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# The Unbearable Lightness of Debating: Performance Ambiguity and Social Influence

Matthew B. Kugler

George R. Goethals

University of Richmond, [ggoethal@richmond.edu](mailto:ggoethal@richmond.edu)

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# LEADERSHIP AT THE CROSSROADS

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and Donelson R. Forsyth

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# The Unbearable Lightness of Debating: Performance Ambiguity and Social Influence

MATTHEW B. KUGLER AND GEORGE R. GOETHALS

This chapter considers three sets of studies on how social influence affects perceptions of candidates' performances in presidential debates. The first set shows that perceptions are influenced markedly by the reactions of peers watching the debate at the same time or by televised audiences shown on broadcast debates. The second set shows that expectations created by news accounts prior to debates also have significant impact and that different kinds of news accounts affect different viewers in distinct ways. Individuals with a high need for cognition respond well to more complicated messages that advance some reason as to why an apparently negative candidate characteristic may actually work in his or her favor. Those individuals do not respond well to simple assertions that a particular candidate will perform well. On the other hand, individuals with a low need for cognition show the opposite pattern. They respond to the simple but not the more complex messages. The third set of studies considers postdebate spin as well as predebate predictions. Although campaigns often use the strategy of lowering expectations before a debate by arguing that their candidate is disadvantaged and will not perform well, and then after the debate declare a surprising victory, our research suggests that this strategy is unlikely to work. It appears too manipulative. Generally, when campaigns set expectations low, viewers perceive their candidate's performance as weak.

In the spring of 2007, Joseph Biden scored points on newscasts with a one-word answer to a debate question. The long-serving senator from Delaware was debating his rivals for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. Questions had been raised about his seemingly uncontrolled verbosity. Biden was asked whether he could assure worried voters that he had sufficient self-discipline to be president. He simply said: "Yes." His answer—just one word—provided an impressive example of restraint. For the broadcast media, it was an effective, though minimal, sound bite. There have been many other brief exchanges that have had similar impact: Lloyd Bentsen telling Dan Quayle, "You're no Jack Kennedy," or Ronald Reagan saying that he would "not exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." These exchanges addressed issues of great concern in a discrete and direct manner, and so have passed into debate lore.

We think moments such as these are memorable and influential for two reasons. First, debates have become ever more important in our political process; as voters, we would very much like to know how to assess them. This is made difficult by the second reason. For the most part, the candidates' relative performances are unclear. Crystallizing moments such as those above are rare. The typical lack of clarity means that while debates are important, they are also ambiguous. Research in social psychology going back to Allport and Postman's (1947) studies of rumors has shown that the importance/ambiguity combination creates an extremely ripe occasion for social influence (see Baron, Vandello, & Brunzman, 1996, for a more recent study). Allport and Postman argue that in those situations people seek guidance in creating a simple summary of the facts. Consistent with this research, we would predict that people will be easily influenced by other people's evaluations (media reports, campaign spin, water cooler gossip) of debate performances. This chapter reports several studies addressing that hypothesis.

*The importance of debates.* Presidential debates are seen by increasingly large numbers of people, with an estimated 62.5 million viewers seeing the first debate of 2004 (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2008). Though debates are often derided as being uninformative, the evidence shows that voters learn at least a little from them—especially about candidates with whom they are not very familiar (Holbrook, 1999). There is also a strong correlation between a person's view of who won a debate and his/her choice on Election Day (Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Schrott, 1990). Coupled with a large viewership, these findings suggest that debates have the potential to swing close elections.

*Debate evaluations.* But debate evaluations are far from objective. Many variables come into play. Research on the Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960 suggests that "the medium is the message" and that Kennedy benefited greatly from the way he appeared on television, relative to Richard Nixon (Kraus,

1962). That is, it is widely believed that John F. Kennedy benefited most among voters who watched the debates on television rather than those who listened on the radio. For example, after the first debate, undecided television viewers were more likely to perceive Kennedy rather than Nixon as similar to the "ideal leader" (Tannenbaum, Greenberg, & Silverman, 1962).

Another factor is prior political leanings and attitudes toward the candidates (Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984). In a representative study Fazio and Williams (1986) found high correlations between predebate candidate favorability ratings and postdebate ratings of candidate performance in the 1984 election cycle. In fact, the general conclusion of the political science literature is that perceptions of all political actions are strongly influenced by one's initial leanings (e.g., Kinder, 1998; Bartels, 2002). So while there is a strong relationship between your perception of who won the debate and who you will eventually vote for, you are generally inclined to believe your favored side won.

Media reports are also important. For example, Ranney (1983) and Steeper (1978) documented the effect of news stories on perceptions of President Gerald Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe in the 1976 debates. Ford had said that Eastern Europe was not under the domination of the Soviet Union. While this remark did not hurt Ford immediately after the debate, news coverage convinced people that he had made a serious mistake and he was subsequently perceived to have lost. Media coverage similarly changed an Al Gore debate victory over George W. Bush into a defeat during the 2000 election (Jamieson & Waldman, 2002).

Other research on media commentary continues to underline its importance. Such commentary lessened Bill Clinton's perceived margin of victory (McKinnon, Tedesco, & Kaid, 1993) in the 1992 debates. Similar research on the 1996 debates between Clinton and Republican challenger Bob Dole showed that network commentary raised viewers' assessments of both candidates (McKinnon & Tedesco, 1999). In general, debate research suggests that contextual features—such as media commentary and whether people watch the debates on television or listen to them on the radio—make a substantial difference (Kaid & Bystrom, 1999; Lemert, Elliot, Bernstein, Rosenberg, & Nestvold, 1991; Schroeder, 2000). These findings are consistent with the notion that debate perceptions are inherently somewhat fragile. It does not take much to shift people's opinions.

In the aftermath of the election of 1960, Sidney Kraus argued that the debates mattered whether people watched them or not (1962). A narrative was constructed about Kennedy's cool confidence and command in the first debate, and that story weighed heavily in a close election. What happened in the debate mattered, but the way the public and the media digested and constructed the debate performances was crucial—more crucial, in fact, than

whether a person had actually seen the debate. In light of the subsequent research discussed above, Kraus's comment seems prescient.

Our research explores multiple facets of how people's perceptions of debates are affected by what they learn about others' views. It shows that people can be highly influenced by information that they receive about others' assessments before, during, and after the debate itself. Its focus is on the influence of both other debate viewers and media commentators. In addition, it considers the possible influence of debate moderators and questioners. Our first set of studies considers one of the simplest forms of influence, that in which other people's opinions are made known without any rationale or argument. In these studies, those opinions are revealed during the debates themselves. We find that they produce a great deal of influence, influence that is best characterized as conformity (e.g., McGuire, 1968). Our second set of studies considers how different individuals are affected by media-created expectations. It tests the hypothesis that different kinds of people react differently to messages of varying complexity. Our final set of studies considers how people might be affected by two kinds of "spin"—predebate prediction about relative performance and postdebate assessment of that performance.

## **SIMPLE CONFORMITY AND DEBATE PERCEPTIONS**

Televised debates give audiences an hour or more to assess presidential candidates both by sound and sight as they are confronted with challenging questions. It could be argued that this should give viewers ample opportunity to form strong and coherent impressions about both the show and the actors. Further, it could be argued that—so extensive is the evidence presented in a televised debate—any attempts to influence the opinions of viewers during or after a debate would be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of audio-visual data presented. In fact, given null results in the following experiments, that is precisely what psychologists would have argued. What the following experiments suggested, however, is that debates are highly ambiguous. For both specific events within debates (Experiments 1+2) and global evaluations of debates (Experiments 3+4), our viewers looked to the reactions of both their peers and distant debate audiences when making their assessments.

### **Sound Bites: No One Could Forget When . . .**

As noted above, there are moments in presidential and vice-presidential debates that have passed into debate lore as unforgettable. Even many current high school and college students know something of the Kennedy-Nixon debates, and textbooks on political science, American government, and political communication mention supposedly decisive moments in

debates to illustrate one concept or another. From our perspective, the question of decisive moments is an interesting one. If there are exchanges in debates that are of such clarity in and of themselves, then it is hard to argue that the ambiguity of debates is high.

Yet, a moment may not need to be inherently special to enter into debate lore as pivotal. It could be that instead of *being* critical some moments are *made* critical. Perhaps audience reaction or postdebate interpretation is necessary to turn a one-liner from mundane to pivotal. To examine the degree to which pivotal sound bites stand on their own, two studies were run on Williams College undergraduates using the second presidential debate of 1984 (Fein, Goethals, & Kugler, 2007).

Let us recall briefly the election of 1984. The Republican candidate was President Ronald Reagan and the Democratic candidate was Walter Mondale, a former vice president and senator. Throughout the campaign, Reagan enjoyed a substantial lead (and ultimately won by an impressive margin). There was, however, one dark period for the Reagan campaign. In the first debate, Reagan had an unexpectedly poor showing, appearing confused. Combined with his age, this confusion sparked some second thoughts in the electorate and Mondale's numbers began to climb. In the second debate, exactly two weeks later, Henry Trewhitt, a correspondent for *The Baltimore Sun*, asked Reagan directly about his age.

**Mr. Trewhitt:** Mr. President, I want to raise an issue that I think has been lurking out there for two or three weeks, and cast it specifically in national security terms. You already are the oldest president in history, and some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall, yet that President Kennedy had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuban missile crisis. Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?<sup>1</sup>

This question cut straight to the heart of the resurgent concerns about Reagan's age. Reagan's answer was telling:

**Reagan:** Not at all, Mr. Trewhitt, and I want you to know that also 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 audience erupted in laughter. Mondale, recognizing the mood, joined in. Trewhitt said, "Mr. President, I'd like to head for the fence and try to catch that one before it goes over, but I'll go on to another question."

In many ways, this is the prototypical critical moment. Reagan's response was widely reported and the slight slump disappeared from tracking polls. It appeared that his words were universally received as clever and on topic. Our studies, however, showed that the story was slightly more complicated.



These experiments each had three conditions: an unedited version containing the key sound bite and the audience reaction to it, an edited version in which the sound bite was included but audience and commentator reaction was excluded, and a second edited version lacking the sound bite altogether. If the one-liner stood on its own and participants did not require “help” from the audience to recognize its importance, then it should not make any difference if the audience reaction and Trewhitt’s “home run” comment are deleted. If, on the other hand, audience and commentator reaction were necessary to persuade viewers that the sound bite was important, then taking them out should have the same effect as taking out both the sound bite and the audience and commentator reactions.

The participants in our experiment judged Reagan the winner of the debate in the control condition (with the unedited sound bite). However, they did not believe Reagan performed better than Mondale when the sound bite was included but the audience applause and moderator reaction were excluded. There was a dramatic drop in Reagan’s performance ratings when his comments were not stamped with the audience’s approval. This would seem to indicate that the sound bite did not stand well on its own. When the sound bite was not included at all, Mondale was again seen as doing better in the debate—unsurprising since Reagan’s best lines had been omitted.

Interestingly, only 15 percent of participants in the condition where the reaction had been deleted listed the sound bites as among the highlights of the debate, as opposed to 78 percent of participants in the control condition that included audience applause. In this case, the supposed defining moments had little impact if they were not endorsed by others. In the same way, television sitcoms depend on canned laughter. The jokes themselves do not have the same impact if they are presented without other viewers’ reactions.

From these studies, we learned something very important about how one-liners are perceived. Specifically, we saw that it was not so much the exchange itself but rather how it was perceived by the audience that most influenced how viewers saw it. But many debates do not have such decisive moments. How susceptible to influence are viewers when the debate content is less dramatic and more even?

We conducted two studies investigating that question. One was a simple lab study. Participants came into the lab in small groups to watch a short segment of the same 1984 Reagan-Mondale debate. They were given wireless handheld dials with digital displays of the type commonly used in marketing and persuasion studies. Mirroring a procedure used by CNN in their live coverage of the 1992 debates, participants were told that they should use the dials to track their reactions during the course of the debates (turning them one direction in favor of the Republican candidate and the other direction in

favor of the Democratic candidate) and that a graph showing the average of their group members' reactions would be superimposed over the debate video itself. This way they would have constant feedback letting them know how well each candidate was doing at various points in the debate.

For our study, we ignored the group's actual responses and manipulated the feedback displayed. The "audience" feedback always began at the neutral midpoint and during the course of the segment reached a value that was solidly in either Reagan or Mondale territory. This false feedback had a huge effect on audience perceptions. Participants who saw their "peer's reactions" favor Reagan rated his performance (on 100 point scales) as being 20 points above Mondale's. Participants who thought that their peers favored Mondale said that he outperformed Reagan by 20 points.

Both this study and the sound bite studies can be criticized for being artificial. But our final study, run during the 1992 campaign, had groups of participants watch a presidential debate live in the presence of a few confederates who had been told to cheer subtly for either Bush or Clinton, and jeer the other very quietly but audibly. Participants in the "pro-Bush" room rated Bush's performance far better (and Clinton's far worse) than did participants in the "pro-Clinton" room. On a 100 point scale, Clinton's performance was rated as 51 points higher than Bush's in the "pro-Clinton" group but only 6 points higher in the "pro-Bush" group. None of the participants said that they were influenced by other people's reactions, and most reported that they barely noticed the reactions of the confederates. Interestingly, the confederates themselves were affected by their own behavior. They were more pro-Clinton in the "pro-Clinton" group than in the "pro-Bush" group. This study, using a simple, natural manipulation in the midst of an active campaign cycle shows how powerfully debate perceptions can be shaped by social influence.

## Conclusions

These four studies show that debate perceptions are highly malleable, which suggests in turn that they are very ambiguous. Even when they seem quite clear, they are subject to considerable social influence. Perceptions of even a rather stark and memorable physical reality are shaped by social reality. Specifically, moments in debate history that are later called decisive can be easily cast into oblivion by removing the reactions of the audience. Showing people the reactions of their peers during the course of debates (a feat that is now trivial technologically) *creates* a consensus position. And exposing debate watchers to a biased crowd will dramatically shift their perceptions. In these findings, we have substantial support for the ambiguity of debates based on the extent to which even modest social influence changes debate perceptions.

## TRAIT-FOCUSED SPIN

The next pair of studies (Kugler & Goethals, in press) addresses two new elements in debate perceptions. The first is inspired by Laswell's (1948) classic formulation that the study of persuasion concerns "who says what to whom and with what effect." So we can begin to think about how different audiences are affected by different messages under different conditions. Second, we want to examine a hard case for social influence in debates: candidates who had obviously negative traits.

One individual difference measure from the persuasion literature can be seen as being particularly important in addressing the first question: Need for Cognition (NFC). NFC measures how much a person is intrinsically driven to think, separating "chronic cognizers" from "cognitive misers" (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). It figures prominently in several models of persuasion, including the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986). We proposed that people who are high in NFC, those who are highly motivated to think carefully, would prove resistant to the effects of simple persuasion attempts that ignored candidates' negative qualities. These people would be willing and presumably able to counter-argue against a glib pronouncement favoring one candidate over another, a pronouncement that did not provide any backup. On the other hand, their low NFC counterparts would show the usual cooperative effects in response to simple messages. This finding would be consistent with effects found regarding NFC in priming studies (Petty, 2001).

We are also concerned here with how spinners might devise convincing messages when the candidates they support have obvious negative attributes. Examples include John F. Kennedy's inexperience, Bob Dole's aggressiveness, and George W. Bush's vagueness. In each of these cases, a simple positive spin might be suspect. These candidates had real problems and all of the cheering crowds in the world could only do so much to counter them. And those people a candidate would most need to impress—news reporters, pundits, potential funders—would certainly be paying close attention, emulating the harder to persuade high NFC audiences.

For these sophisticated and involved viewers, we proposed a new approach to pre-debate spin. These individuals might be more influenced by more complex framings that cast specific potentially negative qualities in a favorable light. Such trait-focused spin (TFS) essentially attempts to spin straw into gold. A real-world example of this type of spin can be seen in the work of Jamieson and Waldman (2002) on media framing in the 2000 presidential campaign. They discuss how the media created a narrative that provided an interpretive frame for George W. Bush's performance in the 2000 debates. The issue was Bush's vagueness about specific policies. This

attribute could be seen as a sign of intellectual shallowness, but it could also be portrayed as part of a particular management style. In the summer before the debates, the Bush campaign promoted their candidate as the MBA president, concerned with the big picture and not trivial details. This created a positive frame. When the press later saw Bush's performance in the debates, his vagueness cued memories of his business school background as opposed to doubts about his intelligence.

Chronic cognizers might enjoy the complexity of the counterintuitive interpretations. The elaborate nature of the persuasive message sidesteps their defenses. After trait-focused spin they can say, "Yes, I think he did well, not surprising given his top-down management style." Yet this very advantage could have the reverse effect on cognitive misers. They could easily become lost in the complexity of the message.

We tested these hypotheses in two studies. In the control conditions, participants were given a simple introductory article about the debate they were about to view. In the positive spin conditions, they were given the same article, but with a section inserted saying that the target candidate was favored over his opponent. No real reason was offered for this assertion. There were also trait-focused spin conditions in which a potentially negative trait was described, and then integrated into a positive prediction. In the first case (Dole vs. Mondale, 1976) the trait was Bob Dole's aggressiveness, and in the second case (Bush vs. Dukakis, 1988) the trait was Michael Dukakis's cold, intellectual detachment.

In the first study, then, the goal was to influence perceptions of Senator Bob Dole in his 1976 vice-presidential debate against Senator Walter Mondale. As indicated above, Dole was seen as being very aggressive. Historically, his aggressiveness was very poorly received and, after the election, even he acknowledged that he had gone too far. His performance was such that viewers at the time understood exactly what Mondale was talking about when he referred to Dole's reputation as a "hatchet man." Participants were brought into the lab for a study on perceptions of presidential debates. They were told which debate they would be watching and were given a news article with one of the following headlines: "TV Producer Says Clash May be 'Liveliest of All'" (control); "Senate Watcher: Dole to 'Overwhelm' Mondale" (simple positive spin); and "Senate Watcher: 'Aggressive' Dole to 'Overwhelm' Mondale" (trait description as part of positive message, TFS). The simple positive spin article simply reported that Dole was favored. The trait-focused spin article said that Dole would effectively use his quick wit and sharp invective to overwhelm Mondale. After participants finished watching the selected segment of the debate, in this case the closing third, they were given a questionnaire asking various questions about the debate.

We predicted that high need for cognition participants would not be influenced by the simple positive spin article, but that they would be moved by the trait-focused spin article. In contrast, we expected that low need for cognition participants would be moved by the simple positive spin article, but might find the trait-focused spin article too involved, and might not be influenced by it. All participants (100 percent) in the control condition said that Mondale won the debate. In contrast, those who had been told that Dole would perform well, or that he would do well because he was aggressive, were generally more favorable toward Dole than were control participants. However, there was an interesting difference based on the participants' need for cognition. High NFC participants found simple positive spin unconvincing. Again, none of them thought Dole won. But as predicted, they were positively influenced by the trait-based spin. In that instance, 50 percent thought Dole won. Low NFC participants were more or less equally persuaded by both types of spin. In the simple positive spin condition, 50 percent said Dole won. In the trait-based spin condition, 43 percent said Dole won. Thus the more complex message was slightly—although not significantly—less effective for the low NFC participants.

Study 2 employed largely the same design and procedure. Its main goal was to replicate the results of Study 1, especially the difference based on NFC status, in the context of a different debate and a different trait. The performance selected for this study was that of Governor Michael Dukakis in the second presidential debate of 1988. While the 1988 election was largely unexceptional—if not quite as one-sided as 1984—there were a few memorable exchanges in the second debate. These resulted from a framing that the Republicans had been constructing for some time. In the first debate, when Dukakis seemed to laugh derisively at Bush's momentary confusion, Bush said, "Wouldn't it be nice to be the iceman and never make a mistake." This iceman framing can be seen as having prompted the first question in the second debate, the well-known "Kitty question." Governor Dukakis was asked, "If Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" A difficult question in the best of times, but made worse by Dukakis's cold and analytic answer. Even he later admitted that he had flubbed the response. A later question, like one given to Reagan in 1984, asked him to reflect upon his performance in the previous debate. It alluded to a belief that Dukakis had "won the first debate on intellect, and yet [he] lost it on heart."

Both of these exchanges are reflective of a general problem created by the "iceman" framing. Dukakis had a very analytic style that played poorly with the electorate. Thus in our articles for this study, the overarching trait into which we attempted to assimilate Dukakis's analytical detachment was "intelligent." A generally positive word that undeniably applies to Dukakis,

"intelligent" can also carry with it the air of detachment, intellectualism, and lack of warmth. This captures both the positive and negative aspects of his performance in the debate and throughout the campaign.

Once again articles were drafted for the three categories used in Experiment 1. The results were slightly different in this study. Compared to the control condition, the simple spin condition produced only modest influence for both high and low need for cognition participants. Twenty-five percent of the high NFC participants thought that Dukakis won in the control condition, and 38 percent of them thought he won in the simple spin condition, an increase of 13 percent. The low NFC participants showed a nearly identical increase of 12 percent from 11 percent in the control condition to 23 percent in the simple spin condition. Neither of these represented a statistically significant improvement. However, the trait-focused spin condition was highly effective for the high NFC participants. Fifty-seven percent of them thought that Dukakis won. However, none (zero percent) of the low NFC participants in the trait-focused spin condition thought Dukakis won. The trait-focused spin article talked about both the upsides (he will not get lost in the passions of the moment) and downsides (he is aloof) of Dukakis's intelligence. This message was persuasive to the high NFC participants who can look at issues from both sides. For low NFC participants, all that seemed to matter was that Dukakis was aloof, i.e., cold.

## Conclusions

Presidential candidates have strengths that can be highlighted, but also weaknesses that cannot be hidden. Results from the two studies reported here suggest clear strategies for working with these weaknesses. Both experiments showed that participants who are high in NFC are willing to be persuaded to incorporate specific potentially negative character traits into positive general frames. But what of those debate watchers who are not intensely motivated to think carefully about politics? The results of the 2000 election, where George W. Bush's inarticulacy was early and often framed in terms of his "big picture" approach, suggest that with enough repetition, the electorate as a whole can be brought around to embrace a particular framing. Thus, while trait-focused spin did not work for low NFC participants in our second study, it might be more effective in real campaigns. Also, there is a considerable literature on public opinion, some of which focuses on models of elite-driven attitude assessments (e.g., Kinder, 1998). In these models, involved citizens spread their carefully formed opinions to their less dedicated peers, a kind of water cooler postdebate spin. This downstream spin may be the key for those who are less engaged. The next section investigates a related form of social influence in assessments of presidential debate performance.

## INTERACTIONS OF PREDEBATE AND POSTDEBATE SPIN

While our studies of trait-focused spin (TFS) employed positive appraisals of the competing candidates, such favorable predebate evaluations are probably less common than more modest candidate descriptions from campaign sources who try to set low expectations. For example, prior to the 1992 vice-presidential debate between Dan Quayle and Al Gore (and, memorably, Admiral James Stockdale, running mate of Ross Perot), Republican sources tried to lower expectations for Quayle. They claimed that Al Gore had been educated at elite schools (he was a Harvard graduate) and had lifetime advantages that made it difficult for Quayle to compete on a fair or equal basis. Why is the expectations game played this way?

There are probably two related reasons. First, when a poor performance really is expected, the campaign may try to lower its impact by creating a frame in which it can charitably be understood. In 1992, Republican campaign managers were well aware of Quayle's disappointing vice-presidential debate performance during the 1988 campaign, in which Democrat Lloyd Bentsen leveled Quayle with the well-remembered put-down, "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." Something had to be done. Setting low expectations might help. Low expectation frames can often be understood as a form of negative trait-focused spin. The frame says, our candidate will likely perform poorly, but here is why it should not be taken too seriously. Second, a negative performance expectation creates a low bar over which a candidate may leap, even with a mediocre performance. The hope is that the performance will be enough better than predicted to create a contrast effect (Schwartz & Bless, 1992). That is, the performance may look even better than it was if it is compared to and contrasted with a low expectation.

Creating low performance expectations for debates quite probably extends from the utility of creating low expectations for primary results. Over the years, the expectations game has been played most vigorously in the New Hampshire primary. In 1968, Eugene McCarthy was perceived as the effective "winner" of that primary even though incumbent president Lyndon Johnson got more votes, all write-ins. Though Johnson was not even on the ballot, and he got more votes, he was deemed the loser. McCarthy exceeded expectations. In 1972, George McGovern lost the New Hampshire primary to Edmund Muskie, but did better than expected, and celebrated the result. In 1992, Bill Clinton did better than expected, following the Gennifer Flowers and draft-dodging controversies, and declared himself "The Comeback Kid" even though he lost to Paul Tsongas.

However, an important difference between primaries and debates would seem to render playing the low expectations game perilous in the debate context. In primaries, there is a clear outcome, measured precisely in terms of the

percentage of votes going to each candidate. In debates, as we have argued, the outcome is quite ambiguous. When an outcome is ambiguous, it is generally assimilated to, rather than contrasted with, any expectation that has been created (Schwartz & Bless, 1992). That is, if potential voters are led to expect a candidate to debate poorly, they may be very likely to perceive the candidate's performance just that way. A study by Norton and Goethals (2004) explored precisely this possibility.

Undergraduate research participants watched about half of a 1996 Massachusetts senatorial debate between the incumbent senator, John Kerry, and the incumbent governor, William Weld. Pretests showed that Kerry was clearly perceived as the winner of this portion of the debate. In the study itself, participants watched the same debate segments, with some additions. During the introductions, a supposed TV station political commentator, Jack Harper, reported either "low pitch" (negative) or "high pitch" (positive) dubbed-in messages regarding Kerry's performance. Furthermore, these messages were based on information either from "members of the media" or Kerry aides. In the low pitch version, it was stated that Kerry had been ill and unable to prepare, and was the clear underdog. In the high pitch version, the message stated that Kerry was well-rested and "raring to go," and that he was the clear favorite. The results of the study were quite clear. Kerry's margin of victory was less when participants heard a low pitch for him. Setting expectations low effectively turned Kerry from a winner into a loser.

While creating low expectations prior to an ambiguous performance can lower perceptions of the performance, campaign aides generally do not rest simply on the impact of low initial expectations. Positive postdebate spin is often combined with lowering expectations before the debate to create an opportunity for campaign "spinners" or "framers" to say, in effect, we were very pleasantly surprised at how well our candidate performed. How well does this work?

Not very. A follow-up study addressed this question. The low-pitch, high-spin combination, where campaigns set a low bar, with a negative expectation, and then declare a surprising victory, does not work very well. Observers watched the same video of the Kerry-Weld debate discussed above. This time, not only were predebate pitches included, but also postdebate spin was added. At the end of the actual debate there were a few seconds of televised applause with no comment from the actual broadcasters. In this interval Jack Harper's (the alleged commentator's) postdebate assessment was dubbed in. He reported that either "members of the press" or "the Kerry people" thought that Kerry had won the debate. These reports followed earlier predebate pitches, from either the press or the Kerry campaign, that were either positive or negative. When the positive postdebate spin for Kerry followed the earlier positive pitch, Harper reported that "as expected he



outperformed Governor Weld and gained a clear victory." When the spin followed an earlier negative pitch, Harper reported "he performed better than expected and gained a clear victory."

The result produced by the various combinations of predebate pitches and postdebate spins was quite clear. Kerry's margin of victory grew following the positive postdebate spin, except in one instance. When the postdebate spin was attributed to Kerry aides, following a low pitch by these same aides, Kerry gained nothing. Viewers seemed to think that Kerry's aides lacked credibility and were obviously trying to manipulate the audience. Some data on viewer ratings of the overall quality of the network coverage also suggest their skepticism in this condition. First, coverage ratings were higher when Harper reported the views of the press rather than those of campaign aides. Viewers trust the media more than campaign spinners. Furthermore, the quality of coverage was rated particularly poorly when Harper reported the campaign aides' low-pitch/high-spin combination. They did not believe these attempts at influence, and they preferred that Harper not report them.

In line with this skepticism about campaign spinners, it is interesting that following the 2004 presidential debates between John Kerry and President George Bush, ABC News refused to interview aides from either campaign. They relied instead on their own commentators and instant viewer poll results. Of course, this does not take social influence out of the equation. The findings from all of our experiments suggest that the perceptions of media commentators and the perceptions of other viewers, as conveyed in polls, will have a great impact on those who are tuning in to postdebate coverage. It is not clear whether the media commentators reflect the viewer poll results or vice versa. Either way, the combination is likely to have a powerful influence on those watching the televised coverage.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, our results from three sets of studies show that people's perceptions of debate performances are highly susceptible to social influence. They suggest that debates are inherently ambiguous and that people are open to guidance even when interpreting supposedly crystal clear debate moments. In 2007 Joe Biden had the good sense to respond to the question about his verbosity with brevity, creating a perfect media sound bite. His response actually said very little about his capacity for restraint, just as Reagan's famous age comment was not necessarily indicative of his mental acuity and Lloyd Bentsen's "you're no Jack Kennedy" put-down of Dan Quayle explained nothing about the latter's leadership ability. Yet all of these moments are excellent examples of how the media shapes public perceptions of our quadrennial presidential debates. This shaping is not necessarily—or

even likely—for the good, but understanding its form and the magnitude of its impact is essential, especially if we wish to make debates into something more than an exchange of sound bites.

A recent column in *The New York Times* ridiculed coverage of a 2008 Republican primary debate, lamenting the emphasis on how candidates “came across” at the expense of analyzing the veracity of what the candidates actually said (Krugman, 2007). The single most important lesson from our research is that how a candidate comes across is as much a function of what is said *about* them as what *they* themselves say. If media coverage of debates focuses on the trivial, then so will public evaluations. This is to no one’s benefit.

## NOTES

1. Transcript courtesy of the Commission on Presidential Debates. <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans84c.html>

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