” (Mirkinson, 2012).

The Republican nominee Romney and Democratic presidential nominee, the incumbent President Obama, debated three times and their vice-presidential nominees debated once. Moderators for the three debates were PBS anchor Jim Lehrer, CBS “Face the Nation” host Bob Schieffer, and Candy Crowley, host of CNN’s “State of the Union” (“Candy Crowley: 10 things to know about the presidential debate moderator,” 2012).

The last time a woman had moderated a presidential debate was 1992 when former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton and independent businessman and billionaire Ross Perot debated in a town hall format. Crowley also moderated a town hall.

More than five decades have passed since that first televised debate in 1960 between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Over the years, voters have come to rely on and expect these presidential debates with candidates answering questions posed by moderators for the purpose of providing voters with the information they need to cast an informed vote.

## **DISSERTATION OVERVIEW**

Televised presidential debates, whether during the general election or primary season, are formal events with explicit rules that, through the use of moderator questions, provide voters insight about the candidates and their stands on



issues, knowledge, leadership and temperament. Do moderator questions ultimately affect how voters feel about a candidate? Specifically, what is the relationship between debate questions, candidate responses, and voter preference? This dissertation will address these questions, historical context and relevant theories. These questions will be answered: 1) What is the manner in which a moderator asks a question? 2) How does a candidate respond to those questions under the rules provided? 3) What, if any, change occurs in voter support for the participants as reflected in national polls? Some debate components have been studied more than others.

The following outlines the dissertation chapters as they address these questions.

Here, Chapter 1 looks at the history of televised debates and the influence of the moderator. Next, in Chapter 2, this study reviews the literature related to the study of televised debates over the years, considering the debate components just outlined. The focus to this point has been on impact, function, candidate performance, topics, voter interest and formats. This existing literature not only describes the relevance of studying televised debates, but also reveals the need to expand the research into the area of the moderators and their questions – both important debate components that are certainly intertwined.

Chapter 3 acknowledges the theoretical link to this study: second-level agenda setting. Up to this point, the research on televised debates has primarily focused on the first level of agenda setting.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the key moments during the 2011-2012 televised debate season to provide context beyond the debates themselves.

Chapter 5 presents research questions and hypotheses, and Chapter 6 explains in detail the research methods used. Each question was examined using discourse analysis. And recognizing that each question leads to an answer, discourse analysis was also used to reveal patterns in the way candidates responded to questions.

Chapter 7 presents the results, followed by discussion and conclusions in Chapter 8, the final chapter.

## **Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature**

The formation of the Commission on Presidential Debates speaks to the perceived need for televised presidential debates each election cycle. While not a requirement of federal law, the formation of the debate commission has – in effect – created the expectation that the two major parties’ presidential candidates will face each other to discuss the issues. But to what effect? This basic question has been posed by numerous scholars during a brief period of debate research that involves a little more than 100 studies. During the past 50-plus years, they have examined a variety of aspects of these broadcasts.

Based on the five identified component parts of debates (candidates, moderators, audience, questions, and answers), an examination of the literature illustrates how some aspects have received much more attention than others.

### **CANDIDATES**

The candidates have received only moderate attention by debate scholars. This debate component pertains to a candidate’s performance. And within these studies, almost half of them examined the amount of control the candidates exhibited. For example, a study of the 1976 Ford-Carter debates found that, despite debates being controlled by journalists, the candidates exercised a “measure of control” over the debate agenda, calling the telecasts a “mix” of control (Bechtolt, Hilyard, & Bybee, 1977). Subsequent studies found that even though journalists posed the questions and thus the debate agenda, candidates had at least a degree of control regarding the topics discussed

(William L. Benoit & Wells, 1996; Berquist & Golden, 1981; Blankenship, Fine, & Davis, 1983; Friedenber, 1994; Levasseur & Dean, 1996; Self, 2005; Sullivan, 1989).

Several debate studies considered how viewers perceived candidates through the relevance of politeness theory. These studies are based on the premise that politeness is an important dimension of political leadership and as Hinck and Hinck (2002) stated, “contributes to the understanding of an audience on political image.” Similar studies determined that the audience watches for the purpose of deliberating who gained or lost face, and by implication, which candidate is best fit to serve as president (William L. Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; William L. Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006; William L. Benoit & Wells, 1996; W. A. Dailey, Hinck, & Hinck, 2005; W. O. Dailey, Hinck, & Hinck, 2008). And Hinck, Hinck, Dailey and Hinck (2013) examined the 2012 primary debates as they related to politeness theory and found that standing in the polls shaped the degree to which a candidate became a target of attacks and the intensity of those attacks.

A pair of studies considered nonverbal behavior of candidates during debates (Gentry & Duke, 2009; Seiter & Weger, 2005). Both found that while such nonverbal communication did not necessarily help candidates, it hurt them when they were seen during a split-screen shot reacting negatively to the opposing candidate who was speaking.

Two other studies addressed how the planning of debates affects candidates’ performances (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Self, 2005). Hart and Jarvis’ study suggested that

debates “add sobriety to campaigns, ground political discourse, make candidates introspective, and restrain political overstatements.”

## **MODERATORS**

Receiving even less attention among scholars is the research that involves the performance of moderators. One aspect of this deals with the moderator’s agenda illustrated through the topics raised. Researchers in this area revealed that journalists, candidates and the audience all have separate agendas, and that the journalists’ commercial news values are very much present, influencing at least to some degree the topics discussed (Jackson-Beeck & Meadow, 1979; Turcotte, 2015).

The relationship between moderators and the format in which they are involved is another area of study within this component. Two separate studies considered the use of YouTube videos submitted by voters who recorded their questions of the candidates for use during a televised primary debate. One found that the YouTube format did not generate any additional interest among young voters compared to debates where the moderators asked the questions (McKinney & Rill, 2009). The other study revealed that the dynamic between politicians, journalists and citizens suggests journalists “do a better job” of getting candidates to answer questions than do citizens in YouTube videos by “virtue of asking the right form of question” (Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011). And the moderator’s participation in the Town Hall format compared to the traditional press panels was the focus of two other studies, which concluded that citizens asking questions did not necessarily correlate more with the public’s agenda as measured through public

opinion polls (Brown, 2005; Morello, 2005). In fact, one of the studies found the opposite to be true.

Researchers have also been interested in examining the ways in which journalists distribute response time among the candidates. Studies here revealed that moderators who provide more speaking time for candidates during debates, either through more questions or complex questions requiring longer responses, help those candidates due to a strong correlation between speaking time and caucus and primary results (Matera & Salwen, 1996; Stewart, 2015).

#### **AUDIENCE**

The vast majority of debate research deals with the audience and the level of effect the televised debates have on them. Many concluded that debates increase voter knowledge (Chaffee, 1978; S. Coleman & Hansard Society for Parliamentary, 2000; Drew & Weaver, 1991; Ellsworth, 1965; Jacoby, Troutman, & Whittler, 1986; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000; Kraus, 1962, 1979; Lemert, 1993; McKinney & Carlin, 1994; Mulder, 1978; Pfau, 1988; Pfau, Diedrich, Larson, & Van Winkle, 1993; Rose, 1979; Swanson & Swanson, 1978). One such study determined that “most studies suggest debate viewing contributes to considerable learning about the candidates and their positions” (Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992). Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) found that the amount of overall time dedicated to a single debate, standardly 90 minutes, offers, “...the most extensive and serious view of the candidates available to the electorate.” And

Lanoue (1992) concluded that voters with low levels of knowledge are particularly affected by a debate.

Other research found debates have limited effects on voting decisions (Abramowitz, 1978; W. L. Benoit & Hansen, 2004; D. J. Lanoue, 1991; Lichtenstein, 1982; Miller & MacKuen, 1979; Mullinix, 2015; Munro et al., 2002; Payne, Golden, Marlier, & Ratzan, 1989; Rouner & Perloff, 1988; Wald & Lupfer, 1978). One limited effects study stated that debates “don’t very often convert partisans on one side to the other” (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). Two other studies pointed to ideology over debate performance as an important influence on voting (R. L. Holbert, 2005; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984). Prior (2012) challenged strength of debate effects by questioning the validity of polling regarding viewership. He determined that self-reported debate audiences “are approximately twice as big as comparable Nielsen television ratings estimates.” And Schrott and Lanoue (2013) found that debate performance was responsible for only about half of the variance in viewers’ assessments of debate winners and losers, but did alter candidate preference.

However, a great number of studies do indeed suggest that debates influence voting behavior. An examination of the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates found those telecasts “extremely important” for the voting decision of one in eight voters who watched (Middleton, 1962). Another study came to a similar conclusion and argued that both Kennedy and Carter might not have won without the debates (Wayne, 1992). In fact, considerable research of televised debates indicates debates can drive viewers to the polls

based on a candidate's performance (Clayman, 1992; M. H. Davis, 1982; Drew & Weaver, 1998; Geer, 1988; Kelley, 1983; David J. Lanoue, 1991; Lanoue & Schrott, 1989b; Pfau, 2002). Data from the 1992 debates concluded that those particular debates made an important difference due to many potential voters' lack of knowledge regarding third party challenger Perot (Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Nelson, 1993; Zhu, Milavsky, & Biswas, 1994). Some studies found that debates rarely converted partisan voters but did sway undecided voters (Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Geer, 1988; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Nimmo & Sanders, 1981; Pfau & Kang, 1991; Swerdlow, 1987). Yet the percentage of those who belong to one party but vote for the other party's presidential candidate, according to another study, ranged from 14 to 27 percent (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976). Research has also shown that debates can increase voters' confidence in their choice, making it more likely that they will actually go to the polls and vote (William L. Benoit, McKinney, & Lance Holbert, 2001). In fact, Lanoue and Schrott's (1991) study of the 1980, 1984 and 1988 debates strongly suggested that the impact of debates may be substantial when it comes to candidate selection.

A limited number of research focuses on audience effects during primary debates. They concluded that these encounters may actually have greater effects on viewers than do general-election debates (W. L. Benoit, M. S. McKinney, & M. T. Stephenson, 2002; S. J. Best & Hubbard, 1999; E. Katz & Feldman, 1962; McLeod, Durrall, Ziemke, & Bybee, 1979; Schrott & Lanoue, 2008; Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Yawn, Ellsworth, Beatty, & Kahn, 1998). One of the earliest studies devoted to primary debates indicated that



primary debates exposure produced significant changes in viewers' perceptions of candidate images and issue positions (Pfau, 1987; Pfau, 1988). Lanoue and Schrott (1989a) found dramatic changes in primary debate viewers' evaluation of candidates' images. Wall, Golden, and James (1988) found similar change in candidate preference after participants viewed a single primary debate. Lemert, Elliott, Nestvold, and Rarick (1983) determined that watching debates early in the primary season increased voter interest and knowledge. And McKinney, Kaid and Robertson (2001) concluded that while primary debate participation may have had negative consequences for a front-runner, it also found that issue appeals made by lesser-known candidates in a large field of participants were evaluated more negatively by viewers. The same study also discovered the often-employed debate strategy of attacking the front-runner is typically more successful if "employed in moderation."

Research has also found that televised debates affect voters' perceptions of the candidates' character and likability (Druckman, 2003; Graber, 1972; Vancil & Pendell, 1984). Benoit, Webber, and Berman (1998) discovered debate viewers changed their perceptions of at least one candidate's honesty, fairness, experience, decisiveness, energy, and "the extent to which the candidate understands the viewpoints of ordinary people." An earlier study found that the 1992 debates influenced "perceptions of the candidates' competence and persona" (Pfau & Eveland, 1994). Jamieson (1988) stated that debates offer a level of contact "unmatched in spot ads and news segments." And Patterson (1992) examined presentation modality during the 1984 debates and discovered

that Mondale was rated lower than Reagan when it came to expressiveness and physical attractiveness.

Some debate scholars suggested strong to moderate effects from post-debate analysis (Hwang, Gotlieb, Nah, & McLeod, 2007; Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004; Kenamer, 1987; Lang & Lang, 1978; Lemert, 1991; McKinnon, Tedesco, & Kaid, 1993). Benoit and Currie (2001) found that voters “cannot expect to obtain an accurate or complete representation of presidential debates from media coverage” as they examined news coverage related to the 1996 and 2000 debates. Fridkin, Kenney, Gershon, Shafer and Woodall (2007) concluded that viewers are influenced by the media’s “instant analyses” as well as by the candidates themselves. And Kendall (1997) observed that television networks’ post-debate coverage focused on candidates’ images rather than their ideas or approaches to issues.

And one study focuses on the implications regarding public policy. Kraus (2000) concluded that it is difficult to suggest that a candidate’s policy proposals outlined during a debate will be adopted by politicians and the public. Kraus found that those watching a debate, even when presented scientific data by a candidate to support change, still subject their assessments to “the values and predispositions of the proponent.”

## **QUESTIONS**

The least examined component of televised debates involves the questions themselves. Two of them pertain to question topics. One study of the 2000 general election debates provided empirical evidence indicating the topic of questions “do not

reflect the public interest” (William L. Benoit & Hansen, 2001). An earlier study compared journalists’ and voters’ questions in the 1992 debates (Eveland, McLeod, & Nathanson, 1994). Unlike the longitudinal 2001 Benoit and Hansen study, Eveland, McLeod and Nathanson found that the content of the questions asked during the 1992 debates, whether they were asked by journalists or by voters during one town hall format, did reflect the issues deemed most important in the national Harris poll used for their study.

The other two studies in this category looked at the type of question, notably “multi-barreled” questions. They found such questions placed too much attention on the journalists and contributed to the poor quality of answers (Bitzer & Rueter, 1980; McCall, 1984).

#### **ANSWERS**

Also, limited in scope is the literature regarding the answers. About half of them considered the functional theory of political campaign rhetoric as it pertains to debates (William L. Benoit, 2002; William L. Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; William L. Benoit & Harthcock, 1999). The earliest among them by Benoit and Harthcock studied the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates and found this theory appeared strongly through the statements made by both candidates. All three studies determined that most answers were acclaims rather than attacks -- made up mostly of policy rather than character issues -- challenging the notion that campaigns are mostly negative.

The other half of the research on the answers focused on the nature of the response. In one such study, the verbal and visual content of answers during the 1984 debates between Mondale and Reagan were considered (Motello, 1988). Results found that there was considerable *verbal* clash, but was often misrepresented due to camera shot selection. Other studies involving the nature of a response examined presidential debate humor (R. Lance Holbert, 2013; Stewart, 2012). Up to this point, the examination of debate humor has only served as a catalyst for further study by providing a systematic approach, similar to what is used in other studies examining political humor in general.

#### **SUMMARY**

The literature on debate research to date is full of examples illustrating the importance of these national broadcasts on the election process. Yet, given the fact that televised debates have been around less than 70 years, and the literature less than 60 years, this remains an area ripe for further examination. The literature to date is dominated by studies related to candidate performance and audience effects. This study also measures audience effects. But the vast majority of the literature to date narrows its focus to voter knowledge and decisions based on what candidates are doing during debates. The moderators have largely been ignored, highlighting the need to add to this important literature by further examining these journalists and their decision-making as they pose questions that drive the debate.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Link**

To understand the relationship between moderators' questions and voter intentions, second-level agenda setting was used for this study. Also known as attribute agenda setting, this theory considers specific attributes of a topic and how this influences public opinion (Maxwell McCombs & Evatt, 1995). Much of the application of second-level agenda setting is seen through examination of political candidate image (Lee B. Becker & McCombs, 1978; Kiouisis, 2006). Several studies, for example, conclude that if news coverage of a candidate includes a certain attribute, such as credibility, this attribute is expected to become more salient in the public's mind (M. Balmas & Sheafer, 2010; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002; Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999; M. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000; M. B. Salwen, 1988; Tan & Weaver, 2010; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). So while the first level of agenda setting involves issue salience, the second level is about attribute salience (Maxwell McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997).

Kiouisis and McCombs (2004) applied second-level agenda setting to presidential images and found evidence of attribute priming regarding media salience of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Specifically, the scandal was associated positively with perceived job approval and negatively associated with perceived favorability of President Clinton. Their study demonstrated to journalists that the aspects of stories they emphasize can influence how voters perceive candidates. This, they concluded, can be a good thing

because journalists could in fact identify attributes that encourage voter interest and participation.

Outside of U.S. politics, the public's images of three candidates during the 1996 Spanish general election was the focus of one study that found positive correlations between the media's coverage -- which included three effective levels -- and the candidates' images among the public (Maxwell McCombs et al., 1997). Lopez-Escobar et al. (1998) examined intermedia relationships in a Spanish election, including on the second level of agenda setting. It found that newspaper political advertising influenced the substantive attributes of both the newspaper and television news agendas. It also found that the newspaper advertising influenced the relationships among the images presented in various news media, and in political advertising. And a study of the 2006 Israeli national election found a difference in opinions between light and heavy newspaper readers regarding major party leaders' suitability for office (Meital Balmas & Sheaffer, 2009).

Coleman and Banning (2006) expanded the theory of second-level agenda setting to include affective framing of candidates through visual information during the 2000 presidential campaign. The coverage of network TV news included nonverbal behavior for Al Gore that was more positive than George W. Bush's. Those who watched more were much more likely to hold attributes that mirrored the media portrayals.

The idea of visual bias was examined in Grabe's (1996) study of the 1987 and 1989 South African elections. A content analysis of the South African Broadcasting

Corp.'s television coverage showed such bias through examination of techniques of shot length, camera angle, camera/lens movement and editing. The study concluded that the National Party may have benefited through positively biased visual portrayals of its candidates and negatively biased visual portrayals of other political party candidates.

Given the research on second-level agenda setting to this point, McCombs emphasized, "Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of attributes for picturing those objects are powerful agenda-setting roles" (Maxwell McCombs, 2014). He also said that the theoretical distinction between the first and second levels of agenda-setting is "especially clear in an election setting where the ballot lists the agenda of candidates." Candidates who want serious consideration by voters not only depend on the amount of news coverage about them, but they also depend on the attributes associated with them in that coverage as they try to build an appealing image.

### **MEASURING TONE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

Tone has been measured in various ways using second-level agenda setting in examining political discourse. Rodgers and Thorson's (2003) method, for example, measures story tone through individual sentences within news stories. In their 2007 study, Lasorsa and Dai (2007) used this same method and coded sentences as positive, neutral, or negative. Stories with more positive sentences were labeled as positive in tone. Stories with more negative sentences were labeled negative in tone. Stories with more neutral sentences were labeled neutral in tone. In the case of a tie, the story was also labeled neutral. Coders were instructed to consider a positive sentence as one that expresses a

distinctly upbeat, uplifting idea to a typical viewer. A negative sentence was coded as one that expresses a distinctly troubling, problematic, depressing idea. A neutral question did neither.

In recognition of the difficult coding task of deciding whether a story is positive, negative, or neutral, McCombs and Poindexter (1999) proposed a series of questions to be answered about the story: Who or what was responsible for the action or activity (Individual, group, or institution)? Was the action good, bad, or neutral? Who or what was the recipient of the action (Individual, group, or institution)? Was the recipient helped, harmed, or neither helped nor harmed by the action or activity?

#### **AGENDA-SETTING THEORY BACKGROUND**

The second level of agenda setting represents the evolution of a theory that was initially imagined in 1922 but tested more than three decades later. Lippmann first observed that much of the behavior underlying public opinion is through “an imagined pseudoenvironment” treated as though it were real (Lippmann, 1922). In their initial research of agenda setting, McCombs and Shaw uncovered Lippmann’s concept among undecided voters during the 1968 U.S. presidential election (1972). At the time, the rare combination of survey research with content analysis was conducted. Five issues dominated the political landscape of 1968 and McCombs and Shaw found a “near-perfect correspondence” between the rankings of those issues among those surveyed and their rankings based on their play in the news media during the previous twenty-three days. Their original assumption had its roots in Lippmann’s work that considered how mass



media bridges “the world outside and the pictures in our heads” (M. McCombs et al., 2000) .

The evidence for agenda setting was expanded in an examination of the 1972 U.S. presidential election to make sure that the public’s agenda wasn’t affecting the media’s agenda. McCombs and Shaw used a representative sample of all Charlotte, North Carolina voters and their media sources during three distinct periods of the campaign. They identified two distinct phases of election year agenda-setting (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). During the early phase in the summer and early fall, the local daily newspaper “was the prime mover” compared to the half-hour network news programs. In the final month of the campaign, little evidence of agenda-setting was found in either medium. These cross-lag correlations eliminated the rival hypothesis that it was the public’s agenda influencing the media’s agenda.

With agenda setting entrenched in media studies, other scholars in the immediate decade following the work of McCombs and Shaw published their own empirical studies that indicated coverage by the mass media of certain issues, events, and people raises the awareness and social status of them (Jackson-Beeck & Meadow, 1979; McLeod et al., 1979; Smith, 1987; Swanson & Swanson, 1978; Zucker, 1978b). Some 15 years after the McCombs and Shaw study published in 1972, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) conducted a series of 14 different field experiments that produced powerful confirmation of the agenda-setting process when issue salience changed among participants exposed to edited newscasts.

A key aspect in the study of agenda-setting effects involves the need for orientation, including Weaver's (1980) study on the psychological explanation for seeking political information. And those with a high need for orientation about political issues are more apt to be influenced by the mass media, than those with moderate or low orientation needs (D. Weaver, 1977). McCombs points out that the need for orientation is based on relevance and uncertainty (Maxwell McCombs, 2014). If an issue that is unobtrusive resonates with the public, there will be a moderate to high degree of need for orientation. If the issue is obtrusive, personal experience may satisfy any need for more information.

Another important area of study within agenda setting is the consideration of the time span during which the agenda-setting effects could occur. One such study focused on civil rights issues (Winter & Eyal, 1981). Front page stories from the *New York Times* were compared with public opinion, showing strong agenda-setting effects over a four- to six-week period. Winter and Eyal showed that recent media emphasis leads to public salience rather than cumulative effects over time in this particular case concerning civil rights.

Looking back at the body of work, McCombs concluded that certain conditions or environments are conducive to the use of the agenda-setting theory:

Some years ago, a seminar in Taipei discussed this widespread international replication of media effects originally found in the United States and came to the conclusion that agenda-setting effects – the successful transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda – occur wherever there is a reasonably open political system and a reasonably open media system.

But as McCombs also concluded, “Theories seldom emerge full-blown.” Research over the years based on the agenda-setting theory has brought forward insight related to the psychological effects on repeated exposure to what the media deems important, including the impact of specific elements within that coverage. And clearly, since the emergence of agenda setting in 1972, the channels of communication have increased, affecting the flow of information to be studied. This took agenda setting to other levels.

In addition to second-level agenda setting, many other dimensions of agenda setting have evolved. Intermedia agenda setting involves the hypothesis that when one news organization initiates a news story, other news organizations will present basically the same topic and treat it with similar importance (Breen, 1997; Denham, 2014; Du, 2013; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). As McCombs (2004) points out, the world’s journalists can only observe a small fraction of each day’s situations and events. Often, the elite news media exerts a substantial influence on the agenda of other news media. Crouse’s (1973) well-known behind-the-scenes look at the 1972 presidential campaign provides a classic illustration of intermedia agenda setting. He described one instance during the campaign when journalists covering the results of the Iowa caucuses observed what the reporter for the *New York Times* was writing. Just as the *Times* gave an account of how McGovern did surprisingly well in his second-place finish to Muskie, so too did every major newspaper the next day.

And in recent years, a third level of agenda setting has been studied. The theoretical model known as network agenda setting suggests that objects and their attributes are more than separate and distinct “disaggregated” elements. They are in reality bundled together in media messages as well as in public thought and conversation (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Maxwell McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014; Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014).

But despite the extensive research conducted in the area of agenda setting, just a fraction of this work examines televised presidential debates, and only a handful of those studies utilize the theory’s second level focused on attributes. This realization, coupled with the fact that the debate literature in general scarcely considers the power of the moderators and their questions, makes second-level agenda setting an ideal theory to explore how journalists influence the electoral process when participating in televised debates.

## **Chapter 4: The 2012 Election and Key Candidate Moments**

While this research examines the role of the moderator in affecting voter preference for those candidates who participate in televised debates, these highly-watched events are only part of the primary election process. It is important to first put the debates into proper context since there are other events surrounding them. Seven key candidate moments were identified in order to consider factors outside of the debates that had an impact on how moderators planned and distributed their questions along the way. But first, a brief review of the 2012 election season itself provides insight into events leading up to the debate season.

### **THE CANDIDATES**

While President Barack Obama ran for his second term in office without opposition, the Republican field was crowded and competitive. Ultimately, former Massachusetts Governor and businessman Mitt Romney became the party's presumptive nominee on May 29, 2012 with his victory in the Texas primary. But along the way, numerous other candidates attempted to show themselves as the "Not-Romney" candidate, touting what they considered more conservative credentials.

Romney was consistently competitive in the polls, but did not always take the top spot. Many of his Republican competitors bested him at times throughout the campaign. In fact, there were several other Republican candidates with name recognition who joined the campaign early on, including former Libertarian nominee and Representative Ron

Paul of Texas, former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

By the time the first debate rolled around on May 5, 2011, businessman and Godfather Pizza CEO Herman Cain, former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson, and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum joined the field. There had been other African-American candidates who ran for the Republican nomination in the past, but Cain had unprecedented success as a minority candidate by winning several straw polls, including in February 2011 when he won the Tea Party Patriots' American Policy Summit Straw Poll by gaining 22 percent support. It provided momentum that would eventually lead to his climbing to the top of polls by October.

When the second debate was televised on June 13, 2011, former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman and Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota had just joined the field. While Bachmann was not the first female Republican to run for president and win votes in the primaries, she made a political splash on August 13, 2011 by becoming the first woman to win the Ames Straw Poll hosted by the Iowa GOP (Oliphant, 2011).

And by August, the final contender, Texas Governor Rick Perry, announced his bid for the nomination, taking part in his first debate on September 7, 2011 atop the polls.

## **THE ISSUES**

Each of the Republicans were making their case to unseat a sitting president and focused on domestic issues – particularly economic recovery and job creation – in response to the financial crisis and recession that began in the late 2000s (B. Davis,

2009). This was an election when voters considered the economy their top concern (Lauter, 2012; Newport, 2012). The Pew Research Center found in September of 2012 that only 41 percent of Americans said their own personal financial situation was excellent or good, while consumer confidence was “lower than it was when Gerald Ford lost to Carter in 1976 and when Carter was ousted by Ronald Reagan four years later” (Elliott et al., 2012).

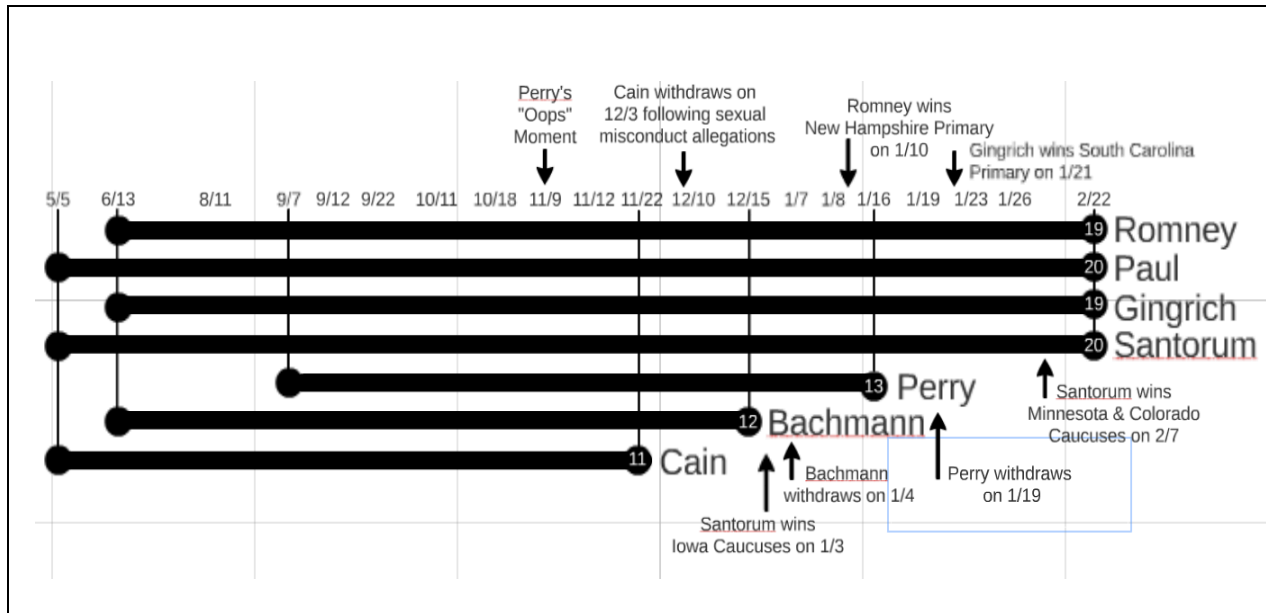
The crowded Republican field of candidates had a record-setting number of primary debates as a possible platform to make their case to solve the economic crisis. But while there were 20 televised debates, not all of the candidates had the same starting point, and not all of them made it through to the final debate. As Figure 1 illustrates, several key candidate moments in tandem with the debate season changed the course of the overall campaign, and thus participation in the debates. There were different, yet equally significant explanations for this.

### **PERRY’S ‘OOPS’ MOMENT**

When Perry could not remember the name of one of the three agencies he intended to eliminate during a debate on the CNBC broadcast of November 9, 2011, one media account called it a “cringe-worthy” moment (Hetchkopf, 2011). It was a sentiment that summed up the post-debate coverage. Perry was describing his jobs and flat tax plans when he said:

And I will tell you, it is three agencies of government when I get there that are gone. Commerce, Education, and the... what’s the third one there? Let’s see.

**Figure 1: Key Candidate Moments During the 2011-2012 Republican Primary Debate Season**



*Note: Dates along the top indicate when debates were broadcast. Each black dot marks the first and last debate for each candidate, with the numbers in white indicating the total number of debates for each candidate.*



After some laughter and an exchange with Paul, a fellow Texan who suggested to Perry it was the EPA, moderator John Harwood asked, “Seriously, is the EPA the one you were talking about?” Perry responded that it was not, although adding the EPA needed to be rebuilt. When Harwood pressed, Perry said:

The third agency of government I would, I would do away with, the Education, the... Commerce and, let’s see. I can’t. The third one, I can’t. Sorry. Oops.

It was a moment from which Perry could not fully recover over the rest of his short-lived campaign. CNN’s chief political analyst, Gloria Borger, said that “Oops” moment and other debate gaffes earlier in the campaign doomed Perry’s chances at the nomination (Levs, 2012):

It’s all about the debates. The debates were the first primaries. And once Rick Perry said ‘oops,’ it was very difficult for him to regain his footing.

Perry placed fifth in the Iowa Caucuses a few months later. On January 19, 2012, he withdrew from the campaign.

#### **ALLEGATIONS FORCE CAIN TO WITHDRAW**

Cain’s campaign started much earlier than Perry’s. But like Perry, he too did not make it through the entire campaign -- or debate -- season. At the top of the polls in October, Cain halted his campaign on December 3, 2011 following sexual misconduct accusations (Somashekhar & Thompson, 2011). While Cain vehemently denied allegations of sexual harassment and having an extramarital affair, the negative attention saw his poll numbers plummet. The Washington Post noted that it was his “impressive debate performances” that initially put him in the front-runner status.

The collapse of Cain's campaign appeared to help former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's bid. A poll ahead of the Iowa Caucuses showed that Cain's supporters were gravitating toward Gingrich (Saulny, 2011). In fact, while Cain faced the allegations prior to leaving the race, Gingrich had already become the latest national frontrunner, finding himself atop the polls in late November.

#### **SANTORUM'S UPSET WIN IN IOWA**

The ebb and flow of the Republican Party primaries continued when Santorum pulled off an upset win in the Iowa Caucuses, the first official delegate contest in all 50 states (Fahrenthold & Wilgoren, 2012). Prior to that contest on January 3, 2012, Santorum had spent months in Iowa, holding 381 town hall meetings covering all 99 counties. While Romney, the presumptive favorite, was initially reported the winner by a slim eight votes over Santorum, it was in fact Santorum who was later certified the winner over Romney by 34 votes (Epstein, 2012).

The next national poll in February found Santorum on top of the field of candidates. Gingrich, who led in the previous national poll, said of the Iowa outcome that his positive campaign turned out to be a weakness exploited by his opponents. Gingrich's observation would be a harbinger of things to come for his future debate strategy.

#### **BACHMANN'S WITHDRAWAL**

Santorum's surprise win in Iowa also eliminated one of the Republican Party contenders. Bachmann suspended her presidential campaign following a sixth-place finish in the Iowa Caucuses (Goldman, 2012). Just months earlier she had won the Ames

Straw Poll. Like Santorum, Bachmann – who was originally from Iowa -- staked her candidacy on her former home state.

It was Bachmann's comments regarding the HPV vaccine later in the campaign that stirred up controversy following her lead in the polls. Competing for the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party with Perry, Bachmann criticized Perry during one debate for mandating the vaccine in Texas. As part of that criticism she implied that the vaccine could cause mental retardation in young girls. The American Academy of Pediatrics said such a claim had absolutely no scientific validity (Holan, 2011).

#### **ROMNEY'S EXPECTED NEW HAMPSHIRE VICTORY**

One week after coming up short in the Iowa Caucuses, Romney decisively won the New Hampshire primary. While the win was not unexpected, Romney supporters hoped the margin of victory would send a signal to the party that he was the candidate to unite behind (Burns, 2012). In his victory speech, Romney warned his Republican rivals that attacking his record as a private equity executive would be a mistake for the party trying to unseat an incumbent president.

Exit polls explained why Romney won the first-in-the-nation primary. Those polled believed Romney had the best chance of defeating President Obama in November, and that he was the most equipped to handle the struggling economy (S. Best, 2012). The same polls revealed Romney's appeal over a wide range of demographics. Romney won every age group with the exception of voters under 30, who favored Paul, who placed a distant second in the primary.

### **GINGRICH'S SOUTH CAROLINA SURPRISE**

After New Hampshire, the next early contest was the South Carolina primary, and yet again, a different winner emerged. Gingrich pulled off what was considered an upset victory when he won the state that was coveted by many of the candidates who counted on a win there to keep their campaigns afloat, such as Perry (Ball, 2012). Pundits pointed to Gingrich's debate performances to explain his sudden turnaround. In addition, experts believed he had the most extensive campaign in the state. Gingrich had 12 paid staffers in the state and five offices, the only candidate to have more than one (Ball, 2012). Just seven days before the victory, South Carolina polls found Gingrich trailing Romney by double digits (Lemire, 2012).

### **SANTORUM'S LATE MIDWEST SURGE**

Following his narrow victory in Iowa, Santorum never climbed to the top of any national polls. But on February 7, 2012, with primary wins in Missouri, Minnesota and Colorado, he was back in contention for the Republican Party nomination and would eventually find himself atop the next national poll (Condon, 2012). With the win, he had four victories under his belt, which was more than any other candidate. Santorum began to make the case that he – not Gingrich – was the best conservative alternative to Romney. One editorial on Santorum's Midwest sweep indicated the implications to the Romney campaign (Ward, 2012):

No amount of spinning by the Romney campaign about delegate counts could obscure what the night made crystal clear: their candidate remains unable to excite passion in the GOP and remains a long way from closing the deal with voters.

Yet there would be one remaining televised debate that stood between any of the remaining candidates and the final push toward the nomination.

#### **SUMMARY**

The circumstances and key moments surrounding the 2012 Republican Primary season were certainly part of the political landscape that did not escape the attention of debate moderators. All of the political developments surrounding the televised debates served as material for these journalists who were tasked with formulating questions for the presidential candidates. The next chapter outlines the research questions and hypotheses that address this process and its effects on voters.

## **Chapter 5: Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Given the long rich history of presidential debates, as noted in previous chapters, little research has focused on the impact of the questions that debate moderators ask or the screen time these moderators provide presidential candidates. This study, therefore, utilized the theory of second-level agenda setting in analyzing the structure of attributes within debate questions posed by moderators. The amount of screen time candidates receive was also measured here, with all results compared to voter preference. The ultimate goal is to understand the role the structure of attributes within debate questions plays in influencing voter support for a particular candidate. This chapter presents the research questions that were answered and the hypotheses that were tested using televised debates during the 2012 Republican primary season in order to understand debate moderators, their questions, and the effect on potential voters.

### **DEBATE QUESTIONS**

Questions posed during presidential debates have been the subject of past research, yet as the literature shows, this area is extremely limited in scope. The 2001 Benoit and Hansen study cited in Chapter 2 examined the impact of questions on the topics candidates addressed over time. The study's authors concluded that the fact that the candidates' remarks were prompted by questions created at the discretion of moderators could not be overemphasized. Here, this little-explored aspect of televised debates is considered through the two initial research questions posed.

RQ1: How were moderator debate questions structured?

RQ2: What was the objective of moderator debate questions?

As will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 7 where the results are presented, the structure of a question consists of its topic, format and source. A question's objective is determined once the structure is known.

### **DEBATE ANSWERS**

The literature also tells us that almost equally limited is the research examining the answers provided during televised debates. As noted earlier, whether it is responses centered around acclaims, attacks and defenses, or simply the use of evidence, attempts have been made to uncover any implications from such answers (William L. Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Levasseur & Dean, 1996). This study also considers such implications in the following research question.

RQ3: Overall, what types of answers did candidates provide during the presidential primary debates?

### **VOTER PREFERENCE**

When it comes to the audience – the potential voter – we do know that the research is robust. And within this area, the literature includes studies that examine how televised debates affect voter preference. To test the effect the structure of attributes within questions asked by moderators has on the audience, this study adds to this critical area of research by posing the following research questions.

RQ4: What changes, if any, were there in voter preference for presidential primary candidates before and after the debates?

In order to identify any correlation between specific debate question attributes and voter preference, four sub-questions focused on the time frame in which debate questions were asked, along with their structure and distribution.

RQ4a: Did the *cumulative salience* of candidates during the presidential primary debates significantly predict change in voter preference?

RQ4b: What was the relationship, if any, between *cumulative attribute salience* and voter preference?

RQ4c: Did the *immediate salience* of candidates during the presidential primary debates significantly predict change in voter preference?

RQ4d: What was the relationship, if any, between *immediate attribute salience* and voter preference?

For the purposes of this study, and as will be outlined further in Chapter 6 explaining the methods used, the cumulative period consists of the entire debate season, while the immediate period involves a shorter span of debates within the entire season. Salience is operationalized by the number of questions a candidate receives, while attribute salience includes the structure (or attributes) of those questions.

### **MODERATOR'S ROLE**

Of course, in attempting to answer many of the research questions posed to this point, it is important to note that it is the moderator who controls elements such as candidate salience and candidate attribute salience, because the moderator can alter the course of the telecast at his or her discretion. Presidential debate historian Alan Schroeder



refers to the moderators as “scene-stealers” who may have affected outcomes (Schroeder, 2008). Under today’s rules, the person who moderates a debate has power. Columnist David Broder wrote, “Whether the question impales a candidate or offers him escape from the tight corner of the previous charge, we are affecting history, not just writing its first draft” (Schroeder, 2008). Yet, moderators are hardly the focus of debate research. Most of the studies link the moderators to the debate format, while only two single out the moderator -- and even then, the focus is primarily on the institutional news values these journalists bring to the table (Jackson-Beeck & Meadow, 1979; Turcotte, 2015). Here, this study proposes two hypotheses and a final research question to examine the structure of attributes within moderators’ questions and the subsequent implications.

H1: Debate questions structured with attributes that challenge presidential candidates correlate with negative voter preference for them.

## **SCREEN TIME**

And finally, this study also examined the amount of screen time candidates receive during a debate in measuring a potential correlation between debate question and answers and voter preference. As we read in Chapter 2, researchers have already examined how moderators distribute response time among the candidates. They found strong correlation between the amount of screen time a candidate received, and their results on Election Day (Matera & Salwen, 1996; Stewart, 2015). So, to also consider that possibility, one more research question is posed, along with one more hypothesis.

RQ5: Which presidential primary candidates received the most “screen time” during the debates?

H2: Presidential candidates who have less “screen time” receive more “unsure” evaluations by voters.

## **SUMMARY**

The five research questions and two hypotheses presented in this examination of attributes within televised debate questions helped identify their role in voter preference. Moderators structure the questions using these attributes, as candidates then react and potential voters watch. The inspiration for this study comes from research regarding similar questions and hypotheses, although not in the area of debates.

As described in Chapter 3, one such study found positive correlations between the media’s coverage of a Spanish general election -- involving three effective levels – and the candidates’ images among the public (Maxwell McCombs et al., 1997). Another study found direct emotional effects on viewers when exposed to network TV news’ visual framing of presidential candidates (R. Coleman & Banning, 2006). The authors concluded that it does not seem inappropriate to suggest that visual information may have a second-level effect on how viewers perceive politicians.

Prompted by second-level agenda-setting studies such as these, this study hypothesized that the same holds true for viewers of televised presidential debates. In this instance, rather than a political story, the structure and distribution of debate questions during live televised presidential debates are examined for such second-level agenda-

setting effects. The next chapter explains how the research questions are operationalized and how the hypotheses are tested.

## Chapter 6: Methods

To understand the role of moderator questions in presidential debates, five research questions were answered and two hypotheses were tested using discourse analysis and secondary analysis. Before the research questions and hypotheses are presented, the data and data collection methods will be described.

Four types of data were used: 1) moderator questions, 2) candidate answers, 3) screen time of candidates, and 4) poll results. All of this data comes from the 2012 Republican presidential primary season, which was selected for this study due to the unprecedented number of Republican primary debates that were televised.

While there were 22 telecasts that featured some or all of the Republican candidates running for president during the 2012 primary season, only 20 of them were conducted in a traditional debate format that utilized a journalist as the moderator, even when citizens in person or through social media were involved. They are the focus of this study and include:

1. May 5, 2011, Greenville, SC (Fox News/Bret Baier)
2. June 13, 2011, Manchester, NH (CNN/John King)
3. August 11, 2011, Ames, IA (Fox News/Bret Baier)
4. September 7, 2011, Simi Valley, CA (NBC/Brian Williams)
5. September 12, 2011, Tampa, FL (CNN/Wolf Blitzer)
6. September 22, 2011, Orlando, FL (Fox News/Bret Baier)

7. October 11, 2011, Hanover, NH (Bloomberg/Charlie Rose)
8. October 18, 2011, Las Vegas, NV (CNN/Anderson Cooper)
9. November 9, 2011, Rochester, MI (CNBC/Maria Bartiromo & John Harwood)
10. November 12, 2011, Spartanburg, SC (CBS/ Scott Pelley)
11. November 22, 2011, Washington, DC (CNN/Wolf Blitzer)
12. December 10, 2011, Des Moines, IA (ABC/Diane Sawyer & George Stephanopoulos)
13. December 15, 2011, Sioux City, IA (Fox News/Bret Baier)
14. January 7, 2012, Manchester, NH (ABC/Diane Sawyer & George Stephanopoulos)
15. January 8, 2012, Concord, NH (NBC/David Gregory)
16. January 16, 2012, Myrtle Beach, SC (Fox News/Bret Baier)
17. January 19, 2012, Charleston, SC (CNN/John King)
18. January 23, 2012, Tampa, FL (NBC/Brian Williams)
19. January 26, 2012, Jacksonville, FL (CNN/Wolf Blitzer)
20. February 22, 2012, Mesa, AZ (CNN/John King)

These 20 debates provided a study period of 46 weeks, a total of seven viable candidates based on monthly tracking polls from one source. Never before had so many primary debates been held by any U.S. political party. In comparison, only 12 televised Republican debates were held during the most recent 2016 primary season.

## **MODERATOR QUESTIONS**

The transcripts for each of the 20 debates were used to gather each question asked by moderators during the 2012 Republican Party primary season. ProCon.org, a non-profit, non-partisan education group's website, was used to gather the transcripts ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012). ProCon.org linked to the websites of each news organization that hosted debates, where the full transcripts were available to the public. Whether they were initial inquiries or follow-ups, a total of 1,433 debate questions were identified.

## **CANDIDATE ANSWERS**

The candidate answers to each of the 1,433 debate questions were also collected for this study, based on the same transcripts used to collect the questions. All candidates who, in at least one poll, met the "10 percent" support threshold established by the Debate Advisory Standards Project (a joint project of Pew Center and Knight Center) were specifically analyzed. This included the following candidates and their highest poll percentage:

- Michele Bachmann (16 percent)
- Herman Cain (30 percent)
- Newt Gingrich (35 percent)
- Ron Paul (11 percent)
- Rick Perry (31 percent)

- Mitt Romney (34 percent)
- Rick Santorum (38 percent)

All other candidates who participated but did not meet the 10 percent support threshold were categorized as “other.”

### **SCREEN TIME OF CANDIDATES**

To measure the amount of screen time each candidate received over the 20 debates examined in this study, the website USPresidentialElectonNews.com was used in order to view the complete videos of each telecast ("2012 primary debate schedule," 2012). This non-partisan online project -- focused on presidential elections -- features, among other things, links to the videos of each 2012 Republican Party primary debate, posted either on a host news organization's website or on YouTube.

### **POLL RESULTS**

In order to observe voter preference over the course of the 2012 primary debate season, the North Carolina-based national polling firm Public Policy Polling was selected for this study. The PPP surveys included a question that asked respondents who they would support among the candidates. For example, a national survey conducted between September 8-11, 2011 asked: “If the Republican candidates for President were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?” PPP performs automated telephone surveys using Interactive Voice Response ("Our Methodology," 2012) . The IVR technology, according to PPP, can “reduce interviewer bias to zero by eliminating

the live human interviewer.” Every poll respondent hears the exact same questions read in the exact same way. PPP also uses a mathematical weighting method that assigns a weight based on each demographic.

Another reason this study used the Public Policy Polling data is based on well-publicized accuracy. For example, Politico reported that despite being a firm that represents Democratic clients, PPP was one of the top pollsters in the 2012 general election according a Fordham University report (Leighton, 2012). Also, PPP reported the correct winner in all nine battleground states (Mahtesian, 2012).

Finally, PPP was selected for this research since it was found to be the only polling group that consistently conducted national presidential polls on a monthly basis throughout the 2012 primary season. The lone exception was the post-holiday season of January 2012, when there was not a poll.

### **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

To answer three of the research questions, this study used the qualitative method of discourse analysis. This provided a way to uncover what British cultural scholar Stuart Hall called “the latent meanings of text” (1975). It is especially useful when analyzing news media accounts. Hall emphasized that the press plays a key role in shaping public opinion, and therefore promoting and reinforcing specific social meanings.

Discourse analysis is a method that focuses on themes and patterns of what is being said within socially determined practices (Connell & Miles, 1985; Fiske, 1996; van



Dijk, 1988, 1985). What is of interest is not just the text, but what it signifies (Curtin, 1995).

Researchers involved in discourse analysis rely on three fundamental principles (Gee, Michaels, & O'Conner, 1992). First, human discourse is internally structured and governed by rules. Second, it comes from speakers who find themselves in the midst of an environment where cultural, political, economic, social, and personal realities shape the discourse. And third, the discourse helps explain the speaker's environment. From linguistics, the term discourse means a system of related or linked sequential utterances beyond the level of a sentence (Fiske, 1987; Orr, 1991).

In analyzing the role of moderator questions during televised debates, the political context surrounding the telecast is important to consider. This study followed Hall's textual analysis tradition that he and his colleagues started (1975). They considered newspapers as literary and visual texts that "employ symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense" (1975, p. 17). Hall and his fellow researchers wanted to go beyond the direct and explicit political and social appeals of newspapers, in order to reveal "the structures of meaning and the configurations of feeling on which this public rhetoric is based" (p. 16). Their methods picked up on the complexity of language and connotation "which has to be sacrificed in content analysis in order to achieve high validation" (p. 15).

In the realm of discourse analysis, Hall emphasized that the literary/linguistic analyst uses the strategy of "noting and taking account of emphasis" (1975). Hall added

that the position, placement, treatment and tone of such emphasis is possible through qualitative discourse analysis. But he added that, sometimes, emphasis emerges due to its uniqueness:

The really significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but the one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern – but which is also given, in its exceptional context, the greatest weight (p. 18).

## **SECONDARY ANALYSIS**

In order to answer one of the research questions, secondary analysis was necessary. Secondary data analysis has been defined by communication scholar Lee Becker (1981) as the “reuse of social science data after they have been put aside by the researcher who gathered them.” Researchers often decide that a survey is the best way to achieve research goals. However, often a collection of a new set of survey data is impractical. In such situations, researchers may decide to analyze survey data that someone else has already collected after securing the proper access and permission to use it (Poindexter & McCombs, 1999, p. 282). Naturally, for studies such as this one involving very large populations, individual researchers do not have the necessary money or access to obtain data firsthand (Brewer, 2007). But more importantly, in order to measure second-level agenda-setting effects in this study related to voter preference, it was necessary to use responses that took place within the appropriate time span when agenda setting occurs, generally four to six weeks after a media message is received (M. B. Salwen, 1988; Zucker, 1978b). Utilizing the existing Public Policy Polling results enabled this due to the polling firm’s consistent tracking during the 2012 Republican

Party primary season ("Polls," 2012). The following monthly PPP polls were utilized, with the polling period in parentheses:

- April 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (April 7-10)
- May 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (May 5-8)
- June 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (June 9-12)
- July 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (July 15-17)
- August 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (August 18-21)
- September 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (September 8-11)
- October 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (October 7-12)
- November 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (November 10-13)
- December 2011 PPP National Republican Poll (December 16-18)
- February 2012 PPP National Republican Poll (February 9-10)
- March 2012 PPP National Republican Poll (March 15-17)

This secondary analysis involving 11 polling periods spread out over the 20-debate period provided the means by which this study measured any correlation between voter preference and the data gathered related to moderator questions, candidate answers and screen time.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The data and methods described above will be used for the following research questions and hypotheses. The first two research questions focus on the questions of the debate moderator. RQ1 asked: How were moderator debate questions structured? Each question was qualitatively analyzed in order to identify any component parts that made up the question's structure. This involved reviewing the transcripts of all 20 debates and examining each question to identify recurring patterns of structure.

The question structure identified by answering RQ1 made it possible to answer RQ2, What was the objective of moderator debate questions? In other words, the question structure that emerged from answering RQ1 was the insight used for determining the objective of the moderator's questions in RQ2 after reviewing the patterns multiple times over the course of several weeks in the tradition of Hall's "deep soak" approach to discourse analysis. This method differs from traditional content analysis which is focused on manifest content while Hall's discourse analysis method focuses on latent content.

Both methods are based on a long preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material: where they differ is that content analysis uses this process of soaking oneself to define the categories and build a code (based on an intuitive sense of where the main clusters occur), whereas literary, stylistic and linguistic analysis uses the preliminary reading to select representative examples which can be more intensively analysed (1975, p. 15).

Hall added that the error is to assume that because literary/linguistic analysis does not involve code-building, it is "intuitive and unreliable" (p. 15). To the contrary, Hall's work points out that discourse analysis also employs evidence, pointing in detail to the

text on which an interpretation of latent meaning is based. But what discourse analysis allows which content analysis does not is to go beyond recurring themes:

Position, placing, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery, etc., are all ways of registering emphasis. The really significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but the one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern – but also given, it is exceptional context, the greatest weight (p. 15).

Considering each individual question's structure revealed by answering RQ1, enabled a deep review of each of the 1,433 debate questions examined in this study, in order to determine each question's objective when answering RQ2 through Hall's qualitative method.

### **Candidate Answers**

While RQ1 and RQ2 focused on the moderator's questions, RQ3 and RQ4 both focused on the candidates' answers that were given during a live televised debate. Specifically, RQ3 asked, Overall, what types of answers did candidates provide during the presidential primary debates? In order to answer this question, the transcripts were analyzed using the same deep soak analysis to identify the contextual patterns that developed among the candidates. This meant reviewing each individual answer from all 20 debate transcripts multiple times to observe how candidates typically answered questions -- or how they did not answer them.

### **Voter Perceptions**

RQ4, which also had four sub-parts, focused on the voters in order to understand their preferences over the Republican presidential primary season. The public opinion

tracking data mentioned earlier was used to answer RQ4, What changes, if any, were there in voter perceptions of presidential primary candidates before and after the debates? As described before, Public Policy Polling's monthly tracking of voter preference allowed for a consistent comparison as the debate season unfolded.

In order to answer RQ4a (Did the *cumulative salience* of candidates during the presidential primary debates significantly predict change in voter preference?), the entire 20-debate series was examined. Cumulative salience was operationalized by taking the total number of questions a candidate received in all the debates in which he or she appeared and adding them together to come up with a cumulative total of questions received during the entire debate series. The total number of questions candidates received was compared to their standings in the final public opinion poll, but only if they made it to the last debate in February 2012. Their total number of questions was also compared to their overall change in voter preference, regardless of their standing in the final poll. This was done by using the first and last poll in which each candidate appeared, and calculating either their net gain or loss in voter support from start to finish.

In order to answer RQ4b (What was the relationship, if any, between *cumulative attribute salience* and voter preference?), the same 20-debate period was examined. Any patterns that the deep discourse analysis identified in answering RQ1 (related to a question's structure) and RQ2 (related to a question's objective) was used to operationalize attributes within questions. The answers to those initial research questions are the attributes that make up the debate questions. This ties to the theoretical link of

attribute agenda setting, also known as second-level agenda setting. For those candidates who made it through to the final debate, all observed attributes from each of their questions were summed in various categories and compared to their final public opinion poll standing, as well as their overall change in voter preference, positive or negative. So, answering this research question examined the specific attributes within questions that correlate with voter preference.

To answer RQ4c (Did the *immediate salience* of candidates during the presidential primary debates significantly predict change in voter preference?) a shorter span of time within the Republican primary debate season was examined. Like before, salience was operationalized as the total number of questions each candidate received, but for *immediate* salience, a shorter span of time (and debates) was used. The total number of questions per candidate during this shorter period was then compared to the polls immediately before and after that period. But immediate salience was only considered when the post-debate poll allowed enough lag time consistent with agenda setting. As mentioned earlier, there are studies on agenda-setting lag time that suggest that the span of time involved in the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda is generally four to eight weeks (M. Salwen, 1988; Zucker, 1978a). However, another study examined variations across a range of news media, including national TV news, and found the “optimum match” between the media and public agendas is one to eight weeks (M. Salwen, 1988), which is used for this study.

RQ4d asks: What was the relationship, if any, between *immediate attribute salience* and voter preference? To answer this, the role of attributes within questions each candidate received during a shorter span of debates was compared to the polls immediately before and after that period, but again, only if the post-debate poll allowed enough lag time consistent with agenda setting.

### **The Role of the Moderator's Question**

Once the research questions related to debate question structure were answered, the role of debate question composition in attribute agenda setting was tested with H1: Debate questions structured with attributes that challenge presidential primary candidates correlate with negative voter preference for them. Once RQ3 was answered (identifying the objective of moderator questions), it was then possible to determine if the objective was structured in a challenging way based on the attributes within each question. Then, by calculating the percentage of such questions posed to each candidate, it was possible to identify to what degree candidates faced questions that challenged them. Those percentages were then compared to the public opinion data to determine any negative correlation. If a candidate received a greater percentage of questions structured in a challenging way, and experienced a decrease in voter preference between their first and last public opinion poll, then H1 would be supported. Therefore, H1 would not be supported if that same candidate's voter preference percentage remained flat or increased.



## **The Role of Screen Time**

Unlike the televised presidential debates typically involving the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees, the amount of screen time devoted to individual candidates during a televised primary debate -- involving large numbers of candidates -- is less certain. It is likely that screen time plays a role in attribute agenda setting. Therefore, RQ5 (Which presidential primary candidates received the most screen time during the primary debates?) was answered by calculating in seconds, the amount of screen time that each candidate received to speak and be the center of attention. The results of RQ5 were then used to test H2: Presidential primary candidates who have less screen time receive more “unsure” evaluations by voters. Specifically, candidate screen time was correlated with the public opinion data. An example question from the October 2011 survey asked, “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?” The answer choices included, “favorable,” “unfavorable,” and “not sure.” For this study, the percentage within “not sure” was operationalized as an unsure evaluation.

## **SUMMARY**

Discourse analysis and secondary analysis were used to analyze debate moderator questions and candidate answers and screen time during the 2012 Republican presidential primary. In this chapter, the research methods and data were explained and the research questions and hypotheses were outlined with descriptions of the analyses and operationalizations. In Chapter 7, we’ll learn the role that debate questions, candidate

answers, screen time, and attribute agenda-setting played in who would become the 2012 Republican presidential nominee.

## **Chapter 7: Results**

This study examines the questions posed by the moderators of the 2012 Republican presidential primary debates and the candidate answers and screen time to determine the relationship, if any, with voter preference as measured by tracking polls. As outlined in Chapter 5, five research questions are answered and two hypotheses are tested.

### **DEBATE QUESTIONS**

Whether they were initial inquiries or follow-ups, all 1,433 debate questions were examined to answer RQ1 (How were moderator debate questions structured?). Through discourse analysis, patterns emerged regarding the structure of each question, revealing three components: 1) Topic; 2) Format; 3) and Source.

### **Topic of Question**

By qualitatively examining the structure of each question, the first common component they shared involved the topics. As illustrated in Table 1, 25 categories of topics were asked about, including “other.” The use of percentages is included in the table to make clear the attention each topic received. By far, the topic asked about the most dealt with politics and campaign strategy, with 186 of these “horse race” type questions posed by moderators over the course of the 20 televised debates. International issues were asked about 158 times, followed by the economy at 118. Another frequently asked topic, also involving 118 questions, surrounded candidates’ personal lives, ranging in nature from ethics to family life. The topic category of immigration/undocumented

immigrants was asked about 106 times, rounding out this initial tier of identified categories that made up almost half

**Table 1:** Question Topics During 2012 Republican Primary Debates

<b>Topic Categories</b>	<b>Number of Questions</b>	<b>Percentage of Questions</b>
<b>Politics/campaign strategy</b>	186	13%
<b>International issues</b>	158	11%
<b>Economy</b>	118	8%
<b>Personal life/ethics/religion/morality/family</b>	118	8%
<b>Immigration/undocumented aliens</b>	106	7%
<b>Health care</b>	89	6%
<b>Taxes/waste</b>	89	6%
<b>Unemployment/jobs</b>	89	6%
<b>Poor leadership/corruption/scandal</b>	65	5%
<b>Terrorism</b>	51	4%
<b>Federal budget deficit</b>	48	3%
<b>Homosexual issues/gay marriage</b>	38	3%
<b>Social Security</b>	25	2%
<b>Abortion</b>	24	2%
<b>Housing</b>	24	2%
<b>Fuel/oil prices/energy</b>	23	2%
<b>Gridlock in Washington</b>	22	2%
<b>Education</b>	21	1%
<b>National security</b>	18	1%
<b>Iraq</b>	16	1%
<b>Judicial system</b>	16	1%
<b>Space program</b>	15	1%
<b>Military defense</b>	13	1%
<b>Medicare/Medicaid</b>	13	1%
<b>Other</b>	48	3%
<b>Total</b>	1,433	100%

of all questions asked during the 20 debates.

A second tier of topic categories involved questions that were moderately asked about by moderators, ranging in frequency of between 3 and 6 percent. This included: health care (6%), taxes/waste (6%), unemployment/jobs (6%), poor leadership/corruption/scandal (5%), terrorism (4%), federal budget deficit (3%), and homosexual issues/gay marriage (3%).

The third and final tier of topic categories involved those that were only asked about 1 to 2 percent of the time. Topics such as education, national security, Iraq, Medicare/Medicaid and military defense were scarcely discussed.

### **Format of Question**

The second component each question shared in terms of structure involved its format. As seen in Table 2, discourse analysis revealed five such formats. Each question

**Table 2:** Question Formats During 2012 Republican Primary Debates

<b>Format</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Evaluation</b>	Allows for an evaluation of a topic/situation/prior statement/comparison.
<b>Plan</b>	Seeks specific plan details regarding a topic/issue.
<b>Record</b>	Questions a past documented decision/vote.
<b>Knowledge</b>	Tests knowledge concerning topic/issue/situation.
<b>Other</b>	Involves any other scenario.

format involves a unique line of inquiry on the part of the moderator. But in each case, it is the moderator who chooses which format to follow after the selection of the topic. An

“evaluation” question allows for an evaluation of a topic, situation, or prior statement. It may also be formed through a comparison of candidates. Seeking even more detail, a “plan” question asks the candidate to provide specifics regarding a documented plan regarding a topic or issue. A “record” question seeks an answer related to a past documented decision or vote. And a “knowledge” question tests the candidate’s understanding of a topic, issue or situation. All other questions fall under the “other” format.

In one example of a question formatted as an “evaluation,” the NBC News moderator asked former Senator Rick Santorum about the foreclosure crisis, citing the state of Florida where 40 percent of homeowners were behind on their loans.

("Republican Debate," 2011):

Did vehicles of the U.S government make it too easy to own a home in America?

The question posed to Santorum which dealt with the topic of housing allowed the candidate to evaluate the government’s role and responsibility in the crisis.

An example of a question that follows the “plan” format was when the CNN moderator asked businessman Herman Cain about his plan for Social Security:

What is your specific Social Security reform plan in regards to raising the retirement age, at what ages, cutting benefits and what income level means testing kicking in? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

This question to Cain forced him to go beyond an assessment, and provide step-by-step details of what he plans to do in the area of Social Security.

Questions that followed the “record” format were designed to get a candidate’s rationale or explanation for a prior documented decision or vote. An example of this line of questioning was when an ABC moderator asked former House Speaker Newt Gingrich about his decision to put out campaign press releases in Spanish, while criticizing the government for providing various services in Spanish rather than exclusively English:

Why is it OK for you to court voters in Spanish, but not OK for the government to serve them in Spanish? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

The documented decision on the part of Gingrich to court Spanish speaking voters in their native language while opposing, among other services, ballots available to them in Spanish, was the focus of this particular “record” question.

Some questions simply tested a candidate’s knowledge about a topic, issue, or situation. We find a now famous example of this when during the CNBC debate broadcast on November 10, 2011, the moderator followed-up on a question when Texas Governor Rick Perry couldn’t name the third government agency he wanted to eliminate if elected president:

But you can’t – but you can’t name the third one? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

The moderator in this situation was following up on a question related to the governor’s plans for streamlining the federal government. However, when Perry couldn’t remember the third agency, suddenly his knowledge – specifically his memory -- was in question.

Naturally there were some questions that did not fit any of the common formats. We see this in the example when the moderator of ABC News's debate on January 7, 2012 asked Representative Michele Bachmann a lighthearted question about her taste in music:

Congresswoman Bachmann, to you, Elvis or Johnny Cash? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

During this particular debate, each candidate was asked a question related to popular culture as the moderator headed to, or returned from, a commercial break.

### **Source of Question**

The third component making up part of the structure of each question involves its source. This study used as its inspiration a previous agenda-setting study which focused on how political news coverage moves public opinion. This prior study considered both the amount of candidate coverage as well as the salience of favorable and unfavorable attributes mentioned in that coverage (Son & Weaver, 2006). It found that news involving different sources affected – to varying degrees -- the poll standings among candidates. This study implemented their “source” classification to identify what sources were used by moderators in forming questions (see Table 3). They include: 1) Candidate himself; 2) Competing candidate; 3) Poll reporting/public document; 4) Audience member; 5) Reporter's analysis; and 6) Other.



**Table 3: Question Sources During 2012 Republican Primary Debates**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Basis of Question</b>
<b>Candidate himself</b>	Recipient's prior statement
<b>Competing candidate</b>	Prior statement of competing candidate
<b>Poll reporting/public document</b>	Poll results/contents of public document
<b>Audience member</b>	Directly associated with audience member
<b>Reporter's analysis</b>	Lack of attribution within question
<b>Other</b>	All other scenarios

The “candidate himself” source involves a question that draws on a prior statement made by the question’s recipient. For example, the moderator of one Fox News debate, in setting up a question to Perry, brought up the fact that the Texas governor referred to what former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney did at Bain Capital as “vulture capitalism.” The moderator then asked:

“So, what specific regulations would you put in place to curb vulture capitalism?” (“Candidate debate transcripts,” 2012)

In this example, the prior statement made by Perry was the source the moderator drew upon to formulate the question.

An example of when a “competing candidate” was the source of a question is illustrated through a question the NBC moderator asked Gingrich related to something Romney said in the past. Earlier in the day, Romney publicly stated that Gingrich was erratic and a failed leader:

So, given the fact that he went after you today on this topic of electability, your response tonight, Mr. Speaker? (“Candidate debate transcripts,” 2012)

The source of the question did not originate with the moderator, but with Gingrich's opponent Romney.

There were questions based on a poll or a public document. An example of this type of question, labeled as "poll reporting/public document," was found when the CNN moderator addressed the issue of Washington gridlock with Perry:

If you were president of the United States, would you compromise with Democrats in Congress in order to avoid that Washington gridlock that, if you believe the polls, the American people hate? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

The moderator used the results of a poll in formulating his question.

When the source of a question was categorized as "audience member," the question originated from a statement made by an audience member, either in-person or via the internet. One such example was when the CNN moderator interacted with an audience member who commented that the Patriot Act had thwarted at least 42 terrorist attacks aimed at the United States since 9/11, and then wanted to know if the investigative powers of the act should be extended, with the moderator elaborating on that question and directing it toward Gingrich.

Speaker Gingrich, only this weekend there was an alleged terror plot uncovered in New York City. What do you think? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

In this situation, the question was intercepted by the moderator from the actual source, who was a member of the audience.

Naturally, the moderator will develop questions independent of any outside source. This type of question falls under the label "reporter's analysis," and involves any

question that is absent of attribution. For instance, here is an example of such a question, when the ABC News moderator asked Perry about his military service as it relates to the presidency:

Do you believe having worn a uniform, being part of a unit, better prepares you for the job of commander-in-chief than these on the stage who haven't served? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

This question is based on the moderator's own observations, not that of another individual, document or poll.

Finally, there were a few sources observed that did not fit the patterns of the first four source classifications, and were deemed "other."

### **Objective of Question**

As stated in Chapter 5, the structure of questions – topic, format and source – would provide the insight for answering RQ2 (What was the objective of moderator debate questions?). This involved using Hall's "deep soak" method of discourse analysis to identify the recurring patterns of latent content within questions. After multiple readings each individual question, it was determined that there were essentially two different objectives that emerged: neutral and not neutral. Those questions labeled neutral, based on their identified structure, simply sought information from the question's recipient. Such is the case in the example shown earlier when Santorum was asked about the housing crisis:

Did vehicles of the U.S government make it too easy to own a home in America? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

In this case, the *topic* of housing was brought up. The *format* sought an evaluation from the candidate. The *source* of the question was the moderator himself. The end result was a question where the objective was to gather information – in this case opinion. It was neutral in nature.

Next, in another layer of “deep” discourse analysis of the latent content within the remaining questions that were not neutral. In some cases, such questions involved a source cited by the reporter, such as an opponent, who was critical of the question’s recipient. But in all cases, patterns of moderator questions were identified that either confronted, disputed or tested candidates. Therefore, these questions that were not neutral were labeled “challenge questions.” An example of this was observed in the previously highlighted question to Gingrich about his campaign tactics regarding Spanish-speaking voters:

Why is it OK for you to court voters in Spanish, but not OK for the government to serve them in Spanish? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Within this quote, we can see that the *topic* is “politics/campaign strategy,” the *format* relates to Gingrich’s “record” of campaign decisions, and the *source* in this instance is the “reporter’s analysis,” since the moderator has not attributed the premise of the question to anyone else. The first three component parts of the question helped qualitatively reveal a challenge to Gingrich’s campaign rationale.

Coding all 1,433 questions posed during the 20 televised debates examined, based on percentages, four of the seven candidates received more neutral questions than challenge questions (see Table 4). Bachman received the most at 62 percent, followed by

Paul (58%), Santorum (55%), and Cain (52%). It was Romney, the ultimate nominee, who received the most challenge questions at 64 percent. Gingrich was close behind with

**Table 4:** Question Objective During 2012 Republican Primary Debates

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Neutral Question</b>	<b>Challenge Question</b>
<b>Bachmann</b>	62% (70)	38% (42)
<b>Paul</b>	58% (110)	42% (79)
<b>Santorum</b>	55% (110)	45% (90)
<b>Cain</b>	52% (55)	48% (51)
<b>Perry</b>	47% (70)	53% (78)
<b>Gingrich</b>	41% (98)	59% (142)
<b>Romney</b>	36% (111)	64% (197)

*Note:* The actual number of questions is in parentheses. “Neutral Questions” seek information in a neutral manner. “Challenge Questions” confront, dispute or test the recipient.

59 percent of questions posed to him labeled as challenges. A little more than half of Perry’s questions were challenges.

#### **CANDIDATE ANSWERS**

In order to answer RQ3, (Overall, what types of answers did candidates provide during the presidential primary debates?) discourse analysis was once again employed to find the contextual patterns that developed among the candidates. In answering “neutral” questions, candidates, in essence, are able to define themselves to the voters. From philosophy to policy, candidates have the opportunity to stay on message, in order to convey their image of choice. But when they are on the receiving end of a “challenge” question, quite the opposite can occur. Moderators and opposing candidates, for all practical purposes, are attempting to knock the responding candidates off their soapbox, in an attempt to redefine their desired image. Neutral questions allow a candidate to go on

the offensive. Challenge questions can put candidates in a defensive mode. Here, how candidates responded is examined.

As the literature shared in Chapter 4 indicates, the limited research regarding debate answers centers around acclaims, attacks, defenses and the use of evidence. For this study, those previously studied areas are used -- and added to -- based on the observed patterns. Overall, there were 14 answer categories observed here and include: 1) acclaims/brags; 2) attacks moderator; 3) attacks opponent (different party); 4) attacks opponent (same party); 5) defends self/party; 6) provides evidence; 7) provides historical context; 8) involves humor; 9) shares moral views; 10) shares personal anecdote; 11) shares philosophy; 12) pivots; 13) shares political strategy; and 14) other. While each candidate occasionally strayed from their observed patterns, such instances were rare and did not consistently occur during every debate.

### **Answering Neutral Questions**

First, this study determined the overall tendencies of each candidate when answering “neutral” questions. Table 5 illustrates how candidates answered those questions based on the recurring patterns that were observed over the course of the 20 debates.

**Table 5:** Candidate Answers to Neutral Questions

	Bachmann	Cain	Gingrich	Paul	Perry	Romney	Santorum
<b>Acclaims/Braggs</b>	X		X			X	X
<b>Attacks Moderator</b>							
<b>Attacks Opponent (Different Party)</b>	X		X		X	X	X
<b>Attacks Opponent (Same Party)</b>	X			X	X	X	X
<b>Defends Self/Party</b>							
<b>Provides Evidence</b>	X	X	X		X	X	
<b>Provides Historical Context</b>			X				
<b>Involves Humor</b>		X		X			
<b>Shares Moral Views</b>							X
<b>Shares Personal Anecdote</b>							
<b>Shares Philosophy</b>	X			X			X
<b>Pivots</b>	X						X
<b>Shares Political Strategy</b>			X				

*Note:* The table only reflects observed recurring patterns for each candidate during the 20 televised 2012 Republican primary debates. Other less frequent responses are not included.

Four of the seven candidates (Bachmann, Gingrich, Romney and Santorum) often bragged when answering neutral questions. For example, during one CNN debate, when

the moderator asked Bachmann about her stance on the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, she replied:

Well, I'm looking forward to answering the question, because I introduced the repeal bill to repeal Dodd-Frank, because it's an over-the-top bill that will actually lead to more job loss, rather than job creation. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Here, Bachmann took advantage of this neutral question to brag about her role in eliminating a law many Republicans opposed.

Five of the seven candidates (Bachmann, Gingrich, Perry, Romney and Santorum) routinely attacked the opponent from the other party, President Barack Obama, when answering neutral questions. During a debate broadcast on Bloomberg TV, the moderator asked Gingrich if “the American dream” of owning a home was still realistic. Gingrich replied:

You know, there's a stream of American thought that really wishes we would decay and fall apart, and that the future would be bleak so the government could then share the misery. It was captured by Jimmy Carter in his ‘malaise speech.’ It's captured every week by Barack Obama in his apologies disguised as press conferences. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

This answer provided Gingrich the opportunity to attack, by equating Obama to the one-term presidency of Jimmy Carter.

Five of the seven candidates (Bachmann, Paul, Perry, Romney and Santorum) also consistently attacked opponents of their own party. Here was Perry's response to a Fox News moderator who gave the Texas governor the opportunity to assess Romney's take on Obamacare:



I think Americans just don't know sometimes which Mitt Romney they're dealing with. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

With his answer, Perry had the opportunity to portray Romney as a flip-flopper.

None of the seven candidates answered a neutral question by defending self or party, but five used evidence in their answers to a neutral question. A CNN moderator asked Cain to compare his credentials with those of Romney's. Cain said:

With all due respect, his business executive experience has been more Wall Street-oriented; mine has been more Main Street. I have managed small companies. I've actually had to clean the parking lot. I've worked with groups of businesses, et cetera. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Cain took this moment to compare his experience with Romney's and presented evidence to that effect.

Gingrich was the only candidate of the seven who frequently answered neutral questions providing historical context. Such was the case when a CNBC moderator asked Gingrich if corporations could be profitable and still create jobs. Gingrich answered:

In this town, Henry Ford started as an Edison Electric supervisor who went home at night and built his first car in the garage. Now, was he in the 99 percent or the one percent? Bill Gates drops out of college to found Microsoft. Is he in the one percent or the 99 percent? Historically, this is the richest country in the history of the world because corporations succeed in creating both profits and jobs, and it's sad that the news media doesn't report accurately how the economy works. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

With this answer, Gingrich made the case that, historically, both profitability and job creation go hand in hand.

Both Cain and Paul often included humor in their answers when a neutral question presented itself. When a CNN moderator provided Paul the chance to assess

fellow Texan Rick Perry's border security plan, his one-line delivery accompanied by a slight smirk elicited lots of laughing:

MODERATOR: Congressman Paul, you're from Texas. Do you agree with your governor?

PAUL: Not entirely. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Unlike Paul and Cain, Santorum did not consistently use humor. However, he was the only candidate who regularly shared moral views when answering neutral questions. One such moment came when a CNN moderator asked Santorum about a prior statement he made when describing "the dangers" of contraception. Santorum replied:

What we're seeing is a problem in our culture with respect to children being raised by children, children being raised out of wedlock and the impact on society economically, the impact on society with respect to drug use and all – a host of other things when children have children. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Another pattern of answering neutral questions involved philosophy, with Bachmann, Paul, and Santorum all employing this tactic from time to time. One example involved Bachmann when asked by a CNN moderator about her stance on repealing prescription drug benefits, she offered this philosophical response:

Well, I think that the principle has to change, because for years, politicians have run on the idea that government is going to buy people more stuff and that the federal government would be taking care of people's prescription drugs, their retirement, their health care their housing their food. We're the 'everybody else' that's paying for the freight of all these things. That's the principle that has to change, because we have to now recognize that going forward, this isn't going to work anymore. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

As for changing subjects when answering a neutral question, Cain was the only candidate among the seven studied here who would occasionally pivot in this

circumstance. This happened, for example, when a Fox News moderator asked Cain to name a federal department he would eliminate if forced to do so. Cain answered “the EPA,” and then switched gears:

Now with the rest of my time, may I offer a solution for Social Security, rather than continuing to talk about what to call it? I have proposed the Chilean model. It’s been around for 30 years, and it works. It’s a personal retirement account. And in the last 30 years, not only has Chile succeeded with that model, but 30 other countries have done so. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Very little of Cain’s response dealt directly with the question posed.

And finally, Gingrich was the only candidate who would often discuss political strategy when answering a neutral question. When a CNN moderator asked him about the likelihood of repealing Obamacare, Gingrich was quick to bring up the politics involved:

This campaign cannot be only about the presidency. We need to pick up at least 12 seats in the U.S. Senate and 30 or 40 more seats in the House, because if you are serious about repealing Obamacare, you have to be serious about building a big enough majority in the legislative branch that you could actually in the first 90 days pass the legislation. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

After considering the way in which candidates consistently answered neutral questions, additional rounds of “deep soak” discourse analysis on the remaining questions that were not neutral identified how such “challenge questions” were answered.

### **Answering Challenges**

Table 6 illustrates how candidates answered “challenge” questions based on the recurring patterns observed throughout the 20 debates. Five of the seven candidates (Bachmann, Cain, Perry, Romney and Santorum) at times bragged in answering a challenge. When Romney was asked by a Fox News moderator about his position

**Table 6:** Candidate Answers to Challenge Questions

	Bachmann	Cain	Gingrich	Paul	Perry	Romney	Santorum
<b>Acclaims/Brags</b>	X	X			X	X	X
<b>Attacks Moderator</b>			X				
<b>Attacks Opponent (Different Party)</b>	X		X		X	X	
<b>Attacks Opponent (Same Party)</b>	X			X		X	
<b>Defends Self/Party</b>	X	X			X	X	X
<b>Provides Evidence</b>							
<b>Provides Historical Context</b>							
<b>Involves Humor</b>							
<b>Shares Moral Views</b>							
<b>Shares Personal Anecdote</b>		X					
<b>Shares Philosophy</b>			X	X			
<b>Pivots</b>	X	X	X		X		X
<b>Shares Political Strategy</b>							

*Note:* The table only reflects observed recurring patterns for each candidate during the 20 televised 2012 Republican primary debates. Other less frequent responses are not included.

opposing gay marriage, Romney bragged about his record as Massachusetts' governor related to gay rights, pointing to his cabinet appointments:

I do not believe in discriminating against people based upon their sexual orientation. There are some people that do. I had a member of my administration, my cabinet who was – who was gay. I didn't ask justice that I was looking to appoint – rather, people who are applicants for jobs – what their sexual orientation was. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

Unlike Romney, Gingrich did not consistently brag in answering challenge question, he was the only Republican candidate to respond by frequently attacking the moderator. For example, Gingrich appeared outraged when a CNN moderator asked the candidate to respond to allegations by an ex-wife that he wanted an “open marriage” in order to continue an affair he was having with a staff member (Page & Kucinich, 2012):

I think the destructive, vicious, negative nature of much of the news media makes it harder to govern this country, harder to attract decent people to run for office, and I am appalled that you would begin a presidential debate on a topic like that. The story is false. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

But Gingrich did not reserve his attacks solely for moderators. In fact, Gingrich was one of four candidates including Bachmann, Perry, and Romney who answered some challenge questions with an attack against a fellow Republican candidate. That was on display between Romney and Perry over allegations brought up by the Texas governor during one debate accusing Romney of hiring undocumented workers to care for his lawn. Even with tempers flaring, as demonstrated in the following detailed back and forth, Romney found a way keep calm while attacking Perry:

ROMNEY: Rick, I don't think I've ever hired an illegal in my life. And so I'm afraid -- I'm looking forward to finding your facts on that, because that just doesn't...

PERRY: Well, I'll tell you what the facts are.

ROMNEY: Rick, again -- Rick, I'm speaking.

PERRY: You had the -- your newspaper -- the newspaper...

ROMNEY: I'm speaking. I'm speaking. I'm speaking. You get 30 seconds. This is the way the rules work here, is that I get 60 seconds and then you get 30 second to respond. Right? Anderson?

PERRY: And they want to hear you say that you knew you had illegals working at your...

ROMNEY: Would you please wait? Are you just going to keep talking?

PERRY: Yes, sir.

ROMNEY: Would you let me finish with what I have to say?

(BOOING)

ROMNEY: Look, Rick...

MODERATOR: I thought Republicans follow the rules.

ROMNEY: This has been a tough couple of debates for Rick, and I understand that. And so you're going to get testy.

(APPLAUSE)

ROMNEY: But let's let -- I'll tell you what, let me take my time, and then you can take your time. All right? ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

At that point, Romney provided a detailed explanation of how he handled immigration laws while governor of Massachusetts.

All but two of the seven candidates occasionally defended self or party when answering a challenge. Bachmann, Cain, Perry, Romney, and Santorum decided to defend themselves when warranted. For instance, when Bachmann's record was

challenged as part of a question, she often emphasized the fact that she was operating in the House as part of the minority party. This was the way she handled an ABC News moderator's question regarding her and her colleagues' inability to defeat President Obama's healthcare initiative:

Well, you know, I think the important thing to know is that you fight and that you lead. And I led. When I was in the United States Congress, we were in the minority. (House Speaker) Nancy Pelosi wasn't interested in my pro—pro—pro—growth policy on health care. But I didn't sit on my hands. I saw what was happening to this country. Our country was going to lose because of socialized medicine. So I did everything I could, including bringing 40,000 people to the Capitol to get the attention of the Congress to get rid of Obamacare. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

This question prompted Bachmann to defend her inability to defeat the president's healthcare law.

Cain was the only candidate of the seven who routinely shared personal anecdotes when answering a challenge question. Such was the case during one debate when an audience member asked the business owner if he could be “pro-business” and “pro-worker” at the same time:

The answer is absolutely yes, because I was a worker before I was an executive and before I was a business owner. Absolutely. And when I ran the National Restaurant Association – it is a collection of small businesses. Godfather's Pizza is the same way – when I ran a region for Burger King. One restaurant is the basic fundamental business unit in this country. And so, yes, I know how to be pro-worker, because I came from a pro-worker family. My mother was a domestic worker; my father was a barber, a janitor and a chauffeur, all at the same time. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

The audience member's question challenged Cain on his allegiances within the business community, and Cain used his own story to confront that challenge.

As for sharing philosophy when answering a challenge, only two of the seven, Gingrich and Paul, consistently used this approach. When challenged by a CNN moderator about what to do in a scenario where someone refuses to follow the Obamacare mandate to purchase health insurance and then becomes gravely ill, Paul turned to his political philosophy:

I practiced medicine before we had Medicaid, in the early 1960s when I got out of medical school. I practiced at Santa Rosa Hospital in San Antonio. And the churches took care of them. We never turned anybody away from the hospitals. And we've given up on this whole concept that we might take care of ourselves and assume responsibility for ourselves, our neighbors, our friends; our churches would do it. This whole idea – that's the reason the cost is so high. The cost is so high because we dump it on the government. It becomes a bureaucracy. It becomes special interests. It kowtows to the insurance companies, then the drug companies. Then on top of that, you have the inflation. The inflation devalues the dollar. We have a lack of competition. There's no competition in medicine. Everybody's protected by licensing. We should actually legalize alternative health care, allow people to have – practice what they want. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

The last method observed among the candidates answering challenge questions was “pivots,” practiced by all but two of the seven candidates. Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Perry and Santorum often pivoted, avoiding a direct answer to the question posed. During one debate, Santorum was challenged by the CNBC moderator about his tax plan that would put the tax rate at zero for manufacturers. Santorum started to explain and then pivoted to an Obama criticism:

MODERATOR: Isn't that picking winners and losers?

SANTORUM: It's down for a sector of the economy, not picking an individual winner or loser. It's down for an entire sector of the economy that we are getting our hat handed to us by losing jobs. We see that here in Michigan, we see it across this country. And the reason is government has made us uncompetitive. We need



to compete on taxes. We need to compete on regulations. We need to repeal Obamacare. We need to -- I've said I'm going the repeal every single Obama-era regulation that cost businesses over \$100 million. Repeal them all. We'll -- we'll send a very clear message out to manufactures in this country and all over the world that America will compete. ("Candidate debate transcripts," 2012)

So, did the moderator questions and candidate answers make a difference in voter preference? RQ4 addresses that relationship.

#### **VOTER PREFERENCE**

In order to answer RQ4 (What changes, if any, were there in voter preference for presidential primary candidates before and after the debates?), the month-by-month poll standings were analyzed. Table 7 shows where each candidate stood in terms of voter preference during the respective monthly polling period, as well as their overall change in voter preference as they participated in the televised debates. Overall change signifies any change in cumulative voter support between the poll right before a candidate's first debate and the poll immediately following a candidate's last debate.

**Table 7: Poll Standings & Cumulative Voter Preference Change**

Polling Period												
GOP Candidate	Apr 2011	May 2011	Jun 2011	Jul 2011	Aug 2011	Sep 2011	Oct 2011	Nov 2011	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Mar 2012	Overall Change
Bachmann	4%	7%	8%	21%	16%	9%	5%	5%	7%	--	--	+ 3%
Cain	--	--	17%	11%	6%	8%	30%	25%	--	--	--	+ 8%
Gingrich	11%	13%	9%	7%	8%	10%	15%	28%	35%	17%	20%	<b>+ 9%</b>
Paul	5%	8%	7%	9%	6%	11%	5%	5%	11%	13%	9%	<b>+ 4%</b>
Perry	--	--	--	12%	33%	31%	14%	6%	6%	--	--	- 6%
Romney	15%	18%	22%	20%	20%	18%	22%	18%	22%	23%	34%	<b>+ 19%</b>
Santorum	--	--	--	--	4%	2%	1%	1%	4%	38%	31%	<b>+ 27%</b>

*Note:* The Public Policy Polling survey asked registered Republicans who they would support if the election were held during the polling period. The margin of error for each poll varied, ranging between +/- 3.6% and +/- 4.5%. Dashes highlight candidates not included in the polling period. Overall change signifies cumulative voter support change between the poll right before the candidate’s first debate and the poll immediately following the candidate’s last debate. Overall percentage change for each of the “final four” candidates is in bold.

Three of the seven candidates did not make it through the entire Republican Primary debate season (Bachmann, Cain and Perry). Bachmann first appeared in the April 2011 Public Policy Polling survey with 4 percent voter preference. She peaked at 21 percent in July, and ended with 7 percent in December, which was the poll following her final debate appearance resulting in an overall gain of only three percentage points throughout her campaign. Cain initially appeared in the June 2011 poll at 17 percent, peaked at 30 percent in October 2011, and ended with 25 percent support in November 2011, leaving him with an overall gain of eight percentage points. Perry had 12 percent voter support in July 2011, which was the in which he initially appeared. In the very next poll of August 2011, he peaked at 33 percent. His last poll was December 2011, where he ended with 6 percent voter preference – a cumulative decrease of six percentage points.

Four of the seven candidates did make it through to the final 2012 Republican Primary televised debate (Gingrich, Paul, Romney and Santorum). Gingrich first appeared in the April 2011 poll with 11 percent support. He peaked at 35 percent in December of 2011. The past poll in March 2012 found him with 20 percent voter preference, resulting in an overall increase of nine percentage points. Paul also debuted in the April 2011 poll, with his initial support coming in at 5 percent. His highest support was in February 2012 at 13 percent. He ended with 9 percent voter preference in March 2012, giving him a cumulative voter preference increase of only four percentage points. Romney, the eventual nominee, found himself with 15 percent support in the April 2011 poll and peaked in the very last poll at 34 percent, resulting in overall increase in voter

support of 19 percentage points. But the candidate with the biggest cumulative increase in voter support was Santorum, who didn't even register in the polls until August of 2011, when he had only 4 percent support. He peaked at 38 percent in February of 2012, and had 31 percent support in the last poll, giving Santorum an overall increase of 27 percentage points.

Once these poll shifts were identified, the next step was to identify the amount of exposure each candidate received during the debates, along with the attributes that went along with that exposure, in order to reveal any relationship to voter preference.

### **Cumulative Salience**

In order to answer RQ4a (Did the *cumulative salience* of candidates during the presidential primary debates significantly predict change in voter preference?), the total number of questions asked of each of the final four candidates (televised by CNN on February 22, 2012) was calculated and compared to the poll prior to a candidate's first debate and the poll following a candidate's final debate appearance. The final four candidates became the focus at this point of the study since they were the only contenders remaining with any opportunity to gain the nomination following the final debate.

During the primary debate period, Romney received by far the most questions of any of the candidates. As Table 8 shows, Romney appeared in 19 debates and received 308 out of the 1,433 questions asked during the 20-debate series, or almost 22 percent of

**Table 8:** Total Questions Asked & Voter Preference

<b>GOP Candidate</b>	<b>Total Questions</b>	<b>Total Appearances</b>	<b>Average Questions Per Debate</b>	<b>First Poll</b>	<b>Final Poll</b>	<b>Overall Change</b>
<b>Romney</b>	22%(308)	19	16	15%	34%	+19%
<b>Gingrich</b>	17% (240)	19	12	11%	20%	+ 9%
<b>Santorum</b>	14% (200)	20	10	4%	31%	+ 27%
<b>Paul</b>	13% (189)	20	9	5%	9%	+ 4%

*Note:* The actual number of questions is in parentheses. The first poll represents voter support for the candidate right before their first debate. The final poll represents voter support for the candidate following the final debate in the 20-debate series. Overall change signifies cumulative change in voter support between the candidate’s first poll and the final poll.

the questions. While appearing in the same number of debates, Gingrich received significantly fewer questions at 240, which made up 17 percent. Appearing in 20 debates, Santorum ranked third with 200 total questions asked of him (14%). Paul also appeared in 20 debates, but received just 189 questions, or a little more than 13 percent.

Romney also received more attention when it came to the average number of questions each candidate received per debate, regardless of how many appearances they made. Comparing the final four candidates in that regard, Romney remains at the top here too. He averaged 16 questions per debate, four more than Gingrich, who averaged 12. That is the largest margin between the candidates. Santorum averaged 10 questions per debate, and Paul averaged nine.

In terms of any relationship between cumulative candidate salience and an overall long-term change in voter preference, as Table 8 also shows, Romney received the overall largest percentage (22) number (308) and average number per debate (16) of questions, yet his cumulative voter preference increase of 19 percentage points was less than Santorum's 27 percentage point increase. This despite Santorum only receiving 14 percent of the questions spread over the 20 debates. Also, compared to Romney, Santorum received 100 fewer total questions (200) and averaged five fewer questions (11) per debate. However, it is perhaps more important to note that in the very last poll following the 20<sup>th</sup> and final debate, it is Romney who comes up on top of the polls (34%), slightly ahead of Santorum (31%). Like any poll, this is the true "snapshot" of voter preference at that very moment of the campaign.

### **Cumulative Attribute Salience**

To answer RQ4b, What was the relationship, if any, between *cumulative attribute salience* and voter preference?, the rankings of question attributes, screen time, and polls were determined and compared. As illustrated in Table 9, Romney was asked the most the most challenge questions over the 20-debate period, followed by Gingrich, Santorum and Paul. Therefore, Romney received the highest rank of "1" while Paul received the lowest rank of "4."

**Table 9:** Rankings of Cumulative Question Attributes, Screen Time & Polls

	<b>Romney</b>	<b>Gingrich</b>	<b>Santorum</b>	<b>Paul</b>
<b>Question Objective: Challenge</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Topic: Economy</b>	1	4	2	3
<b>Format: Candidate Record</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Source: Competing Candidate</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Follow-Up Questions</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Screen Time</b>	1	3	2	4
<b>Pre-Debate Poll</b>	1	2	4	3
<b>Final Poll</b>	1	3	2	4
<b>Positive Poll Percentage-Point Change</b>	2	3	1	4

*Note:* The numbers listed represent the 20-debate cumulative rankings among the four candidates, with “1” representing the candidate with the highest ranking for that item, and “4” representing the lowest ranking for the same item. “Challenge Questions” confront, dispute or test the recipient. The first poll represents voter support for the candidate right before their first debate. The final poll represents voter support for the candidate following the final debate in the 20-debate series. Overall change signifies cumulative change in voter support between the candidate’s first poll and the final poll.

The three component parts of debate questions as identified earlier in the study were also ranked. The economy was not only the subject of more debate questions, it was also the most important issue for voters. Most of the debate questions on the topic of the economy were asked of Romney, so he received a ranking of 1. Gingrich was asked the fewest number of questions on the economy, so his ranking was 4.

While there were four different question formats identified, only questions that pertained to “record” were ranked for the four candidates because that format most distinguished the questions asked during the debate. Since Romney was asked more questions that referenced his record, he was ranked number one, followed by Gingrich, ranked second. Santorum ranked third, followed by Paul who was ranked fourth since he was asked the fewest number of record-related questions.

One of the most significant findings among these question attributes involved the source of the question. Specifically, as explained earlier, this is when the source of the moderator’s question was based on what a competing candidate had said, either outside or during the debate. This typically meant that the competing candidate had challenged the candidate now on the receiving end of the moderator’s question, focusing attention on him. Again, Romney was ranked first in the percentage of questions asked of him where the source was competing candidate during the course of the 20 debates. Gingrich had the second most, followed Santorum and Paul. Worth noting is that when the source of a question was a competing candidate, three-fourths of the time it was also deemed a “challenge” question.

The final question attribute that completes the process of answering RQ4b involved follow-up questions. As mentioned in Chapter 6, follow-up questions are part of the total count of 1,433 questions asked over the 20-debate series. After answering a previous research question, we know that the distribution of overall questions throughout the 20 Republican primary debates was unequal – Romney was asked more questions



than any other candidate. But here this study found that the distribution of the number of follow-up questions was more uneven. Almost half of the questions Romney received were follow-ups, ranking him first in this area. Right behind Romney in the number of follow-up questions received was Gingrich. About a third of Gingrich's total number of questions involved follow-ups. A little less than a third of all the questions asked of Santorum were follow-ups, putting him third in this area. A quarter of Paul's questions were follow-ups, resulting in his fourth-place ranking.

In terms of cumulative screen time for each candidate (the full results of which will be outlined and tested later in this chapter), Romney ranked first here too, followed by Santorum, Gingrich and Paul.

As for the poll standings, Romney, who ranked first in each of the key attribute categories identified in this study, also ranked first in the final poll. However, he comes in second to Santorum in the percentage of change in the polls between each candidate's first and last poll during the 20-debate series.

The rankings make it clear that, in answering RQ4b (What was the relationship, if any, between *cumulative attribute salience* and voter preference?), the candidate ranked number one in all of the key question attributes that emerged from this study was Romney, who had strong voter preference by ending the 20-debate series at the top of the polls. But Santorum also did well in the polls, finishing second in the final poll and first in the percentage of increase in voter support over the course of the debate season. For his part, Santorum ranked second in the amount of economic questions asked of him, and

second in overall screen time. The objective of the question, whether it was neutral question and or a challenge question, did not seem to matter in terms of voter support.

### **Immediate Salience**

While cumulative salience looks at what happens between a candidate's first and final debate over the primary season, immediate salience focuses on the time span between consecutive polls. RQ4c (Did the *immediate salience* of candidates during the presidential primary debates significantly predict change in voter preference?) addresses this shorter time span with questions from the January 2012 debates.

The questions from the January 2012 debates are used for two reasons. First, it is the largest sample of debates that falls between two polls. Second, it is one of only a few instances during the entire debate season where there is enough lag time between a debate and a poll consistent with what is needed to measure agenda setting, as outlined in Chapter 6. In this case, two weeks separate the last of the six January debates and the February poll.

A lot happened between the December and February PPP surveys, the only time there was a two-month spread between polls. There were six debates, and two suspended candidacies that officially narrowed the field to the final four candidates. And there was a new person at the top of the poll in Santorum, who saw the most significant positive change in voter preference among all of the candidates still competing (see Table 10).

**Table 10:** January 2012 Questions & February 2012 Voter Preference

<b>GOP Candidate</b>	<b>Questions During 6-Debate Series</b>	<b>Dec 2011 Poll</b>	<b>Feb 2012 Poll</b>	<b>Immediate Change in Voter Preference</b>
<b>Romney</b>	29% (124)	22%	23%	+ 1%
<b>Gingrich</b>	26% (110)	35%	17%	- 18%
<b>Santorum</b>	20% (86)	4%	38%	+ 34%
<b>Paul</b>	15% (65)	11%	13%	+ 2%

*Note:* The actual number of questions is in parentheses. The December 2011 poll is the poll immediately before the six-debate series. The February 2012 poll follows the six-debate series. Immediate change in voter preference signifies immediate change in voter support between the December 2011 and February 2012 polls, reflecting immediate salience.

Naturally, the remaining four candidates had the chance to receive even more questions.

During the month of January, Romney was asked 29 percent of them, followed closely by Gingrich at 26 percent. But with Santorum having won the Iowa Caucus, he was receiving much more attention, with 20 percent of the questions addressed to him over the six debates in January.

During this period, it was Santorum with the biggest gain between any of the polls at 34 percent. Much of it came at the expense of Gingrich, who dropped 18 points. The poll numbers of the other two candidates of the final four were virtually unchanged. Paul increased two percentage points and Romney increased one. An observation worth noting over this six-debate stretch is that Santorum was asked twice the number of questions he had been receiving in prior debates and he went up significantly in voter preference

between polls, while Gingrich, for instance, received about his usual average of questions, and went down significantly. Romney and Paul saw little change in support, and received close to their typical average number of questions received.

### **Immediate Attribute Salience**

To answer RQ4d, What was the relationship, if any, between *immediate attribute salience* and voter preference?, as was the case when cumulative attribute salience was examined, here the rankings of question attributes, screen time, and polls were determined and compared during a shorter span of time. As seen in Table 11, Romney was asked the most challenge questions over the shorter six-debate period, followed by Gingrich, Santorum and Paul. Therefore, Romney received the highest rank of “1” while Paul received the lowest rank of “4.”

**Table 11:** Rankings of Immediate Question Attributes, Screen Time & Polls

	<b>Romney</b>	<b>Gingrich</b>	<b>Santorum</b>	<b>Paul</b>
<b>Question Objective: Challenge</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Topic: Economy</b>	3	4	1	2
<b>Format: Candidate Record</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Source: Competing Candidate</b>	1	3	2	4
<b>Follow-Up Questions</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Screen Time</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>Pre-6-Debate Poll</b>	2	1	4	3
<b>Post-6-Debate Poll</b>	2	3	1	4
<b>Positive Poll Percentage-Point Change</b>	3	4	1	2

*Note:* The numbers listed represent the six-debate immediate rankings among the four candidates, with “1” representing the candidate with the highest ranking for that item, and “4” representing the lowest ranking for the same item. “Challenge Questions” confront, dispute or test the recipient. The pre-6-debate poll represents voter support for the candidate right before the first of six January debates. The post-6-debate poll represents voter support for the candidate following the final January debate in the 6-debate series. Overall change signifies immediate change in voter support between the consecutive polls.

The three component parts of debate questions were also ranked. Over this six-debate period, it was Santorum who was asked most about the economy, so he received a ranking of 1. Gingrich was asked the fewest number of questions on the economy, so his ranking was 4. As mentioned earlier, the economy was the most important issue among voters at the time.

It was Romney who was asked the most questions related to his “record.” Since Romney was asked more questions that referenced his record during the six January

debates, he was ranked first, followed by Gingrich, ranked second. Santorum and Paul were ranked third and fourth respectively.

In terms of questions asked of candidates where the source of the question was a competing candidate, Romney was ranked first during the course of the six January debates. Santorum had the second most, followed Gingrich and Paul.

The final question attribute necessary to answer RQ4d involved follow-up questions, which are part of the total count of questions asked during the six-debate series. Romney once again dominated this attribute, ranking first. More than half of his questions during the six January debates came in the form of a follow-up. Gingrich was ranked second, followed by Santorum, who was ranked third. Only about a fourth of the questions asked of Paul were follow-ups, ranking him fourth.

As for immediate screen time for each candidate, Romney filled more than 30 percent of the screen time over the six debates and ranked first in this area, followed by Gingrich, Santorum and Paul.

When it came to the poll standings, it was Santorum who was first in the poll immediately following the six January debates. Santorum also was first in the percentage of change between polls, gaining 34 percentage points. No other candidate came close to this increase. Romney was second in the poll after the six debates, followed by Gingrich and Paul. Support for both Romney and Paul was basically unchanged, while Gingrich dropped 18 percentage points between the consecutive polls.

Based on the rankings that emerged, in answering RQ4d (What was the relationship, if any, between *immediate attribute salience* and voter preference?), the candidate ranked number one in all but one of the key question attributes was Romney, who again had strong voter preference following the shorter six-debate series examined. Romney was a close second to Santorum in the poll after the January debate. But it was Santorum who was first in the poll after these six debates and was the only candidate who experienced a jump in the percentage of change in the consecutive polls. For his part, Santorum was ranked first in the number of economic questions asked of him and second in the amount of questions asked where the source was a competing candidate. In terms of immediate attribute salience, the number of challenge questions asked of a candidate did not appear to matter.

#### **TESTING FOR ATTRIBUTE AGENDA SETTING**

As discussed in previous chapters, this dissertation set out to test the role of debate question composition in attribute agenda setting. H1 tested the following hypothesis: “Debate questions structured with attributes that challenge presidential primary candidates correlate with negative voter preference for them.” Negative voter preference is seen as any percentage decrease in voter support for a candidate in post-debate public opinion polls. A negative Spearman’s rho of at least  $-.30$  would be indicative of challenge questions having at least a moderately negative effect on voter preference.

Therefore, to test H1, the percentage of challenge questions each candidate received and the cumulative change in voter preference between the first and last polls were ranked separately. Once the rankings were determined, the two sets of rankings were correlated using Spearman's rho. As Table 12 shows, only three of the seven candidates received more challenge questions than neutral ones. Romney was the



**Table 12:** Cumulative Challenge Questions & Voter Preference Change

<b>GOP Candidate</b>	<b>Challenge Questions</b>	<b>Cumulative Change in Voter Preference</b>
<b>Romney</b>	64% (1)	+ 16% (2)
<b>Gingrich</b>	59% (2)	+ 9% (3)
<b>Perry</b>	53% (3)	- 6% (7)
<b>Cain</b>	48% (4)	+ 8% (4)
<b>Santorum</b>	45% (5)	+ 27% (1)
<b>Paul</b>	42% (6)	+ 4% (5)
<b>Bachmann</b>	38% (7)	+ 3% (6)

*Note:* Ranking shown in parentheses. The numbers listed represent the 20-debate cumulative rankings among the seven candidates, with “1” representing the candidate with the highest ranking for that item, and “7” representing the lowest ranking for the same item. “Challenge Questions” confront, dispute or test the recipient. The cumulative change in voter preference represents the percentage change in a candidate’s voter support between their first and last poll.

(Spearman’s rho = +.36, df 6, Alpha significance < .05 two-tailed test)

candidate who received the highest percentage of challenge questions among the seven candidates at 64 percent, therefore was given the highest rank of “1.” His support rose by 16 percentage points, the second most of any of the seven candidates examined. Gingrich ranked second in the percentage of challenge questions received and was third in voter preference change with an increase of nine percentage points. Perry was the only other candidate to get more challenge questions than neutral questions at 53 percent, ranking third. His voter support fell six percentage points, putting him seventh in this category.

The remaining four candidates faced questions that were less challenging over the 20-debate series. Slightly less than half of the questions posed to Cain were challenge questions (48%), ranking him fourth. He was followed by Santorum (45%), Paul (42%),

and Bachmann (38%) in that area. Meantime, all four experienced a cumulative increase in voter support over the entire debate season, with Santorum ranking first in this category with an increase of 27 percentage points. Cain was ranked fourth in voter preference change, Paul was fifth, and Bachmann sixth.

When Spearman's rho for the challenge question rankings and the rankings for the cumulative change in voter preference was calculated, the result was +.36, a moderate positive relationship, but not in the direction hypothesized. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

#### **SCREEN TIME**

We learned in Chapter 2 that researchers found strong correlation between the amount of screen time a candidate received, and their results on Election Day (Matera & Salwen, 1996; Stewart, 2015). So, to also consider that possibility when it comes to debates and public opinion polls, RQ5 asked: "Which presidential primary candidates received the most "screen time" during the primary debates?"

A tally of screen time shows that Romney had the most screen time with 308 minutes during 19 debates, resulting in an average of 15 minutes per debate (see Table 13). Gingrich was the next closest with 240 minutes and a 13-minute average over 19 debates. Santorum was third with 223 minutes during 19 debates and a 12-minute average per debate. Paul was fourth with 189 minutes. Ranked fifth was Perry with 148 minutes. Perry, who appeared in only 13 debates compared with Paul's 20 appearances, actually averaged one more minute per debate than Paul, at 11. Bachmann was sixth with 112

minutes and a 10-minute average. Cain brought up the rear with only 106 minutes over 12 debates, a 7-minute debate average.

**Table 13:** Candidate Screen Time During 2012 Republican Primary Debates

<b>GOP Candidate</b>	<b>Total Minutes</b>	<b>Debate Appearances</b>	<b>Average Minutes Per Debate</b>
<b>Romney</b>	308	19	16
<b>Gingrich</b>	240	19	13
<b>Santorum</b>	223	19	12
<b>Paul</b>	189	20	10
<b>Perry</b>	148	13	11
<b>Bachmann</b>	112	11	10
<b>Cain</b>	106	12	9

Answering RQ5 provided the means to test H2: Presidential primary candidates who have less screen time receive more “unsure” evaluations by voters. To test this last hypothesis, this study returned to the Public Policy Polling national survey. A positive Spearman’s rho of at least  $+0.30$  would be indicative of screen time having a moderately positive effect on mitigating voter uncertainty.

Therefore, to test H2, the total number of minutes each candidate received in screen time and the percentage of voters “not sure” of candidates as reflected in their last public opinion poll were ranked separately. Once the rankings were determined, the two sets of rankings were correlated using Spearman’s rho. As Table 14 shows, when the PPP poll asked respondents to what degree they were “not sure” about a candidate, there was

**Table 14:** Comparison of Candidate Screen Time & Voter Uncertainty

<b>GOP Candidate</b>	<b>Total Minutes</b>	<b>Voters “Not Sure” of Candidate</b>
<b>Romney</b>	308 (1)	11% (1)
<b>Gingrich</b>	240 (2)	12% (3)
<b>Santorum</b>	200 (3)	11% (1)
<b>Paul</b>	189 (4)	12% (3)
<b>Perry</b>	148 (5)	16% (5)
<b>Bachmann</b>	112 (6)	19% (7)
<b>Cain</b>	106 (7)	18% (6)

*Note:* Ranking shown in parentheses. The total minutes represent the total amount of time screen time each candidate received over the entire debate series. Voters “not sure” of candidates are representative by poll respondents’ degree of uncertainty about each candidate. Spearman’s rho = +.87, df 6, Alpha significance < .05 two-tailed test)

less voter uncertainty about the final four candidates who received the most screen time out of the field of seven candidates. Romney, Gingrich, Santorum and Paul were ranked first through fourth respectively in the total minutes they received over the 20-debate series. By comparison, Romney and Santorum tied for first in the smallest percentage of voters “not sure” of a candidate. Only 11 percent of poll respondents expressed uncertainty about Romney and Santorum. Only 12 percent were “not sure” about Gingrich and Paul.

But the comparison is much different for the remaining three candidates who received much less screen time. For Bachmann, who ranked sixth in the number of screen time minutes received, 19 percent of poll respondents were unsure of her candidacy in December of 2011 just before she suspended her campaign, putting her last in that ranking. Perry, who ranked fifth in screen time, was also ranked fifth in voter uncertainty,

with 16 percent of respondents indicating they were “not sure” about him. The last poll Cain was mentioned in was October 2011 in the midst of a sexual harassment scandal. He ranked last in total screen time, and next-to-last in voter uncertainty, with 18 percent of respondents “not sure” about him.

When Spearman’s rho for the screen time rankings and the rankings for the percentage of voters “not sure” of candidates was calculated, the result was  $+0.87$ , a strong positive correlation. Therefore, H2 was supported.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Using Hall’s “deep soak” method of discourse analysis, this study found distinct patterns of question attributes and candidate answers. In answering the five research questions and testing the two hypotheses presented here, the patterns that emerged were compared to voter preference over a long and short span of time to test for attribute agenda setting. One of the hypotheses was supported. The next chapter summarizes the findings and highlights key aspects within them.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this study revealed distinct patterns of debate questions and answers, as well as candidate exposure to the audience. Ultimately, all of this was compared to voter preference and uncertainty.

The study specifically found that debate questions are made up of component parts: topics, formats, and sources. Combined, these provide the latent meaning behind each question's objective. It is either neutral or it is not neutral. Repeated layers of discourse analysis found that questions that are not neutral, in turn, challenge a candidate.

But since the questions during a live broadcast result in candidate answers, a similar discourse analysis found patterns that emerged in how candidates consistently answered moderator questions. The 13 categories that emerged included tactics such as bragging, attacking, defending and pivoting.

Another important finding was that, over a long period of time (20 debates), and over a short period of time (six debates), the number of questions a candidate received correlated with voter preference in the polls. It was found that many of these questions were asked in the form of a follow-up, particularly when the source of a question was an opposing candidate making an accusation. This resulted in a rebuttal, or yet another question and opportunity to respond.

But beyond just cumulative and immediate salience, the attributes used to form the questions also revealed a relationship with voter preference over short and long periods of time. An example of this would be when a moderator asked one candidate a

question on the topic of the economy, which was the most important topic to voters at the time. This seemed to provide an advantage over another candidate who received fewer such questions on a topic relevant to voters.

It was hypothesized that being asked more challenge questions would correlate with negative voter preference, but that's not the case. Simply being asked more questions, challenge or neutral, appears to boost a candidate's standings in the polls. It was also hypothesized that voters would be more "unsure" of candidates who received less screen time. This was found to be true. A relationship emerged that seems to indicate the more screen time a candidate received, the less unsure voters were about that candidate.

The findings of this study make contributions to literature on debates and attribute agenda setting, and help lay the ground work for future theory building in political news consumption. The findings also have implications for debate organizers who are discovering that the changing media landscape may force them to rethink current debate rules and formats. This chapter provides a summary of the key findings, including implications for literature and theory. This is followed by discussion of how this study informs debate organizers and journalists, who play critical roles in informing voters.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

This study revealed six key findings that illustrate the moderator's importance in our election process. The moderator's responsibility to craft debate questions is an

integral part of the political process absorbed by potential voters who make their preferences known through public opinion surveys, and ultimately the ballot box.

### **Challenging Questions?**

In answering the first hypothesis (Debate questions structured with attributes that challenge presidential primary candidates correlate with negative voter preference for them.), it is evident that this does not appear to be the case. The eventual nominee, former Governor Mitt Romney, received more challenge questions compared to all seven candidates used in this study. At the same time, he ended at the top of the polls and saw a dramatic increase in support over the 20-debate period. In fact, the three candidates who did have more challenge questions than neutral ones all showed cumulative increases in voter preference. The results here find that there is not a relationship between facing challenge questions and receiving less voter support in the polls. The relationship is quite the opposite.

### **The Sources and Follow-ups**

And considering some of the attributes that are used to construct a question's objective, it is easy to see why Romney may have actually benefited from so many challenge questions. This study found that almost a third of all questions were follow-ups. And more than half of those follow-ups involved a key source: an opposing candidate's statement that served as a challenge. If a candidate was criticized by an opponent during the course of the debate, he or she received more time and attention by means of a rebuttal opportunity. Romney was ranked first in both the number of



questions received when the source was a competing candidate and follow-up questions over the course of 20 debates. He ended in first place in the final voter preference poll, revealing a relationship between such questions and voter support. Former Senator Rick Santorum also appeared to benefit from this pattern during the shorter term of six debates. It was he during the six-debate stretch in January 2012 who received the highest percentage of questions when the source was a competing candidate, and was second only to Romney in the number of follow-up questions.

### **The Topics**

Another key finding: the topic of questions was another attribute at play. In terms of questions posed to Romney, this study's findings revealed that in the long run over the 19 debates in which he participated, he was the candidate among the final four who received the most questions related to the economy, which was paramount on voters' minds based on the polls. Only businessman Herman Cain received more, and his candidacy was cut short due to scandal.

As for Santorum, his final surge in the polls down the final stretch of the campaign was impressive, and based on this key finding, also understandable. Cumulatively, Santorum was second to Romney in the total number of economic questions received over the 20-debate stretch. And during the shorter six-debate period, it was Santorum who received by far the most economic-related questions compared to any other candidate. Again, a relationship between this attribute and voter preference appeared.

And equally noteworthy are the topics that received scarce attention. National security, the judicial system, Medicare and Medicaid, and education were among the important topics that scarcely got noticed. Each of these topics made up only 1 percent of the questions. Even hot-button issues such as gay marriage and abortion each made up only about 2 percent of the topics. In sharp contrast, politics and campaign strategy took up 13 percent of all the questions asked.

### **Candidate Answers**

Because questions are not asked in a vacuum, another key finding that stands out involves candidate answers, and their relationship to voter preference. As revealed through discourse analysis, Romney was well prepared for the challenges that came with success in the polls. The eventual winner of the final poll and nomination was the only candidate who consistently answered challenge questions in three distinct ways: bragging about himself, attacking opponents regardless of party and perhaps most notably, without pivoting. Romney was only one of two out the seven candidates who did not routinely dodge answering a question. The other was Representative Ron Paul. Santorum, on the other hand, was willing to consistently pivot away from a question's topic, yet unwilling to bad mouth competitors, regardless of party.

In terms of how former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Paul answered challenge questions compared to the top two finishers, while Paul was willing to attack opponents within his own party, Gingrich was not. However, Gingrich was the only candidate willing to attack the moderators when he believed he was unfairly questioned

about a sexual affair, as described in Chapter 7. This highly-publicized tactic of attacking moderators would be repeated by candidates such as Donald Trump and Senator Ted Cruz of Texas during the 2016 Republican presidential primary debates (Mahler, 2015).

In a tight race, how candidates differed in their responses should not be overlooked. Answering a challenge question directly – without dodging it -- was something unique to Romney’s approach in the long run.

### **Outside the Debate**

And then there are the outside forces that even the sharpest of debate performances cannot overcome. For Representative Michele Bachmann, it was a resounding defeat in the Iowa Caucus and comments related to mental retardation detailed earlier in this study that marginalized her campaign. Cain faced a highly-reported sex scandal that forced his exit. Before the revelations, this businessman was the one candidate receiving more questions related to the economy compared to Romney. And former Governor Rick Perry’s infamous “oops” gaffe, coupled with underwhelming performances in several primaries, prompted his departure.

And another factor that should not be ignored in the short term was the political landscape during those final debates. Santorum was winning his share of primaries late in the debate season. Recognizing his new status, moderators were more willing to ask him more questions about the topic most important to voters – the economy.

## **Total Questions and Screen Time**

Finally, the most important key finding involves the sheer attention that comes from the total questions received and the resulting screen time. The more questions a candidate receives, the more time the candidate gets on camera. In Romney's case, since he was always close to the top of the polls, he always received the attention of the moderators and his opponents who would talk about him during the debate. That prompted the moderators to give him a chance to respond, allowing for more screen time over the course of 20 debates. Over the long haul, it was a vicious cycle for those lower in the polls who felt the need to attack the frontrunner, but at the expense of valuable screen time by means of rebuttals for Romney.

## **SPOTLIGHT ON MODERATORS**

This recognition of the importance of how debate questions are crafted by moderators -- involving varying attributes -- was evident during the 2012 Republican Party primary debate season.

For example, a *New York Times* editorial said that Fox News' Bret Baier during a debate in 2011 put the "entire G.O.P. field on the spot, asking candidates if they would accept a debt-reduction deal in which they would receive \$10 in spending cuts for every \$1 in tax increases." None of the 2012 candidates that night said they would. It's an example of the kind of challenge question a candidate hopes to avoid.

After moderating two of the first three Republican primary debates, Baier was interviewed by the publication *The Hill* about his impressions of the telecasts and how he

approaches them (Kitto, 2011). When asked what he'd learned during the first two debates, he said, "I learned to expect the unexpected. I learned that things don't always go as you had planned. I learned that it is difficult to logistically maneuver through eight candidates. Tomorrow there will be nine onstage. It's a challenge to be fair on time and questions. But we've previously done it very effectively."

Baier explained how a producer "is talking to me in my ear" in an attempt to keep things fair. Fellow journalists acknowledged that effort having covered the eighth debate for the *New York Times* (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2011). But they also wrote that "the exchanges between Mr. Romney and Mr. Perry -- standing side by side -- overshadowed the others."

In fact, Perry was playing right into Romney's hand. Perry kept questioning Romney's record during that particular debate, giving Romney more rebuttal time based on the agreed upon debate rules, and therefore almost a third more time than Perry. But the decision over how many back-and-forth rebuttals take place is left solely to the discretion of the moderator.

Another observation regarding the influence the moderator has on a debate's outcome came after the eleventh debate. This particular broadcast on CNN was focused on economic issues. Wolf Blitzer's style that evening was described and lauded by *Investors Business Daily* (Andrew, 2011). The publication called it, "The most informative, clear and compelling articulation yet among the eight GOP candidates." Blitzer was commended for "smoothly and professionally" running the show.

One of the biggest post-debate headlines came out of the second debate CNN's John King moderated late in the primary season. That's when he opened up with a question related to reports from other media outlets that Gingrich's second wife claimed he wanted her to accept his affair with someone else as part of their marriage. The *Washington Post* asked the question: "Did John King blow it? (Paul, 2012)" The article continued by saying that King seemed unprepared for Gingrich's response, when the candidate attacked King and the media for starting a presidential debate with "a topic like that." The columnist also said King was unprepared to respond with a proper follow-up question.

The *Washington Post* also noted after the second debate that CNN and King missed an opportunity to hear substantive responses from the candidates ("Missing the mark in the 2012 race," 2011). The column complained about the time constraints that allowed only 60 seconds or less to respond to questions:

The pundits reporting after the debate were left without any serious issues on which to compare and contrast the candidates because the candidates were not given time to string more than a few sentences together. So, the serious voter was left with shallow commentary on style rather than substance.

While not the rule maker, King was the rule enforcer.

Ahead of the fourth debate at the Reagan Library in California, NBC News' Brian Williams said about debates in general (Grossman, 2011):

I sweat these more than anything else I do—the stakes are high and there are hand grenades all over the place. Interviewing a sitting president is much less stressful.

The same piece quotes Ray Sullivan, Perry's campaign communications director, who said his candidate – who had just entered the race – was subject to a “disproportionate number of barbed questions from the moderators.” Williams later replied: “They came here expecting the most and the toughest questions, and we delivered.”

Time and time again, observers and the campaigns emphasized the role of the moderator in setting up a debate's tone through the crafting and distribution of questions. Over the course of nine months of debates during the 2012 Republican Party primary season, this study found that particular attributes of moderator questions correlate with voter support. If one candidate receives more questions related to the most important topic to potential voters, a correlation with increased voter preference is understandable, if for no other reason than to legitimize the candidate as someone worthy of asking about that topic. During the 2012 election, that was the economy. This study found that even if those questions come in the form of a challenge, it still can be beneficial to the person on the receiving end of it. And while prior statements from competing candidates often challenge a recipient's record and ethics, they come complete with additional follow-up questions and more of an opportunity to make one's case. At that point, how a candidate answers all those questions can then influence voters, which is why the results contribute to agenda setting.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS TO AGENDA-SETTING THEORY**

This dissertation set out to build theory relating to the attribute agenda-setting effects of questions asked during televised presidential debates. As seen in the literature, only a fraction of debate research involves agenda setting, and only a few of those studies utilize the theory's second level focused on attributes. This study found the use of second-level agenda setting extremely valuable in assessing the correlation between the questions asked of candidates during highly-viewed presidential debates and voter preference. Much of the attribute agenda-setting studies of the past have found correlation between various attributes within political stories and voter preference for candidates who are the subject of those stories. Yet, unlike the text of a news story, an examination of the attribute agenda-setting effects that occur as the result of the questions asked during a live debate has never been explored. The study of debates and the questions moderators ask ought to include the debate dynamics that instantly unfold in front of viewers. This study's examination of live, unscripted political broadcasts involving live responses contributes to the theory of second-level agenda setting by exploring something that to this point is little known. Even though the initial hypothesis that more challenge questions asked of candidates translates into a decrease in voter support for them was not supported, the patterns that emerged explaining this result are valuable additions to attribute agenda-setting research. This study found that the structure of a question made up of attributes involving a question's topic, format and source is every bit as important to examine as the resulting objective of that question. As the study



found, some question attributes can provide candidates advantages in the form of, for example, more relevant topics and screen time. And the second hypothesis that was supported reveals why screen time matters. Those candidates with the most opportunity to answer questions have the highest voter support in the polls, while those with the least amount of screen time find that voters are unsure about them.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO DEBATE LITERATURE**

This study also contributes to prior *debate* research since, to this point, only a fraction of the literature examines the performance of moderators, and even then, much of it only considers the topics raised by the journalist (Jackson-Beeck & Meadow, 1979; Turcotte, 2015). Other studies consider the relationship between moderators and the format in which they are involved (Brown, 2005; McKinney & Rill, 2009; Morello, 2005; Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011). Researchers have also been interested in examining the ways in which journalists distribute response time among the candidates (Matera & Salwen, 1996; Stewart, 2015). But this study took aspects of all of those prior studies and expanded them. By using Hall's "deep soak" method of discourse analysis, this study considered other aspects related to the moderator that previous studies have not explored. For instance, while other studies considered the distribution of response time, they did not acknowledge the moderator's autonomy in granting follow-up questions, leading to some candidates getting more attention than others. This study also found that as a moderator structures a question, more than just the topic is at work. The format and source of the question, until now, has not been addressed. And this study takes into

account the outside factors that can suddenly jolt observed patterns within debates and make them moot. For example, Cain at one point led Romney in the number of questions related to the economy, but a scandal made this attribute irrelevant in Cain's case. Yet questions related to the economy still benefitted other candidates that avoided a similar outside jolt.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO METHODOLOGY**

In terms of methodology, this study also contributes something new to the literature by taking a new approach to examining televised debates. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, a pioneer in discourse analysis, is certainly not known for his research in either debates or agenda setting. However, as explained earlier, his "deep" discourse analysis method fits this study's qualitative analysis of moderator questions within presidential debates because of the nuances involved during a live broadcast. Previous studies have considered numerous aspects of debates by examining their manifest content, a research technique that provides an "objective, systematic, and quantitative" description of communication (Berelson, 1952). This study, through the use of discourse analysis, considered many of these same aspects in tandem in order to examine their latent content. For example, while examining debate topics individually is appropriate through content analysis, such an approach does not lend itself to the other parts of debate questions and answers that were analyzed here.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM AND THE VOTER**

The results here serve as a reminder to journalists who moderate political debates that they not only set the agenda when it comes to the topics covered, but certainly in the case of a televised debate, the amount of attention candidates receive. Based on the correlation noted between the amount of time a candidate receives during debates and voter uncertainty of certain candidates as reflected in the polls, the responsibility that comes with being a moderator should not be taken lightly.

And the objective of the question (challenge or neutral) certainly feeds this often-uneven division of speaking time among the candidates. A moderator must expect that any time one candidate is confronted with an opposing candidate's prior statement about them, it is likely to result in a back and forth between the two that can easily marginalize the others on the debate stage. The rules in place for the moderators of the 20 debates used in this study allowed for rebuttals at the journalists' discretion (Mahler, 2015). The findings of this research perhaps will give debate organizers pause as they develop future debate criteria. One possibility is to maintain a rotating order of questioning, and only allow such rebuttals during the candidate's next turn. While this might not provide a lively exchange, it would make screen time fairer and could help avoid repeated insults and encourage candidates to answer policy questions on the minds of voters, with at least limited barbs.

## **LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH**

While this study is a comprehensive examination of the role of moderator questions asked during the televised 2012 Republican primary season debates, it does acknowledge some limitations. By focusing on the debates of one particular political party, this research makes no attempt to consider if the correlations to voter preference found here apply to a series of Democratic Party debates, for example, during a different time frame. Similarly, how question attributes and screen time compare with voter preference during the televised debates over the course of a general election season with only two candidates cannot be determined from this study. Future studies of debate questions should consider party affiliation in order to determine if moderators exhibit any bias, intentional or not.

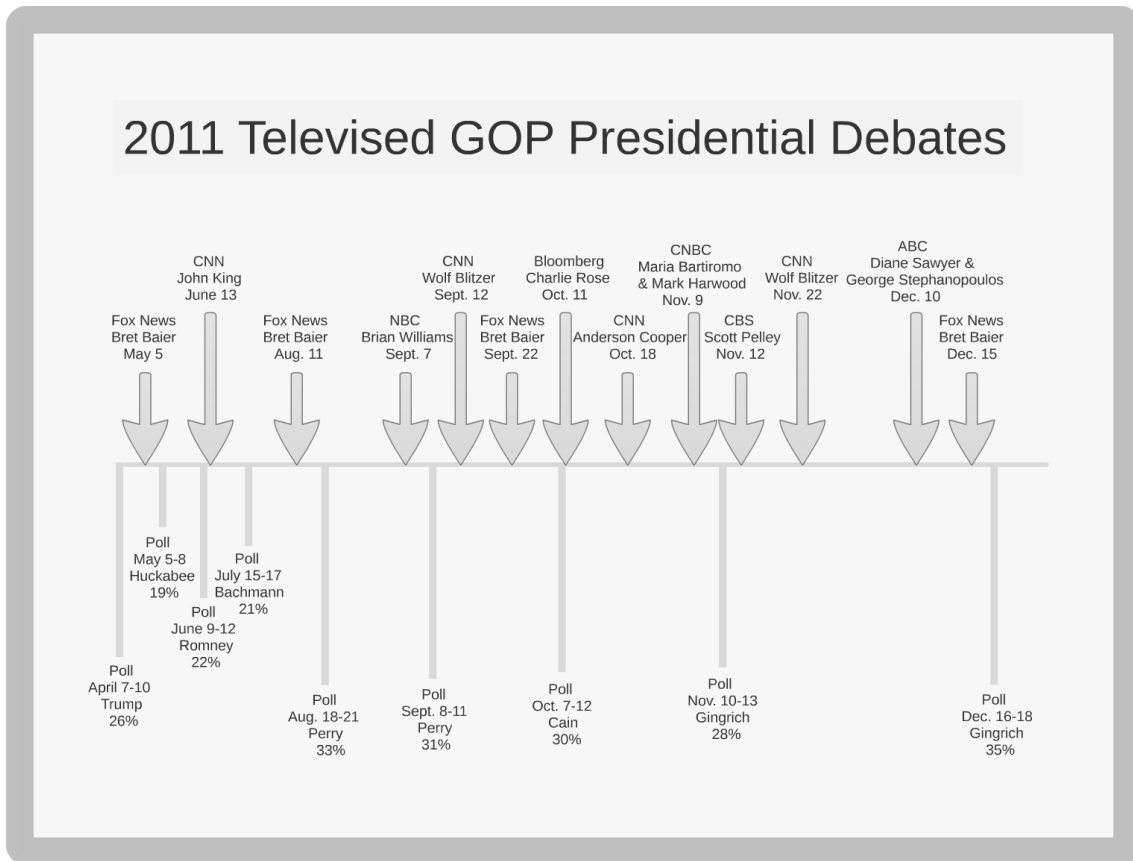
## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While the bulk of prior debate research has focused on topics, answers, and formats, the goal of this research was to determine if the attributes within questions and the distribution of those questions affects how voters feel about candidates. What was found here is that both a question's attributes and its distribution work in tandem to influence the process. Over the span of an entire campaign, a candidate who gets more time -- often the result of specific attributes used to craft questions -- appears to benefit through more attention and the legitimacy that attention provides. Future studies should expand this examination on some of the individual attributes that emerged from this study in order to shed more light on their influence. For example, given the most recent 2016

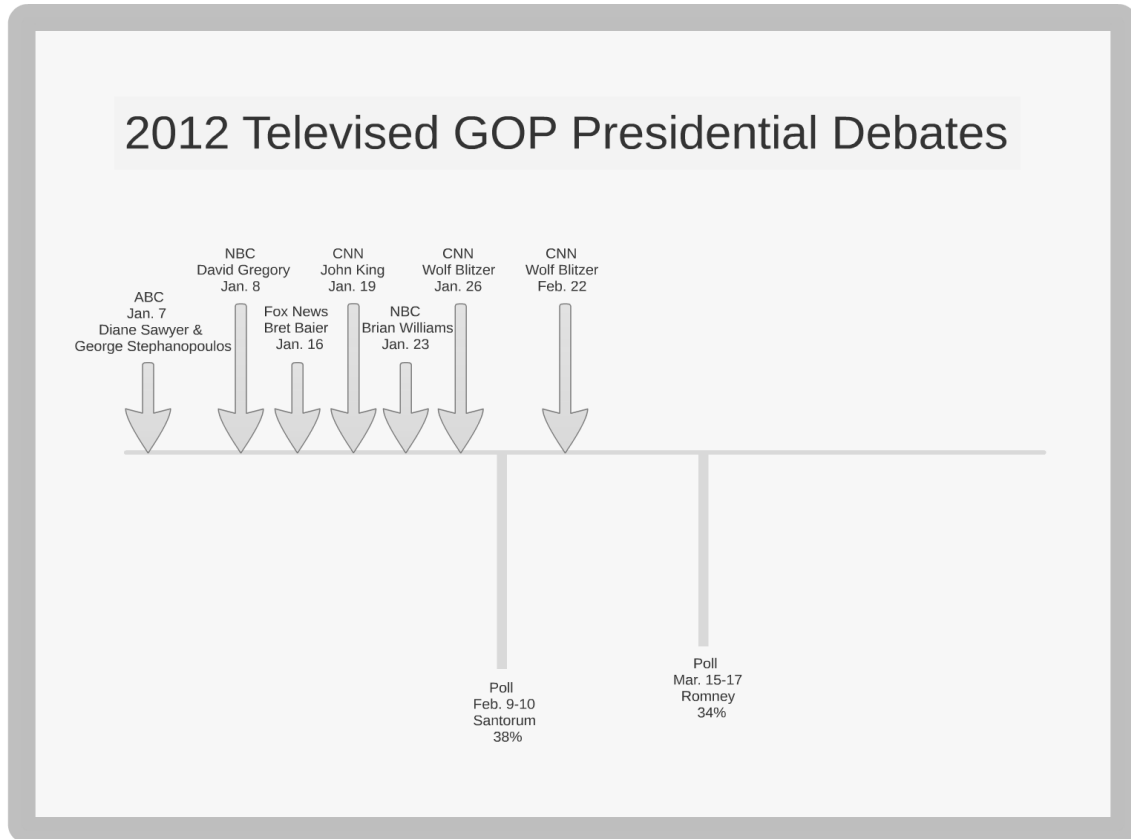
debate season involving a much greater amount of conflict between moderators and candidates, future research ought to put even more of a focus on this particular tension and its effects on the voter. Also in light of the 2016 election season, the growing use of social media as a question source should also be included in future research related to moderator questions. And yet another recommendation is to conduct elite interviews with the televised debate stakeholders, who could be questioned on issues directly connected to the findings of this study, including topics and screen time and the impact they have on voter preference.

# Appendices

## APPENDIX A: 2011 TELEVISED REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES AND POLLS



**APPENDIX B: 2012 TELEVISED REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES AND POLLS**



**APPENDIX C: KEY OVERALL QUESTION ATTRIBUTES & VOTER PREFERENCE**

<b>GOP Candidate</b>	<b>Economic Questions (Topic)</b>	<b>Record of Candidate (Format)</b>	<b>Competing Candidate (Source)</b>	<b>Follow-Up Questions (Order)</b>	<b>First Poll</b>	<b>Final Poll</b>	<b>Overall Change</b>
<b>Gingrich</b>	20% (47)	8% (17)	24% (57)	35% (83)	11%	20%	+ 9%
<b>Paul</b>	22% (42)	4% (6)	16% (30)	25% (47)	5%	9%	+ 4%
<b>Romney</b>	<b>30% (93)</b>	<b>14% (39)</b>	<b>36% (112)</b>	<b>47% (145)</b>	15%	34%	+ 19%
<b>Santorum</b>	26% (52)	8% (13)	22% (44)	28% (55)	4%	31%	+ 27%

*Note:* The actual number of questions is in parentheses. The leader in each category of question attribute is in bold. The first poll represents voter support for the candidate right before their first debate. The final poll represents voter support for the candidate following the final debate in the 20-debate series. Overall change signifies cumulative change in voter support between the candidate’s first poll and the final poll.



**APPENDIX D: PUBLIC POLICY POLLING NATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS**



**National Survey Results**

- Q1** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mike Huckabee?
- Favorable ..... 61%
  - Unfavorable ..... 18%
  - Not sure ..... 21%
- Q2** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Sarah Palin?
- Favorable ..... 61%
  - Unfavorable ..... 31%
  - Not sure ..... 8%
- Q3** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?
- Favorable ..... 50%
  - Unfavorable ..... 33%
  - Not sure ..... 17%
- Q4** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?
- Favorable ..... 50%
  - Unfavorable ..... 29%
  - Not sure ..... 20%

- Q5** If the Republican candidates for President in 2012 were Michele Bachmann, Haley Barbour, Newt Gingrich, Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, and Mitt Romney who would you vote for?
- Michele Bachmann ..... 6%
  - Haley Barbour ..... 3%
  - Newt Gingrich ..... 15%
  - Mike Huckabee ..... 22%
  - Sarah Palin ..... 12%
  - Ron Paul ..... 8%
  - Tim Pawlenty ..... 6%
  - Mitt Romney ..... 16%
  - Someone else/Undecided ..... 13%
- Q6** Let's say Mike Huckabee decides not to run and the candidates for President next year were Michele Bachmann, Haley Barbour, Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, and Mitt Romney. Who would you vote for?
- Michele Bachmann ..... 5%
  - Haley Barbour ..... 3%
  - Newt Gingrich ..... 20%
  - Sarah Palin ..... 15%
  - Ron Paul ..... 12%
  - Tim Pawlenty ..... 6%
  - Mitt Romney ..... 22%
  - Someone else/Undecided ..... 16%



### National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mike Huckabee?</p> <p>Favorable..... 59%</p> <p>Unfavorable ..... 22%</p> <p>Not sure ..... 19%</p>	<p><b>Q6</b> If the Republican candidates for President in 2012 were Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, Mitt Romney, and Donald Trump who would you vote for?</p> <p>Michele Bachmann ..... 7%</p> <p>Newt Gingrich ..... 13%</p> <p>Mike Huckabee ..... 19%</p> <p>Sarah Palin ..... 12%</p> <p>Ron Paul ..... 8%</p> <p>Tim Pawlenty ..... 5%</p> <p>Mitt Romney ..... 18%</p> <p>Donald Trump ..... 8%</p> <p>Someone else/Undecided ..... 11%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Sarah Palin?</p> <p>Favorable..... 61%</p> <p>Unfavorable ..... 31%</p> <p>Not sure ..... 8%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> What if Donald Trump didn't run and the candidates for President in 2012 were just Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, and Mitt Romney, who would you vote for?</p> <p>Michele Bachmann ..... 7%</p> <p>Newt Gingrich ..... 15%</p> <p>Mike Huckabee ..... 20%</p> <p>Sarah Palin ..... 14%</p> <p>Ron Paul ..... 8%</p> <p>Tim Pawlenty ..... 6%</p> <p>Mitt Romney ..... 21%</p> <p>Someone else/Undecided ..... 9%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p>Favorable..... 54%</p> <p>Unfavorable ..... 30%</p> <p>Not sure ..... 16%</p>	
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p>Favorable..... 52%</p> <p>Unfavorable ..... 29%</p> <p>Not sure ..... 19%</p>	
<p><b>Q5</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Donald Trump?</p> <p>Favorable..... 34%</p> <p>Unfavorable ..... 53%</p> <p>Not sure ..... 12%</p>	

**May 5-8, 2011**

Survey of 610 Republican primary voters

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Raleigh, NC 27604

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## National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Sarah Palin?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 62%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 27%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 11%</p>	<p><b>Q6</b> Given the choices of Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, and Mitt Romney who would you most like to see as the Republican candidate for President next year?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 8%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 1%</p> <p><i>Sarah Palin</i> ..... 15%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 7%</p> <p><i>Tim Pawlenty</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 22%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 36%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 49%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> If Sarah Palin didn't run and the choices were just Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, and Mitt Romney who would you most like to see as the nominee?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 13%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i> ..... 20%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 12%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 3%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 6%</p> <p><i>Tim Pawlenty</i> ..... 10%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 27%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 11%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 55%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 27%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 18%</p>	
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Tim Pawlenty?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 44%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 25%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 31%</p>	
<p><b>Q5</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Herman Cain?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 40%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 26%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 34%</p>	

**June 9-12, 2011**

Survey of 544 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.

Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



### National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Michele Bachmann?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i>..... 48%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 26%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 26%</p>	<p><b>Q6</b> If the candidates for President next year were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, Rick Perry, and Mitt Romney, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 16%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i>..... 10%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 6%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i>..... 2%</p> <p><i>Sarah Palin</i> ..... 12%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Tim Pawlenty</i> ..... 5%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 11%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i>..... 20%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 10%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Herman Cain?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i>..... 40%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 19%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 41%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> If Sarah Palin didn't end up running for President, and the candidates were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Tim Pawlenty, Rick Perry, and Mitt Romney, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 21%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i>..... 11%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 7%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i>..... 3%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i>..... 9%</p> <p><i>Tim Pawlenty</i> ..... 5%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 12%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i>..... 20%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Sarah Palin?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i>..... 57%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 32%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 10%</p>	
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Tim Pawlenty?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i>..... 32%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 25%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 43%</p>	
<p><b>Q5</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i>..... 50%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 20%</p>	

**July 15-17, 2011**

Survey of 730 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.  
Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



## National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Michele Bachmann?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 51%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 32%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 17%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Jon Huntsman?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 19%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 27%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 54%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Herman Cain?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 39%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 24%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 37%</p>	<p><b>Q8</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Ron Paul?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 44%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 30%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 26%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Sarah Palin?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 62%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 30%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 9%</p>	<p><b>Q9</b> If the candidates for President next year were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 10%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i> ..... 7%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 7%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 2%</p> <p><i>Sarah Palin</i> ..... 13%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 6%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 27%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 3%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 7%</p>
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Rick Perry?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 64%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 20%</p>	
<p><b>Q5</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 51%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 33%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 15%</p>	
<p><b>Q6</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Paul Ryan?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 38%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 27%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 35%</p>	

**August 18-21, 2011**

Survey of 663 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.

Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



### National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Michele Bachmann?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 45%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 36%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 19%</p>	<p><b>Q5</b> If the Republican candidates for President were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i> ..... 8%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 10%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 2%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 11%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 18%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 2%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 8%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 46%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 39%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 15%</p>	<p><b>Q6</b> If the Republican Presidential race came down to just Rick Perry and Mitt Romney, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 49%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 37%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Rick Perry?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 58%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 24%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 18%</p>	
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 52%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 32%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 16%</p>	

**September 8-11, 2011**

Survey of 500 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.

Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



**Q13** If the Republican candidates for President were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Gary Johnson, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?

<i>Michele Bachmann</i> .....	5%
<i>Herman Cain</i> .....	30%
<i>Newt Gingrich</i> .....	15%
<i>Jon Huntsman</i> .....	2%
<i>Gary Johnson</i> .....	0%
<i>Ron Paul</i> .....	5%
<i>Rick Perry</i> .....	14%
<i>Mitt Romney</i> .....	22%
<i>Rick Santorum</i> .....	1%
<i>Someone else/Not sure</i> .....	6%

**Q14** (Asked only of those who made a choice in Q13:) Would you say you are strongly committed to that candidate, or might you end up supporting someone else?

<i>Strongly committed to that candidate</i> .....	33%
<i>Might end up supporting someone else</i> .....	67%

**Q15** (Asked only of those who made a choice in Q13:) Who would be your second choice for President?

<i>Michele Bachmann</i> .....	10%
<i>Herman Cain</i> .....	24%
<i>Newt Gingrich</i> .....	15%
<i>Jon Huntsman</i> .....	1%
<i>Gary Johnson</i> .....	0%
<i>Ron Paul</i> .....	5%
<i>Rick Perry</i> .....	10%
<i>Mitt Romney</i> .....	12%
<i>Rick Santorum</i> .....	3%
<i>Someone else/Not sure</i> .....	18%

**Q16** Do you think that Mitt Romney is too liberal, too conservative, or about right?

<i>Too liberal</i> .....	31%
<i>Too conservative</i> .....	5%
<i>About right</i> .....	51%
<i>Not sure</i> .....	13%

**Q17** Do you think that Rick Perry is too liberal, too conservative, or about right?

<i>Too liberal</i> .....	17%
<i>Too conservative</i> .....	14%
<i>About right</i> .....	53%
<i>Not sure</i> .....	17%

**Q18** Do you think that Herman Cain is too liberal, too conservative, or about right?

<i>Too liberal</i> .....	6%
<i>Too conservative</i> .....	8%
<i>About right</i> .....	71%
<i>Not sure</i> .....	15%

**Q19** If the Republican race for President came down to Mitt Romney and Rick Perry, who would you vote for?

<i>Mitt Romney</i> .....	48%
<i>Rick Perry</i> .....	38%
<i>Not sure</i> .....	14%

**Q20** If the Republican race for President came down to Mitt Romney and Herman Cain, who would you vote for?

<i>Mitt Romney</i> .....	36%
<i>Herman Cain</i> .....	48%
<i>Not sure</i> .....	16%

**October 7-10, 2011**

Survey of 484 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.  
Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



## National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Michele Bachmann?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 40%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 41%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 19%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> If the Republican candidates for President were Michele Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Gary Johnson, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 5%</p> <p><i>Herman Cain</i> ..... 25%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 28%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 3%</p> <p><i>Gary Johnson</i> ..... 1%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 5%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 6%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 18%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 1%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 9%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Herman Cain?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 57%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 11%</p>	<p><b>Q8</b> Do you think allegations of sexual harassment against Herman Cain that came out this week are mostly true or false?</p> <p><i>Mostly true</i> ..... 24%</p> <p><i>Mostly false</i> ..... 54%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 22%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 68%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 23%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 9%</p>	<p><b>Q9</b> Is your opinion of Herman Cain now more positive, more negative, or unchanged from what it was before these allegations came out?</p> <p><i>More positive</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>More negative</i> ..... 26%</p> <p><i>Unchanged</i> ..... 63%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 2%</p>
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Ron Paul?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 52%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 17%</p>	<p><b>Q10</b> Do you think that the media's treatment of Herman Cain this week has been mostly fair or unfair?</p> <p><i>Mostly fair</i> ..... 26%</p> <p><i>Mostly unfair</i> ..... 61%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 13%</p>
<p><b>Q5</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Rick Perry?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 35%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 49%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 17%</p>	
<p><b>Q6</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 48%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 39%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p>	



## National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Michele Bachmann?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 41%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 41%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 19%</p>	<p><b>Q6</b> If the Republican candidates for President were Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Gary Johnson, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 7%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 35%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 3%</p> <p><i>Gary Johnson</i> ..... 1%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 11%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 6%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 22%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 4%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 10%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 60%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 28%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 13%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> Would you say you are strongly committed to that candidate, or might you end up supporting someone else?</p> <p><i>Strongly committed to that candidate</i> ..... 38%</p> <p><i>Might end up supporting someone else</i> ..... 62%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Ron Paul?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 34%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 52%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>	<p><b>Q8</b> Who would be your second choice for President?</p> <p><i>Michele Bachmann</i> ..... 12%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Jon Huntsman</i> ..... 3%</p> <p><i>Gary Johnson</i> ..... 1%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 7%</p> <p><i>Rick Perry</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 5%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 29%</p>
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Rick Perry?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 37%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 47%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 16%</p>	
<p><b>Q5</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 55%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>	

## National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 42%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 44%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> Who is your second choice for President?</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 20%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 18%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 37%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Ron Paul?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 35%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 51%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 13%</p>	<p><b>Q8</b> If the Republican candidates for President were just Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 15%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 28%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 50%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 8%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 44%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 43%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 13%</p>	<p><b>Q9</b> If the Republican candidates for President were just Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 45% <i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 42%</p>
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Rick Santorum?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 64%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 22%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>	<p><b>Q10</b> If the Republican candidates for President were just Mitt Romney and Ron Paul, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 61% <i>Not sure</i> ..... 13%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 26%</p>
<p><b>Q5</b> If the Republican candidates for President were Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 17%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 13%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 23%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 38%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 8%</p>	<p><b>Q11</b> If the Republican candidates for President were just Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 32% <i>Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 56%</p>
<p><b>Q6</b> Would you say you are strongly committed to that candidate, or might you end up supporting someone else?</p> <p><i>Strongly committed to that candidate</i> ..... 48%</p> <p><i>Might end up supporting someone else</i> ..... 52%</p>	<p><b>Q12</b> Do you consider yourself to be a member of the Tea Party?</p> <p><i>Yes</i> ..... 29%</p> <p><i>No</i> ..... 55%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 16%</p>

**February 9-10, 2012**

Survey of 656 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.

Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



## National Survey Results

<p><b>Q1</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Newt Gingrich?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 47%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 42%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p>	<p><b>Q7</b> Who is your second choice for President?</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 20%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 8%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 18%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 18%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 36%</p>
<p><b>Q2</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Ron Paul?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 57%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p>	<p><b>Q8</b> If the Republican candidates for President were just Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 11%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 40%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 41%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 8%</p>
<p><b>Q3</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Mitt Romney?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 54%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 35%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 11%</p>	<p><b>Q9</b> Do you think that Newt Gingrich should drop out of the Republican Presidential race, or not?</p> <p><i>He should</i> ..... 46% <i>Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p> <p><i>He should not</i> ..... 42%</p>
<p><b>Q4</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Rick Santorum?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 59%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 30%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 11%</p>	<p><b>Q10</b> Do you consider yourself to be a member of the Tea Party?</p> <p><i>Yes</i> ..... 34%</p> <p><i>No</i> ..... 52%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 14%</p>
<p><b>Q5</b> If the Republican candidates for President were Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum, who would you vote for?</p> <p><i>Newt Gingrich</i> ..... 20%</p> <p><i>Ron Paul</i> ..... 9%</p> <p><i>Mitt Romney</i> ..... 34%</p> <p><i>Rick Santorum</i> ..... 31%</p> <p><i>Someone else/Not sure</i> ..... 6%</p>	<p><b>Q11</b> Are you an Evangelical Christian, or not?</p> <p><i>Are an Evangelical</i> ..... 48%</p> <p><i>Are not</i> ..... 52%</p>
<p><b>Q6</b> Would you say you are strongly committed to that candidate, or might you end up supporting someone else?</p> <p><i>Strongly committed to that candidate</i> ..... 53%</p> <p><i>Might end up supporting someone else</i> ..... 47%</p>	<p><b>Q12</b> Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Sarah Palin?</p> <p><i>Favorable</i> ..... 68%</p> <p><i>Unfavorable</i> ..... 20%</p> <p><i>Not sure</i> ..... 12%</p>

**March 15-17, 2012**

Survey of 734 Republican primary voters

3020 Highwoods Blvd.  
Raleigh, NC 27604

information@publicpolicypolling.com / 888 621-6988



APPENDIX E: DEBATE TEXT SAMPLE

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

*1960 and 1976 - 2012*

Republican Candidates Debate in Sioux City, Iowa December 15, 2011

PARTICIPANTS:

Representative Michele Bachmann (MN); Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (GA); Former Governor Jon Huntsman (UT); Representative Ron Paul (TX); Governor Rick Perry (TX); Former Governor Mitt Romney (MA); and Former Senator Rick Santorum (PA)

MODERATOR:

Bret Baier (Fox News)

MODERATOR: Speaker Gingrich, since our last debate, your position in this race has changed dramatically. You are now physically at the center of the stage, which means you're at the top of the polls, yet many Republicans seem conflicted about you. They say that you're smart, that you're a big thinker. At the same time, many of those same Republicans worry deeply about your electability in a general election, saying perhaps Governor Romney is a safer bet.

Can you put to rest once and for all the persistent doubts that you are, indeed, the right candidate on this stage to go up and beat President Obama?

GINGRICH: Well, first of all, let me just say to you and to all of our viewers, Merry Christmas. This is a great time for us to be

here. And I hope that everybody across the country has a very joyous Christmas season.

I've been around long enough that I remember at this exact time in 1979 when Ronald Reagan was running 30 points behind Bill Clinton -- behind Jimmy Carter. And if people had said, "Gosh, electability is the number-one issue," they wouldn't have nominated him.

What they said was: He believes what he's talking about. He has big solutions. He can get the economy growing. He understands foreign policy, and he's the person I want to have debate Jimmy Carter. He carried more states against Carter than FDR carried against Herbert Hoover in 1932.

Read more at the American Presidency Project:

[www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=97978#ixzz1h0La0vfl>

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I believe I can debate Barack Obama, and I think in seven three-hour debates, Barack Obama will not have a leg to stand on in trying to defend a record that is terrible and an ideology that is radical.

MODERATOR: Mr. Speaker, Governor Romney...[applause]

Governor Romney just yesterday said you're an unreliable conservative. Now, obviously, he's your opponent. He's your opponent. But even Iowa Governor Terry Branstad said today he respects you greatly, but he openly questioned whether you had the discipline and focus to be president.

GINGRICH: Well, those are two different questions. The first -- let

me take them one by one, very quickly. I have a 90 percent American Conservative Union voting record for 20 years. I balanced the budget for four straight years, paid off \$405 billion in debt. Pretty conservative. The first wealth entitlement reform of your lifetime, in fact, the only major entitlement reform until now was welfare. Two out of three people went back to work or went to school. Pretty conservative. First tax cut in 16 years, largest capital gains tax cut in American history, unemployment came down to 4.2 percent. Pretty conservative.

I think on the conservative thing, it's sort of laughable to suggest that somebody who campaigned with Ronald Reagan and with Jack Kemp and has had a 30-year record of conservatism, is somehow not a conservative?

MODERATOR: And what about the concerns from Iowa governor Branstad?

GINGRICH: I think people have to watch my career and decide. I spent 16 years working to create the first Republican majority in 40 years. I spent years helping create the first balanced budgets. I am the longest serving teacher in the senior military, 23 years teaching one and two- star generals and admirals the art of war. I think it's fair to say that my commitment to disciplined, systematic work is -- is fairly obvious. You know, people just have to decide.

Part of the difference is, I do change things when conditions change. And part of the difference is I strive for very large changes and I'm prepared to really try to lead the American people to get this country back on the right track. And that's a very large change.

MODERATOR: Now to my colleague, Megyn Kelly.

MODERATOR: A similar question to you, Congressman Paul. You have some bold ideas. Some very fervent supporters and probably the most organized ground campaign here in Iowa. But there are many Republicans inside and outside of this state who openly doubt whether you can be elected president. How can you convince them otherwise? And if you don't wind up winning this nomination, will you pledge here tonight that you will support the ultimate nominee?

PAUL: Well, you know, fortunately for the Republican party this year, probably every -- anybody up here could probably beat Obama, so. [laughter] [applause]

PAUL: So the challenge isn't all that great on how we're going to beat Obama. I think he's beating himself. I think really the question is, is what do we have to offer? And I have something different to offer. I emphasize civil liberties. I emphasize a pro-American foreign policy, which is a lot different than policemen of the world. I emphasize, you know, monetary policy and these things that the other candidates don't -- don't talk about. But I think the important thing is the philosophy I'm talking about is the Constitution and freedom.

And that brings people together. It brings independents into the fold and it brings Democrats over on some of these issues. So, therefore, I see this philosophy as being very electable, because it's an America philosophy. It's the rule of law. And it -- it means that, you know, we ought to balance the budget. It opens up the door for saying -- supporting my willingness to cut \$1 trillion out of the budget the first year. [applause]

MODERATOR: Senator Santorum, no one has spent more time in Iowa than you. You have visited every county in the state. And yet

while we have seen no fewer than four Republican candidates surge in the polls, sometimes in extraordinary ways, so far your campaign and you have failed to catch fire with the voters. Why?

SANTORUM: Well I'm counting on the people of Iowa to catch fire for me. That's -- that's what this plan was all about from day one, is to go to all 99 counties and do already almost 350 town hall meetings here in Iowa. We're organizing. We have a very clear message. That's the thing that's going to pay off for us in the end. And we present a clear contrast that really nobody else in this race does.

We present the contrast of someone who's been a strong conviction conservative. You know where I stand. You can trust me because I've been there and I've done it. And I did it as a leader. When I was in the leadership, if you were a conservative and you had an issue that you wanted to get voted on or you wanted to get done in the United States Senate, you came to Rick Santorum. Because I was the guy fighting for the conservative cause when it was popular, and when it was unpopular.

The speaker had a conservative revolution against him when he was the speaker of the House. I had conservatives knocking down my door because I was the effective advocate for the principles that they believed in. That's the contrast. We have -- we need someone who's strong in their political and personal life to go out and contrast themselves with the president and make him the issue in this campaign. And that's why Iowans are beginning to respond. They like the accountability. They like the fact that I've been there and -- and met with them and believe in them to lead this country.

MODERATOR: Chris Wallace? [applause]



MODERATOR: Thank you Brett. Governor Romney, I want to follow up on Brett's line of questioning to the speaker. Because many of our viewers tell us that they are supporting Newt Gingrich because they think that he will be tougher than you in taking the fight to Barack Obama in next fall's debates. Why would you be able to make the Republican case against the president more effectively than the speaker?

ROMNEY: Well lets step back and talk about what's really happening in the country. What we're finding across America is a lot of people are really hurting. 25 million people out of work, stopped looking for work or in part-time work that need full-time jobs. A lot of people in the middle-class who have seen incomes go down as the cost of their living has gone up and up and up. The American people care very deeply about having a president who'd get America right again.

And all of us on this stage have spoken over the last several debates about the fact that government doesn't create jobs, but the private sector does. I spent my life, my career in the private sector. I understand, by the way from my successes and failures what it's going to take to put Americans back to work with high-paying jobs.

I can debate President Obama based upon that understanding. And I'll have credibility on the economy when he doesn't. My successes include some businesses that were successful, like Staples and Bright Horizons Children's Centers, and a steel mill in the middle of Indiana, some things I learned from.

And, by the way, some failures. I remember when founders of Jet Blue came to me and said, invest in us. I said, well, that will never work. Got it wrong. Now one of my favorite airlines.

I know what it takes to get this economy going. The president doesn't. The proof is in his record. It's terrible. My record shows that I can get America working again. [applause]

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