

Truth and Context in the 2012 Presidential Debates

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Abstract

Today's modern age has led to a plethora of information available at the fingertips of all voters. During the 2012 presidential election cycle and specifically, during the three presidential debates that occurred in the fall, candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney spewed facts and political rhetoric, often seemingly with little regard for the truth or context of those facts. An overabundance of information available to today's voters could not help them to separate the truth from the lies told by the candidates, especially as they seemed far more interested by buzz-worthy moments and personal digs than actual facts. Through media analysis of three presidential debates and three surveys, this study found out that presidential debates are tools to reinforce old messages rather than convey new ones.

I. Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, the televised debates that precede presidential elections have become a staple of the campaign season. In what has become traditional debate format, there is little room for live fact-checking on stage and many moderators neglect to challenge candidates in their responses, so media pick up the slack, both during and after, fact-checking and providing background and context on statements made within the debates. Without such context, the average viewer may have little to no concept of how the given fact or statistic actually fits in to the larger policy, economic or social issue and is left only with the perception the candidate gave, rather than the complete picture. This paper sought to prove that in the widening gap between conservatives and liberals in the United States, 2012 candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney resorted to using facts and figures at will, often incorrectly or out of context, in an attempt to win voter favor and capitalize on polarizing viewpoints.

II. Literature Review

In the 1960 election season, the United States was introduced to a new, radical campaign tool: a televised debate between the presidential candidates from the nation's main political parties.¹ The importance of the introduction of this highly visual medium as a critical tool in the presidential race was affirmed when next-day polling of the first televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy concluded that those who had listened to the debate on the radio thought Nixon had won, while those that had watched considered

1 David S. Birdsell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

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Kennedy the victor.²

Since the 1960 debate, eleven general campaigns in the United States have included televised debates.³ Rhetorical scholar J. Jeffery Auer identified six major characteristics of every debate: “1) a confrontation, 2) in equal and adequate time, 3) of matched contestants, 4) on a stated proposition, 5) to gain an audience decision” and 6) rule governance.”⁴ The debates offer a unique opportunity to see the candidates side by side on an even playing field, for an extended period of time (90 minutes is the traditional length) and with the opportunity for more spontaneous statements and interaction (as opposed to scripted, rehearsed speeches and interviews).⁵

Some scholars argue the debates play an important role in the election process. Debates can assist undecided voters in making decisions, prevent possible partisan ship-jumpers from voting for the other party, cause increased turnout on Election Day and most basically, provide any and all voters with more information, regardless of whether they pick their candidate based partly or solely on the debate at all.⁶ But still, others point to studies that suggest the presidential debates have had very little effect on the ultimate election result; the candidate leading at the time surrounding the debate goes on to win.⁷

In other words, there have been no significant occurrences of “game-changers” (race upsets) as a result of debates, a phrase so often used by modern media to describe debate performances. While the debates are popular television events and they do teach new information, that new information is unlikely to change the minds of any viewers.⁸ When talking about truth and lies, in some cases, as in an 1976 debate between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, the viewing audience is incapable of even noticing when a candidate is making a gaffe, or incorrect statement, until the news media bring it to their attention. In the 1976 debate, Ford famously said there was no Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe, clearly an incorrect statement.⁹ However, despite this egregious error, there was no huge flip-flop in polling numbers and the downward slide of Carter continued at the same pace it had before the debate.¹⁰

By looking at studies of past presidential debates, it can be seen that the activities that occur during televised debates are predictable, and while many argue, can be significant, no televised debate in modern history has proved to be a “game-changer” in the trend of the election. Before the first presidential debates of 2012, columnist Peggy Noonan said, “It is true that the debate has the potential to alter the dynamic of the election. A good or great one, followed up by an improved, more serious campaign, could make everything new again. A bad one would do damage indeed.”¹¹ Noonan was echoing the sentiments of Benoit and his co-authors,¹² although this paper would prove that the debates really turned out as Sides concluded,¹³ having very little impact on the ultimate outcome of the election.

2 Sidney Kraus, “Winners of the First 1960 Televised Presidential Debate Between Kennedy and Nixon,” *Journal of Communication* 46, no. 4 (1996, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1996.tb01507.x/abstract>).

3 William Benoit, et al., “A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates,” *Communication Monographs* 70, no. 4 (2003), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0363775032000179133>.

4 *Presidential Debates*, 10.

5 “A meta-analysis,” 336.

6 *Ibid.*

7 John Sides, “Do Presidential Debates Really Matter?” *Washington Monthly*, September/October 2012, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/septemberoctober_2012/ten_miles_square/do_presidential_debates_really039413.php (October 21, 2012).

8 *Ibid.*

9 M.J. Stephy, “Top 10 Debate Flubs: Gerald Ford, 1976,” *Time*, June 13, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2077515_2077516_2077513,00.html (October 21, 2012).

10 “Do Presidential Debates Really Matter?”

11 Peggy Noonan, “2012 Debates: This is it, Mitt,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443916104578022811751382342.html> (November 15, 2012).

12 “A meta-analysis,” 336.

13 “Do Presidential Debates Really Matter?”

III. Methods

Two main methods were used to gather information for this paper. The first method used was a combination of media and debate analysis. Media outlets (both television, print and online) focused on certain points in the debate where the candidates told lies or gave facts out of context. By looking at these facts and their own context within the debate transcripts, a more comprehensive framework can be found with which to analyze these moments. In other words, topics specified by media outlets indicate what moments within the debate are worth closer examination.

The second was the use of exit surveys at three debate-watching events at Elon University. At each of these events, which were co-hosted by College Republicans, College Democrats and the Political Forum, a nonpartisan group, all students were invited to come and watch the televised debate in a common space on campus. At the conclusion of each of the debates, the attending students were asked to complete a two-page survey that contained a variety of questions about each of the candidates' performance and their perception of the lies told or facts given out of context. However, it should be noted that there were inherent problems with the results of this method. The respondents and thereby, results, were very skewed to the Democratic Party and Obama. But, despite this flaw, there are still a few interesting conclusions to be drawn.

IV. Debate and Media Analysis

Debate 1: October 3, 2012

The first debate took place at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado. It was moderated by Jim Lehrer of PBS's *NewsHour* and was intended to consist of six individual segments on domestic policy. Instead, the segments merged into one and Lehrer struggled to get a word in edgewise, let alone challenge any affirmation made by either candidate.

FactCheck.Org, a project by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, said both candidates uttered "exaggerations and false claims" in their first meeting.¹⁴ Much of the first debate was focused on the economy, or the candidates managed to bring the thread of conversation back to the economy. In even his opening statement, Barack Obama began with facts on the economy, stating that five million jobs had been added to the private sector in the past 30 months.¹⁵ While that fact may be true as stated by preliminary revisions of a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it is the first example of a statement removed from context, in this case, historical perspective. In the recovery from the 2001 downturn, during George W. Bush's presidency, five million jobs were added in the 30 months following the lowest point of that economic slump, just like the recovery from 2008. The two economic downturns before 2001, however, saw faster recovery than did the '01 and '08 events, making both Bush and Obama's numbers off historic pace.¹⁶ Obama then told an outright lie about Republican candidate Mitt Romney's tax plan, which he said called for a \$5 trillion tax cut.¹⁷ While Romney has proposed cutting numerous taxes and extending the Bush tax cuts, the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center estimated this would only result in a \$480 billion cut in the year 2015. The figure Obama gave was an extrapolation of the cut over ten years, not just in one. Romney also said he wanted to broaden the tax base, which could make up for that lost revenue.¹⁸ The use of this extrapolation is an ideal example of the use of context as manipulation. By using this much larger sum of \$5 trillion, Obama sought to paint Romney as an irresponsible budgeter and someone who would greatly increase the

14 "Dubious Denver Debate Declarations," *FactCheck.Org*, October 4, 2012, <http://factcheck.org/2012/10/dubious-denver-debate-declarations/> (November 15, 2012).

15 "2012 presidential debate: President Obama and Mitt Romney's remarks in Denver on Oct. 3," *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/2012-presidential-debate-president-obama-and-mitt-romneys-remarks-in-denver-on-oct-3-running-transcript/2012/10/03/24d6eb6e-0d91-11e2-bd1a-b868e65d57eb_story.html, (November 15, 2012).

16 Paul Davidson, et al., "Debate fact check: 2nd look at taxes, job gains," *USA TODAY*, October 4, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2012/10/03/fact-checking-the-debate/1612241/>, (November 15, 2012).

17 "2012 presidential debate."

18 "Dubious Denver Debate Declarations."

country's deficit.

On the other side of the stage, Romney told an outright lie when he said Obama had doubled the deficit during his time in office. This is not true. The fiscal year of 2009 actually began in October 2008, when Bush was still president. The Congressional Budget Office had already estimated that the deficit for 2009 would top \$1.2 billion, before Obama was even elected or took office. To the uneducated observer, it would appear that the dates indicate the deficit's increase took place under Obama's tenure, but in fact, it hardly did at all.¹⁹ Romney also repeated a false claim that he said several times throughout the campaign. He said Obama's health care law cuts \$716 billion from Medicare. This is unsubstantiated. The health care law cuts payments to health care providers and insurers; it doesn't take funds from Medicare recipients. *USA TODAY's* fact checking team pointed out another curious point about that false statement: Romney's vice-presidential candidate actually did propose a \$716 billion cut to Medicare recipients in his 2012 budget proposal. By using this false \$716 billion figure as an attack without mentioning that his running mate proposed a real cut of the same magnitude indicates Romney was relying on the average viewer and voter to be unfamiliar with Washington politics and will latch on to the "Obama will de-fund healthcare for senior citizens" concept, something that is untrue.²⁰

The candidates exchanged various other jabs throughout the night, on energy, health care and several other elements of the economy including tax cuts for the wealthy, a main point of contention throughout the campaign. Polling by both CNN and CBS right after the conclusion of the debate showed that the majority of debate-watchers thought Romney "won," by a nearly 3-to-1 margin in CNN's study²¹ and 2-to-1 margin in CBS's.²²

Debate 2: October 16, 2012

Nearly two full weeks after the first debate, CNN's Candy Crowley moderated the second in Hempstead, New York, at Hofstra University. This one was "town hall style," quite different from the first as it was attended by a group of undecided voters, all of whom had come up with their own questions to ask of Obama and Romney. Crowley and her team selected the questions, which the voters themselves asked. Crowley provided some, but not much, direction beyond that. This debate was also much different than the ones that came before or after because the candidates were allowed to stand while giving responses, and move about the small stage, creating a far more hostile air.

It was also in the second debate that Romney offered a third category to the truth and context classification: reversals of previous statements. Romney offered up several statements that could be declared lies if held up against previous assertions.

Like the first debate, many of the challengeable statements made by both candidates came back to the economy, or some facet of it. In the first question posed by one of the audience members, Romney stated that he wanted to keep the nation's federal Pell Grant program "growing."²³ Previously, Romney had called the program "unsustainable." His running mate, Paul Ryan, again, had called for massive cuts to the program.²⁴ Romney had a similar reversal of opinion when he stated he wouldn't cut taxes for the wealthy. What Romney probably meant was that he wouldn't cut taxes for "just" the wealthy, since he called for cuts for all. Romney also gave incorrect facts about the number of women who had lost their jobs since Obama took office (it's only 93,000 as factored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, not Romney's stated 580,000).²⁵

Obama had a similar number of fact gaffes, mostly when discussing his opponent's position on issues

19 Ibid.

20 Davidson, et al.

21 "CNN Poll: Most watchers say Romney debate winner," *CNN*, October 3, 2012, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/03/cnn-poll-romney-wins-debate-by-big-margin/>, November 15, 2012.

22 "CBS News Instant Poll: Romney wins first presidential debate," *CBS News*, October 3, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7424218n>, November 15, 2012.

23 "Transcript and Audio: Second Presidential Debate," *NPR*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/16/163050988/transcript-obama-romney-2nd-presidential-debate>, November 15, 2012.

24 Michael Stratford, "In Debate, Romney Voices Support for Expanding Pell Grant," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 17, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/decision/2012/10/17/in-debate-romney-voices-support-for-expanding-pell-grant-program/>

25 "FactChecking the Hofstra Debate," *FactCheck.Org*, October 17, 2012, <http://factcheck.org/2012/10/fact-checking-the-hofstra-debate/>, November 15, 2012.

like immigration and new energy. He incorrectly stated that Romney called Arizona's immigration law a "model" for the nation and that Romney said jobs in the wind industry were "imaginary."²⁶ In both cases, Obama was manipulating quotes made by Romney on those topics. He had indeed called a part of Arizona's immigration law a "model," but just a part.²⁷ Romney had also not called jobs in wind energy "imaginary," but had said Obama had a vision of an "imaginary world where government-subsidized windmills and solar panels could power the economy."²⁸

But the largest fact-check of the night occurred on stage when Obama publicly challenged a statement made by Romney and was then backed up by moderator Crowley, resulting in audible applause from the audience, something that was not supposed to happen. Romney thought he was catching the president in a lie, challenging him about his debate statement that he called the attacks on the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya an "act of terror," the day after the event in a speech in the Rose Garden of the White House.

"I want to make sure we get that for the record, because it took the president 14 days before he called the attack in Benghazi an act of terror," Romney said, to which Obama replied, "Get the transcript."²⁹

The overall nature of the debate was more offensive as opposed to defensive than the first. Both candidates seemed to be on the attack. There was a reversal in the polling numbers on which candidate "won," although there was a far narrower margin between the two. In both the CNN³⁰ and CBS News³¹ post-debate poll, Obama beat Romney by seven points.

Debate 3: October 22, 2012

Just six days after the Hofstra debate, Bob Schieffer of CBS's *Face the Nation*, moderated the final debate at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. Although it was divided into six segments like the first debate, this one was on the topic of foreign policy, although it sometimes veered off track.

This was also the first debate in which one of the candidates (Obama) got truly catty and seemed to be stepping outside of the bounds of respectful debate discourse. The first occurrence happened when Romney said the United States Navy had less active ships than any time since 1917. This is a lie. According to the Naval History and Heritage Command, the number of active duty ships hit at all-time low since the 19th century in 2007 under Bush's second term, when just 278 vessels were active. There are now 285 active vessels (2011 figure).³² But in response to this claim, Obama retorted:

Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military's changed. We have these things called aircraft carriers, where planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines. And so the question is not a game of Battleship, where we're counting slips. It's what are our capabilities.³³

Obama also had a sarcastic comment about statements Romney made on Russia several months before the debates.

Throughout the debate, most of Obama's misrepresentations were about Romney's positions, not just on foreign policy, but also on education and health care, despite the intended focus of the debate. A verbal altercation about Romney's position on bailing out the American auto industry occurred as Obama said Romney didn't support giving funds to these companies.³⁴ Romney insisted that he did not support letting the auto in-

26 Ibid.

27 Paul Davidson, et al, "Debate fact check: 2nd look at taxes, job gains," *USA TODAY*, October 4, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2012/10/03/fact-checking-the-debate/1612241/>, (November 15, 2012).

28 "FactChecking the Hofstra Debate."

29 "Transcript and Audio: Second Presidential Debate."

30 "Poll: CNN Poll: Who won the second presidential debate?" *CNN*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/POLITICS/pollingcenter/polls/3274>, (November 15, 2012).

31 "Poll: Obama edges Romney in second presidential debate," *CBS News*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50133279n>, (November 15, 2012).

32 "U.S. Navy Active Ship Force Levels, 1886-present," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, June 10, 2011, <http://www.history.navy.mil/branches/org9-4.htm#2000>, (November 15, 2012).

33 "Transcript: Presidential debate, Oct. 22, 2012 (text, video)," *Politico*, October 22, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1012/82712.html>, (November 15, 2012).

34 "Transcript: Presidential debate."

dustry go bankrupt, but his own words are in direct contrast to that fact. In a November 18, 2008 op-ed piece in the *New York Times* titled "Let Detroit Go Bankrupt," Romney said "If General Motors, Ford and Chrysler get the bailout that their chief executives asked for yesterday, you can kiss the American automotive industry goodbye."³⁵ However, it is clear that Romney supported federal loan guarantees for car companies.³⁶

On education, Romney restated a fact he commonly brought up throughout the campaign that students in Massachusetts were very highly ranked during his governorship. While this is true, these rankings were just as high before Romney took office and remained there after he left the governorship, an important point of context he left out.³⁷ Obama also had a dramatic out-of-context fact, saying that unemployment among veterans of the United States military is lower than that of the general population. While this may be true, Obama neglected to mention that this doesn't include veterans of wars started since 2003, Iraq and Afghanistan. They actually have an unemployment rate that is higher than that of the general population and peaked at 15.2 percent during Obama's first term.³⁸

The third and final debate had the most on-stage fact checking between the two candidates of all three matchups, and the margins of victory were even wider than the second debate. The CBS post-debate poll showed that Obama "won" the debate 2 to 1.³⁹ The CNN poll was narrower, with just an eight-point lead for Obama over Romney.⁴⁰

Exit Surveys

Three exit surveys were held to ask questions on their demographics and their perception of candidates, along with one open-ended question. (See Table 1 for full survey results from this section of analysis.). In a survey after Debate 1, there were 20 Democrats, 1 Republican and 12 in the Independents/Other category. In the second survey, there were 6 Democrats and 4 in the Independents/Other category. In the third survey, there were 20 Democrats, 2 Republicans, 6 in the Independents/Other category, and 1 with no answer. The participants were composed of 38 females and 28 males in these surveys combined. One did not indicate his or her gender.

Obama was their chosen candidate for 23, 8 and 23 participants in each of three surveys respectively. Romney was chosen as their favored candidate by 3, 0, and 2 participants in each of three surveys. There were three participants who favored the other candidate.

Including responses from all three debates, 77 percent of respondents said the debate did not influence for whom they intended to vote. This supports Sides' theory that presidential debates don't actually matter in determining the outcome of an election. Just four respondents across all three said the debate performance changed their mind about their candidate selection. Across all debates, the respondents, who said they were moderately to extremely politically aware, also ranked the performances of both candidates in terms of truth with little variation. They gave Obama a "truthfulness ranking" of 3.8 out of 5, while giving Romney just 2.6 out of 5. More respondents also said Obama was either "straightforward" or "somewhat straightforward" far more often than they did Romney, who was more often ranked "somewhat straightforward" or "not straightforward."

The opinions and preferences of the survey-takers were very skewed towards the Democratic Party and President Obama (65 percent identified as Democrat and 76 percent said they were going to vote for Obama). At all three events combined, just three people identified as Republican. Within the surveys, there were also several contradictory answers (respondents who identified as voting for a specific candidate also said the debate had left them still undecided). Several respondents also left questions unanswered.

35 Mitt Romney, "Let Detroit Go Bankrupt," *New York Times*, November 18, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/19/opinion/19romney.html?_r=1&, (November 15, 2012).

36 "False Claims in Final Debate," *FactCheck.Org*, October 23, 2012, <http://factcheck.org/2012/10/false-claims-in-final-debate/>, (November 15, 2012).

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 "Poll: Decisive win for Obama in final debate," *CBS News*, October 22, 2012, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57537795/poll-decisive-win-for-obama-in-final-debate/ (November 15, 2012).

40 "CNN Poll: Nearly half of debate watchers say Obama won showdown," *CNN*, October 22, 2012, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/22/cnn-poll-who-won-the-debate/>, (November 15, 2012).

Table 1. Demographics and Numerical Measurements of Debate Performance

	Debate 1 (33)	Debate 2 (10)	Debate 3 (29)	All debates
Amount debate influenced candidate choice				
Didn't affect	25	8	22	55
Changed mind	2	0	2	4
Did influence but still undecided	6	1	4	11
Blank	0	1	1	1
Level of political awareness (1-5 scale)				
1	1	0	0	1
2	2	0	2	4
3	7	1	10	18
4	15	4	12	31
5	8	5	5	18
Average	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8
Obama's truthfulness (1-5 scale)				
1	1	0	0	1
2	2	0	0	2
3	9	1	9	19
4	19	8	17	44
5	2	1	3	6
Average	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.7
Romney's truthfulness (1-5 scale)				
1	2	1	5	8
2	10	7	9	26
3	13	2	13	28
4	7	0	2	9
5	1	0	0	1
Average	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.6
How straightforward was Obama?				
Straightforward, told accurate facts	13	5	14	32
Somewhat straightforward, sometimes misrepresented facts	19	5	14	38
Not straightforward, manipulated facts	1	0	1	2
How straightforward was Romney?				
Straightforward, told accurate facts	2	0	2	4
Somewhat straightforward, sometimes misrepresented facts	23	3	18	44
Not straightforward, manipulated facts	8	7	9	24

The second half of the exit survey included qualitative answers about the candidates' debate performances. Respondents were asked to identify the topics about which the candidates had been truthful or untruthful. In the three debates, the greatest percentage of respondents ranked Obama "truthful" about "health care" for Debate 1 and "foreign policy" for Debates 2 and 3, as shown in Table 2. When another question was asked, on which topic was the candidate not truthful, most people chose "Don't know," followed by "economy."

Obama's opponent, Romney, had the greatest percentage of respondents say he was "truthful" about the "economy" for Debates 1 and 2. For Debate 3, the largest number of respondents said "don't know." When they were asked on which topic was the candidate not truthful, the greatest percentage of respondents said he was "not truthful" about the "economy" for Debate 1 (curiously the same topic about which he was also "truthful"). For Debate 2, there was not a dominant category. For Debate 3, it was "don't know," followed by "foreign policy."

It is worth noting that the "economy" is highly ranked as a "truthful" and a "not truthful" topic for both Obama and Romney in debates, perhaps indicating that the respondents are unable to identify when a candidate is telling a truth or lying about the economy, despite the fact that they consider themselves to possess a moderate to high level of political awareness. The alternative interpretation is that both Romney and Obama told truths and lies about the economy and that the respondents just focused on those that fit the framework they had already established about a particular candidate.

Table 2. Topics of Truth and/or Fact Manipulation

	Econ- omy	Health care	Repro- ductive rights	Foreign Policy	Same-sex marriage	Every- thing	Don't know	Noth- ing	Other	Blank
On which topic was the candidate truthful?										
Obama										
Debate 1 (33)	5	15	1	0	0	5	2	2	1	2
Debate 2 (10)	1	2	0	6	0	1	0	0	0	0
Debate 3 (29)	8	0	0	17	0	1	3	0	0	0
Romney										
Debate 1 (33)	10	0	0	1	0	2	8	4	2	6
Debate 2 (10)	3	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	1	1
Debate 3 (29)	4	1	0	9	0	0	9	1	1	4
On which topic was the candidate not truthful?										
Obama										
Debate 1 (33)	9	0	0	0	0	1	11	2	3	7
Debate 2 (10)	3	0	0	1	0	0	5	0	0	1
Debate 3 (29)	4	1	0	3	0	0	16	1	1	3
Romney										
Debate 1 (33)	9	6	0	1	0	3	6	0	2	5
Debate 2 (10)	2	0	1	3	0	3	1	0	0	0
Debate 3 (29)	7	3	0	8	0	1	9	0	0	1

The Debates' Impact on the Election

By examining polling numbers from before and after each debate, it can be seen that none caused a dramatic shift in numbers for either Obama or Romney (see Table 3).

Table 3. Gallup Poll Numbers Before and During Debate Season⁴¹

	Pre-Debate 1	Post- Debate 1	Post- Debate 2	Post-Debate 3	Actual outcome of election (popular vote)
Obama	49	49	48	48	51
Romney	45	46	47	47	48

It can be seen that Romney increased (marginally) in popularity among all voters polled as Election Day approached, while Obama decreased (by a single point), again, not dramatically. At no point during debate season did Romney surpass Obama in polling numbers, and was unable to unseat the incumbent president on November 6, 2012. No media outlet of significance said any debate was a “game changer” or likely to affect the election.

In fact, with the incumbent winning the presidency, with the Republican Party retaining control of the House and the Democratic Party keeping their majority in the Senate, the 2012 election was a “status quo” one, meaning nothing changed. Arguably, all three debates could have been skipped altogether without affecting the outcome whatsoever. This is, of course, disputable. Perhaps Romney might have experienced a late surge had he not had the debates to limit his growth. Or, maybe Obama would have won by a far wider margin if he hadn't had the debates to tarnish his image at all. This is all speculation, of course.

V. Conclusion

Despite the immense number of lies and the manipulation of facts told by both candidates, the real sticking points of this debate season weren't Obama's misleading the public about veteran unemployment or Romney trying to take credit for Massachusetts excellent education record over two decades. No, instead, the memorable moments were found in the quips and humorous moments, however unintentionally. Viewers will remember Obama telling Romney, “The 1980's called. They want their foreign policy back,” long before they remember that Romney called Russia the United States' greatest geopolitical foe. Romney's statements that he loves Big Bird, but wants to defund PBS will stick in the public memory much longer than his statements that he never opposed bailing out the auto industry despite clear evidence to the contrary. And Romney's “binders full of women” comment will mean more than Obama's false assertion that he'll reduce federal taxes to Clinton-era levels.

Viewers don't seem to latch on to truth and lies that the candidates tell, or if they do, perhaps they only hear the lies they can disagree with and only hear truth where they seek it. It is plausible that debate viewers are victims of the “false consensus effect,” meaning they assume certain statements are correct or incorrect because it is what they and the people that surround them think.⁴² Psychologist Drury Sherrod said people seek out candidates with whom they already agree.⁴³ This would mean that debate viewers already know who they intend to agree with while watching, and it is unlikely any number of truths, lies, or manipulations of fact will influence their opinions and perceptions.

The candidates, Obama and Romney, seemed to fall in line with this theory. Both only made statements that would please the voters they were trying to woo, both trying to appear more moderate (in Romney's case) or more successful in his first term (in Obama's case) than might be found if facts alone were taken at face value in full context. Exit polling and the election outcome indicate that neither candidate was

41 “U.S. Presidential Election Center,” *Gallup*, November 8, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154559/US-Presidential-Election-Center.aspx>, (November 15, 2012).

42 Robyn M. Dawes, *Insights in Decision Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 179.

43 Drury Sherrod, “Selective Perception of Political Candidates,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1971), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747672>.

able to do anything differently to “shake up” the race, so to speak, and so another debate season passed without actually having any major impact on the election. The results suggest that debates are tools of message reinforcement, not new message conveyance, and as long as truth and lies fit into that framework, they’re fair game for use by candidates.

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