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Teaching the Presidential Debates: Helping Students to Understand and Overcome Biases during Presidential Election Campaigns

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Abstract

In this paper, we propose ideas for teaching presidential debates within the university classroom setting. In particular, we explore methods for helping students to break through partisan and ideological barriers that might inhibit their understanding of and ability to analyze candidates' messages. If debates are to fulfill their original purpose of creating a more informed and responsible electorate, it is first essential that viewers give each nominee a full and fair hearing. We begin our discussion with a brief history of presidential debates, emphasizing both the presentations of the candidates and how those presentations have been distorted by media analysis, particularly the general emphasis on style and trivia over substance. We then address the cognitive filters that all viewers—including students—bring to these events. Next, we introduce several ideas for disarming these filters. Finally, we conclude by addressing the potential of debates to help political science professors create better prepared voters.

Over 67 million Americans watched the first debate between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney as they contested the 2012 United States presidential election. Millions of college students watched along with their fellow citizens as the two candidates addressed such issues as the economy, taxes, unemployment, education, and health care. The next day, in political science classrooms across the nation, young Americans discussed what they had witnessed the night before. While many of these students possessed highly developed cognitive skills, they generally lacked experience and perspective, particularly in evaluating politics and politicians. For most, this was the first national election in which they were eligible to vote. For many, it was the first campaign that they followed closely.

Presidential debates represent an ideal “teaching moment” for political scientists for a variety of reasons. First, given the direct, face-to-face competition between the nominees, debates are unusually compelling events that are likely to generate strong student interest. Second, their ninety-minute time frame makes them easy to “package” as an instructional module. Third, debates provide significant substantive information on a variety of contemporary political topics, allowing for a broader discussion of U.S. public policy. Finally, they can effectively be used to illustrate lessons about partisanship, persuasion, and attitude reinforcement.

Nevertheless, anyone who has taught American Government at any level understands that most students enter each election season with well-formed biases that

influence how, and sometimes whether, they consume information about politics and politicians. Cognitive consistency theory reminds us that people tend to be most comfortable with messages that conform to their pre-existing biases and will often tune out dissonant information (Festinger, 1957). While it is obviously not the instructor's job to change students' ideological or partisan preferences, it is her responsibility to help them understand how those biases operate and what distortions they create in analyzing, among other things, presidential debates.

In this paper, we propose ideas for teaching presidential debates within the classroom setting. In particular, we explore methods for helping students to break through partisan and ideological barriers that might inhibit their understandings of and abilities to analyze candidates' messages. If debates are to fulfill their original purpose of creating a more informed and responsible electorate, it is first essential that viewers give each nominee a full and fair hearing.

We begin our discussion with a brief history of presidential debates, emphasizing both the presentations of the candidates and how those presentations have been distorted by media analysis, particularly the general emphasis on style and trivia over substance. We then address the cognitive filters that all viewers—including students—bring to these events. Next, we introduce several ideas for disarming these filters. Finally, we conclude by addressing the potential of debates to help political science professors create better prepared voters.

Issues, Images, and the History of Debates

The supposed purpose of presidential debates is to give voters an opportunity to hear where candidates stand on the issues and, ultimately, to help voters make a decision about whom they will vote for in November. In this way, debates are

intended to help a relatively uneducated electorate make more informed choices at the ballot box. Debates offer the voter an opportunity to compare and contrast the candidates on a variety of topics.

Before the advent of radio and television, debates did not play much of a role in presidential campaigns. Lincoln and Douglas debated seven times in 1858 while competing for a U.S. Senate seat in Illinois, but this was before both ran in the historic presidential election in 1860. Wendell Willkie challenged Franklin D. Roosevelt to debate in 1940, but Roosevelt declined, not wanting to give Willkie a platform from which to challenge the president on fundamental issues. Roosevelt again declined to debate his Republican opponent (this time, Thomas Dewey) in 1944 (Jordan, 2011).

Interestingly, Dewey participated in the first presidential debate held during the primary season, squaring off against Governor Harold Stassen, his rival for the Republican nomination in 1948. The Dewey-Stassen radio debate, which was limited to a single topic (whether or not the U.S. Communist Party should be outlawed), lasted an hour and was broadcast to some 40-80 million Americans (Lanoué & Schrott, 1991). The Democrats' first primary season debate came in 1956, when former Governor Adlai Stevenson debated Senator Estes Kefauver for their party's nomination. As a pre-cursor to the modern debate, Stevenson and Kefauver made opening and closing statements, and fielded questions from a moderator (Trent, 2011).

With the few exceptions noted above, most electioneering prior to 1960 took place in newspapers or was orchestrated behind closed doors, where party elites selected their nominees and the party faithful made the case for their candidates. Indeed, well into the twentieth century, presidential nominees rarely made direct public appeals

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or overtly solicited public support (Ellis & Dedrick, 1997). There was certainly no formal or informal mechanism in place to compel presidential candidates to debate prior to 1960. That would change, however, with the advent of the first televised presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960.

Since that time, debates have played a significant role in the folklore surrounding American electoral politics. The 1960 election produced the idea that style trumps substance, as a plurality of viewers concluded that a calm, sharply dressed Kennedy had outperformed a sweating, shiftily-eyed Nixon. In 1976, President Ford committed a celebrated Cold War-era gaffe when he said that he did not believe Eastern Europe was under Soviet control. Four years later, former California Governor Ronald Reagan, a week before the election, supposedly devastated incumbent Jimmy Carter by asking Americans, “[a]re you better off than you were four years ago”. In 1984, Reagan’s lackluster performance in his first debate against former Vice President Walter Mondale raised questions about the impact of the incumbent’s advanced age. In their second debate, however, Reagan put such concerns to rest by jokingly remarking that he would not “use my opponent’s (Mondale’s) youth and inexperience against him”. Eight years later, President George H.W. Bush took criticism for looking at his watch not once, but twice, during his Town Hall debate with Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton and billionaire Ross Perot. Finally, in 2000, Vice President Al Gore came off in post-debate media reports as buffoonish, as he sighed, rolled his eyes, and even violated Governor George W. Bush’s personal space during their three debates in 2000 (Lanoue & Schrott, 1991; Schroeder, 2000).

Because these events have been recounted so often—and because each one

appeared to presage the outcome of the election—it has become common for journalists and pundits alike to trumpet the supposedly game changing impact of U.S. presidential debates. The empirical record, however, suggests a somewhat different picture. Political scientists conducted numerous quasi-experimental and cross-sectional studies during each of the first two debate series in 1960 and 1976. For the most part, they uncovered only limited opinion change (Katz & Feldman, 1962; Sears & Chaffee, 1979). Instead, the most significant impact of debates appeared to be the reinforcement of voters’ already existing preferences. Scholars found almost no evidence that these debates actually affected election outcomes.

Since 1976, a number of studies have produced at least some evidence of debate effects (Holbrook, 1996). At this point, a consensus has emerged that, although debates can “move the needle” only about three or four points at most, such an effect can be critical in a close race. It is quite possible, therefore, that debates did, in fact, affect the outcomes of narrowly contested elections in 1980 (Lanoue, 1992) and 2000 (Hillygus & Jackman, 2003). Nevertheless, as presented below, viewers’ assessments of debates remain heavily influenced by partisan loyalties and pre-existing candidate preferences, and we should expect that our students will experience debates through those same filters.

Partisanship, Ideological Anchors, and Attitude Change

When the Kennedy-Nixon debates were announced in 1960, many observers assumed that the power of a new medium would make these events both irresistible and highly influential. As it turned out, those who made this assumption were only half right. The 1960 presidential debates received ratings that were unprecedented in

the annals of political television. Over 66 million Americans watched at least one of the debates, and a large percentage watched all four (Minow & Sloan, 1987). The electoral impact of the debates, however, fell well short of expectations. Summarizing the empirical research, Katz and Feldman (1962) ask, “Did the debates affect the final outcome?” Their response: “Apart from strengthening Democratic [voters’] convictions about their candidate, it is very difficult to say conclusively” (p. 211).

The problem, Carter (1962) notes, is very simple. “All too frequently,” he reports, “[and] to the detriment of public affairs discussions, people tend to hear and see only what they want to see” (emphasis ours) (p. 259). Lang and Lang (1962) concur, noting that pre-debate Kennedy supporters were far more likely to report that JFK had won the debates than were pre-debate Nixon backers. Indeed, this effect has persisted throughout the entire fifty-year history of presidential debates. Writing over three decades after Lang and Lang, Holbrook (1996) similarly notes that “there is a strong tendency for people to think that their preferred candidate won the debate” (p. 199). (See, also, Sears & Chaffee (1979) and Lanoue and Schrott (1991) for additional information).

To be sure, not all debate watchers are bound by their partisan and ideological predispositions. Further, some debate performances are so compelling (for better or worse) that they succeed—at least temporarily—in doing more than simply reinforcing prior attitudes (Schrott & Lanoue, 2008). Nevertheless, by all accounts, even the most influential debates move public opinion by only a small amount (Lanoue & Schrott, 1991). Instead, as noted above, the dominant impact of debates is either reinforcement of prior preferences or no effect at all.

Because we are interested in debates as a teaching moment, we are particularly drawn to Carter’s (1962) assertion that selective perception works “to the detriment of public affairs discussions”. Every political science teacher has had the experience of bringing up a “hot button” policy topic (abortion, perhaps, or gun control) about which almost everyone has an opinion. Under these circumstances, class discussion is often flaccid, at best, or confrontational, at worst. It is difficult to persuade students to think beyond deeply held positions and, as a result, no real learning takes place.

Presidential elections represent a rare moment when students are truly engaged with politics and the political process, but they also occur at a time when emotions may run high and minds may be closed to opposing viewpoints. If we hope to use debates to enhance student learning, then we must attempt to overcome these biases. If we cannot do so, then we have squandered an opportunity to enhance students’ critical thinking and evaluative skills.

In order to overcome students’ biases, we must first understand how such biases are formed and organized. While there is a rich and varied literature in public opinion, political attitudes, and persuasion, we concentrate broadly on two theories in the discussion below. We consider these theories particularly relevant to analyzing the cognitive filters that mediate viewers’ reactions to presidential debates.

Cognitive consistency theory posits that most people will experience anxiety when their beliefs and preferences are incongruent. The best known of these theories is Leon Festinger’s (1957) concept of “cognitive dissonance”. According to Festinger, when people are faced with information that contradicts previously held views, they are highly motivated to return to a state of consonance. This is generally accomplished in one of three ways. The

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person either a) decreases the importance of the dissonant element; b) increases the importance of consonant elements; or c) changes her opinions altogether (the latter option, of course, being the least common result).

In the case of debates, dissonance is created when viewers who may have intentionally tuned out speeches and advertisements by the “opposing” candidate are suddenly faced with a situation in which exposure to his or her message is unavoidable. During a debate, the opposing nominee appeals directly to the viewer, with no filters or editing. Thus, a Democratic voter may hear the GOP nominee making plausible arguments for policies that the voter had previously rejected. The Republican viewer may absorb the image of a confident Democratic candidate arguing for solutions the viewer had once considered unthinkable. Cognitive dissonance theory assumes that debate watchers will attempt to resolve the anxiety created by these situations.

As political scientists, we cannot, of course, directly observe a person reconciling whatever dissonance he feels upon watching a presidential debate. But we can measure that process indirectly in a number of ways. First, as noted above, we can see it in the very different responses of Democratic and Republican loyalists on the question of who “won” each debate. In general, we will likely find, as scholars have since 1960, that “individuals with a party affiliation...declare their own candidate the winner far more than they choose the opposition candidate” (Katz & Feldman, 1962, p. 198).

Second, we can offer follow-up questions asking which moments during the evening were considered to be most memorable. All things being equal, we will likely find that Democratic and Republican viewers will also differ as to which debating moments were most critical. Here, too,

viewers are likely to cite moments that cast their preferred nominee in the best possible light.

The second theoretical perspective that deserves our attention is social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1980). According to this theory, attitudes have both a cognitive and an emotional component. Further, all of us have an “attitude dimension” which allows us to order our preferences in any given situation into three categories: the latitude of acceptance, where attitude change is likely; the latitude of non-commitment, where it is possible; and the latitude of rejection, where it is very unlikely.

Social judgment theory also posits that certain attitudes serve as “anchors” against which information is judged. The importance of those anchors helps to determine the size of each “latitude” and, thus, the likelihood of attitude change. Similarly, receptivity to persuasive messages is affected by the degree of ego involvement a person has with a given attitude object. Someone who has spoken out against abortion, for example, may be less susceptible to attitude change than someone whose views are identical, but who has not publicly shared those views with others.

Since we are not concerned with changing students’ minds, we do not care whether or not they find either debating candidate to be persuasive. We do, however, hope that students will use debates to acquire more accurate information about the candidates and their views on important matters of public policy. Thus, we must be concerned with the possible tendency of students with strong attitude anchors and significant ego involvement to tune out certain messages altogether. In particular, we should construct our lessons so that students are not encouraged to take public stands on the candidates and issues—at least

in the classroom—prior to viewing the debates.

Using Debates to Promote Student Learning and Critical Thinking

Except for the exceptional case of 1980, in which the lone Reagan-Carter debate occurred just one week before Election Day, most presidential debates take place between late September and mid-October. For classes that begin before Labor Day, this provides plenty of time for introductory lessons to help prepare students for the debates themselves, and to discuss the biases and filters inherent in processing political information.

Assuming that the first debate occurs around September 25, we would propose the following lessons for the initial weeks of the semester:

WEEK 1: Introduction to theories of voting behavior and public opinion. Concentrate specifically on the Sociological Model (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954), which posits that voting decisions are largely “pre-determined” by citizens’ group identifications and affiliations; the Socio-Psychological Model (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960), which emphasizes the impact of short-term and long-term effects on voting behavior, and especially the central role played by party identification; the Rational Choice Model (Downs, 1957), which conceptualizes voters as consumers attempting to make a decision that best corresponds to their own self-interest; and the Retrospective Voting model (Fiorina, 1981), which casts elections as referenda on the record of the party in power.

WEEK 2: A history of presidential debates, including both the anecdotal

observations of journalists and the empirical findings of political scientists. Much of the material cited earlier would be relevant to this task. In addition, students can watch many of the most celebrated debating moments on YouTube or other online sources.

WEEK 3: A brief discussion of theories of attitude change and mass media effects (among the better sources on this topic are Graber, 2010 and Iyengar, 2011). Lectures and class discussions should emphasize how selective perception and selective retention limit the impact of media messages on viewers, while also highlighting those instances in which transformative media effects have been found. Students should be asked to think about their own biases and how they affect their willingness and ability to entertain opposing arguments. They should further be asked to reflect on the differences between style and substance in media presentations. Prior to the end of this lesson, students should be asked to fill out a survey regarding their own partisan and candidate preferences, as well as their knowledge about the candidates’ stands on various issues (this will, of course, need to be done in consultation with the university’s institutional review board or human subjects committee).

Given the typical university schedule—at least in semester-based systems—the first presidential debate will likely occur right around the fourth week of classes. It is probably best to ask students to view each debate as a group, and not individually. It is well known that viewers at home typically watch debates with friends or family, and that the communication that takes place during the event tends to limit the attention

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given to the candidates and to exacerbate biases that already exist (since it is likely that one's friends and family share similar political views) (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). While it is true that the classroom provides an artificial environment for debate watching, it also gives the instructor a chance to control the circumstances under which the debates are being consumed.

Assuming that there are at least two presidential debates, students can be given multiple opportunities to explore their own biases and their own reactions to the style and substance of these events. Given a class of at least twenty students, participants can be divided into the following categories:

1. **Pro-Bias**—these are students who will be asked after the debate to make the argument that their most preferred candidate—based on the pre-debate questionnaire—was the debate winner.
2. **Anti-Bias**—these are students who will be asked after the debate to make the argument that their *least* preferred candidate won the debate.

After these groups have been selected, one more split will take place. Half of the students in each group will watch the debate on television, while the other half will listen to it on the radio. Presumably, this will provide the chance to assess the effects of candidate appearance, body language, and other non-verbal cues on viewers' evaluations.

After the first debate, the students in the Pro-Bias and Anti-Bias groups will make short presentations describing why "their" candidate won the debate. Students will subsequently fill out another questionnaire, which will ask them to assess the debate performance of each of the candidates (they will be told to make these evaluations

without regard to whether they were in the Pro-Bias or Anti-Bias group). In addition, the survey will once again include the battery of questions from the pre-test asking students to identify the candidates' stands on several issues.

When the second debate occurs, all roles will be reversed (i.e., Pro-Bias students will become Anti-Bias students, and vice versa; previous radio listeners will view the second debate on television, and previous TV viewers will listen to it on radio). Should a third presidential debate and a vice presidential debate also occur, every student in the course will have the opportunity to experience each of the four groups (Pro-Bias/Radio, Pro-Bias/TV, Anti-Bias/Radio, Anti-Bias TV). Presentations will take place and questionnaires will be filled out after each debate.

At the end of the debate series, the instructor will analyze the various questionnaires, provide results to the students, and lead a discussion of the following questions:

1. Did people react differently to the debates on TV and radio, and what does that tell us, if anything, about the impact of style and substance on debate evaluations?
2. As each debate occurred, were students able to form a more accurate view of the candidates' actual positions on the issues?
3. Did the requirement that some students prepare arguments in favor of their least preferred candidate (the Anti-Bias group) force them to listen more carefully to what that candidate had to say? Were these students more likely than their counterparts to give their least preferred candidate higher marks on his or her debate performance? Further, were they

- better able to identify accurately that candidate's positions on the issues?
4. Did the debates cause any change in students' voting intentions?
 5. What conclusions can be drawn from this study about the impact and limits of presidential debates?

While the data from the questionnaires will provide a starting point for discussing the issues presented during the first three weeks of class, students should also be invited to speak impressionistically about the debates themselves, the media coverage of debates, and the broader implications of these events for democratic theory. After the election, follow-up conversations should take place regarding any conclusions that can be tentatively drawn about the impact of debates on the final election outcome. This would, of course, be an ideal time to remind students about the differences between anecdotal and empirical evidence, as well as the limitations of the quasi-experimental design used in class.

In terms of learning objectives, this exercise should satisfy several outcomes:

1. Students should understand basic theories of U.S. voting behavior; the history of presidential debates; and the basics of cognitive consistency theory.
2. Students should demonstrate critical thinking skills by analyzing the impact of their own predispositions on their use of debates and other political media.
3. Students should distinguish between anecdotal and empirical data, and understand the limitations of each.
4. Students should acquire accurate information about important issues of public policy and the platforms of the political parties and their candidates.

5. Students should be able synthesize the literature on voting behavior, mass media and public opinion, and attitude change.
6. Students should become more informed and aware voters.

Conclusion

Debate performances are said to be windows into the soul, and they can be used as a teachable moment if students will look beyond the political theater that accompanies them and take account of the distorting impact of their own personal biases. One of the most important purposes of teaching political science is to provide students with the skills to think critically about political information and competing political messages. This can only occur if they are armed with the information necessary to understand the filters that might cloud their own perceptions.

It should be pointed out emphatically that the instructor in this exercise must remain neutral on both candidate and issue preferences. If she is seen by her students to be pushing an agenda, all of her efforts will be undermined. The goal of this project is not to persuade students either to maintain or to reject their pre-existing biases. Rather, the purpose is to provide them with the tools to analyze information clearly and more dispassionately.

This project is well suited to a variety of courses. For an introductory American Government course, it would be necessary for the instructor to re-configure his syllabus so that the voting and elections lessons occur at the beginning of the semester. For advanced courses in elections, public opinion, or mass media and politics, the entire course might be organized around the debates and the presidential election. Even graduate courses in political behavior might benefit from students' "first hand"

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experience with their own role as consumers of political information.

Presidential debates happen only once every four years, so instructors should be prepared to take maximum advantage when they occur. Debates can be a highly effective vehicle for bringing to life important lessons about the study of political science. Further, they can provide a rare opportunity for students to strengthen their own abilities to think critically about parties and candidates. Finally, they can, if approached properly, fulfill their original, essential goal: to help create better, more informed citizens.

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