

## Playing to the Crowd: Agenda Control in Presidential Debates

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*Presidential debates allow candidates to send a message directly to voters. We use an experimental design complemented with a content analysis of all presidential debates in 1992, 2004, and 2008 to explore how candidates should and do use agenda setting, framing, and message tone to shape the agenda in debates. We find that candidates are differentially attentive to various topics, depending on the comparative advantage provided by the topic. Yet, this agenda control occurs only at the margins because topic salience in public opinion predicts candidate attention and conditions voters' receptiveness to debate rhetoric. Our findings thus suggest that topic salience constrains candidates' abilities to focus the agenda strategically.*

*[Supplementary material is available for this article. Go to the publisher's online edition of Political Communication for the following free supplemental resources: Experimental Sample and Randomization; Experimental Treatments; Experimental Results; and the Presidential Debate Rhetoric Codebook.]*

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Presidential debates are the most prominent shared campaign experiences of the voting public. In 2008, approximately 66 million people watched the second presidential debate (Stelter, 2008). Debate viewing helps inform citizens about the candidates and their policy positions (Abramowitz, 1978; Blais & Perrella, 2008; Chaffee, 1978; Lemert, 1993; but see Lanoue, 1991), shaping the public's assessment of both (Lanoue & Schrott, 1989). While debates may not always change electoral outcomes (Stimson, 2004), they have been known to alter the trajectory of a candidate's support (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Geer, 1988; Holbrook, 1996; Lanoue, 1992; Lewis-Beck, Norpoth, & Jacoby, 2008). And for political scientists, because debates offer candidates significant "face time" with the American public, they represent critical venues through which to observe candidate rhetorical, or messaging, behavior. An analysis of candidate messaging sheds light on candidate strategy.<sup>1</sup>

There is little existing work on candidates' rhetorical strategy. This dearth of knowledge extends to the topics that candidates emphasize in debates and the messages they use to highlight these topics. In campaigns in general and in debates specifically, candidates have

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strong motivations to “agenda set” and “frame” strategically by focusing their discussion on a set of topics—and portraying topics through a set of frames and using a tone—that showcase their candidacy in the most favorable light. Indeed, it is exactly through these strategic portrayals that citizens learn about candidates (Holbrook, 1999). In the context of a debate, citizens can infer the candidates’ priorities by observing which topics candidates discuss most often (including, importantly, those topics that candidates go out of their way to address), which frames candidates use to present each topic, and the rhetorical tone candidates take throughout. As yet, it is unclear how candidates employ each of these tools for agenda control during debates.

In general, previous research suggests that candidates should seek to focus the agenda on topics that are most advantageous to them and to avoid topics that favor their opponents—a strategy Riker (1996) dubs “heresthetics.” Vavreck (2009), for example, shows that “clarifying” candidates (incumbent party presidential candidates in good economies and challenger party candidates in bad economies) focus their televised advertisements and speeches disproportionately on the economy. Conversely, “insurgent” candidates (incumbents in bad economies and challengers in good economies) focus on non-economic topics. In both cases, the goal is that citizens will be primed with the topic that candidates emphasize (e.g., Jacoby, 1998; Riker, 1996; Sellers, 1998). An alternative strategy is for all candidates to “play to the crowd,” focusing on whichever topic the public deems most important at the time (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). To the extent that candidates hold a strategic advantage over their opponents on salient topics, these two strategies—heresthetics and playing to the crowd—are complementary. However, for those candidates who are disadvantaged on the topic most salient to the public (e.g., insurgent candidates when the economy is salient), these two strategies are sharply at odds.

Although considerable research has explored how these strategies play out over the course of the campaign, little of this research has focused on debates. Debates are unique because candidates respond to moderator and audience questions on the fly and thus enjoy incomplete agenda control. Moreover, unlike more targeted modes of strategic communication (Bennett & Manheim, 2001), televised debates require candidates to appeal to a broader audience. In demonstrating how and why candidates attempt to balance advantageous with salient topics, we extend the study of strategy to presidential debates while highlighting topic salience as a critical moderating variable.

Our study uses an experiment to develop baseline expectations about how candidates *should* use agenda setting and framing in the context of debate rhetoric. We then use quantitative manual content analysis to examine the agenda-setting and framing behaviors and the rhetorical tone displayed in the 1992, 2004, and 2008 presidential debates. The results of the experiment suggest that voters generally disapprove of agenda-setting and framing behaviors but are significantly less critical when candidates use these mechanisms to discuss topics they deem important. Consistent with these results, the content analysis suggests that the candidates attempt to shift the debate agenda toward topics the public finds most salient. At the same time, candidates tend to focus on topics on which they are personally advantaged, but their ability to do so is restricted by the topics’ salience.

## The Impact of Presidential Debates

While not all debates prove influential for electoral outcomes (Stimson, 2004), a considerable amount of research suggests that debates have a specific, if limited, impact on voter attitudes. Debates can change the preferences of undecided voters (Geer, 1988). And while the conditional influence of partisanship on voter evaluations is substantial, the magnitude

of this influence tends to remain stable as the campaign unfolds (Bartels, 2006). Therefore, the change in public support for presidential candidates over the course of the campaign (Gelman & King, 1993) cannot be due solely to partisan activation and occurs despite the stabilizing influence of partisanship (Bartels, 2006). Debate rhetoric may be one source of this change—its influence made possible by the elevated attention citizens pay to the debates (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990; Kraus, 2000; Marcus & Mackuen, 1993; Schroeder, 2008).

Even if the debates do not prove pivotal, studies have identified three broad categories of debate rhetoric influence on citizen attitudes and public opinion. First, political rhetoric can *prime* specific considerations in voters' minds, making them more accessible and hence potentially more influential than unprimed considerations in subsequent evaluations (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Simon, 2002)—and certainly priming effects apply in the context of debates. Second, debate rhetoric can *persuade* voters to think differently about a given topic and thus change the relative evaluation of the candidates on this dimension (Bartels, 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated that debates, through priming and persuasion, have the power to change citizens' vote intentions (Benoit et al., 2003; Geer, 1988; Holbrook, 1999; Lemert, 1993), particularly if they have low political knowledge before the debate (Lanoue, 1992). A third class of debate influence relates to information gain. As with other political messaging, debates can *inform* citizens about current events and conditions as well as candidate traits and positions (Abramowitz, 1978; Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Blais & Perrella, 2008; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). It may be useful to treat this category as distinct from persuasion and priming because new information (e.g., learning a candidate's position on a policy topic) can alter citizens' vote intentions without necessarily changing underlying attitudes regarding a given topic (e.g., a citizen's position on the policy) or the importance they attach to the topic.

We are particularly interested in *how* candidates communicate their messages, that is, how they use rhetoric to influence voters in the ways outlined above. In the following sections, we identify three main rhetorical tools that candidates use to prime, persuade, and inform voters and two non-mutually exclusive behaviors that candidates employ to improve their eventual vote share. Although we cannot demonstrate that these behaviors reflect purposeful strategies, for practical reasons it is useful to think about them as strategic, as it allows the implications of our findings to be made clear and allows politicians to derive prescriptive advice.

### Strategies for Agenda Control

Debate success hinges largely on each candidate's ability to keep the debate focused on those policy topics that showcase the candidate in the best possible light. But what topics are the most advantageous for each candidate? We consider two, non-mutually exclusive debate strategies: heresthetics and playing to the crowd. The first strategy is for candidates to discuss topics on which they hold an advantage.<sup>2</sup> Instead or in addition, candidates may choose to focus on topics important to the public, thereby appealing to public opinion (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994) by playing to the crowd. These two strategies are complementary for candidates who are advantaged over their opponents on salient topics but in conflict when the opponents hold the advantage.

A heresthetics advantage on a given topic may derive from a number of partisan, personal, and contextual sources. The primary source of partisan advantage is the concept of issue ownership (Rahn, 1993; Sides, 2006)—the idea that each political party has a reputation for handling a particular set of issues (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Petrocik, 1996;

Petrocik et al., 2003; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). Advantage may also stem from the personal characteristics of a candidate. As Petrocik (1996, p. 847) notes, “gender can determine who is the more credible candidate on matters of sex discrimination, [and] a retired war hero is a particularly credible commentator on military security” (for evidence of gender ownership, see Iyengar, Valentino, Ansolabehere, & Simon, 1997). Moreover, the electoral context may determine the relative advantageousness of a topic. In particular, Vavreck’s (2009) study demonstrates that the state of the economy dictates the advantageousness of this topic for candidates of all stripes. We return to this point shortly.

When pursuing the heresthetics strategy or playing to the crowd, candidates have three tools of agenda control available to communicate their message. Although each debate is structured around questions posed by the moderator or audience members—and it is generally these players, and not the candidates, who control most of the agenda—candidates are still able to exercise an important degree of agenda control through agenda setting, framing, and tone selection. In the sections that follow, we introduce these three agenda control tools and describe how each can be used to support either the heresthetics or playing-to-the-crowd strategy.

### ***Agenda Setting***

Broadly speaking, agenda setting refers to the process by which problems that receive media or elite attention become political issues, while other problems are ignored (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1995; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The topics on the agenda in question are simply those topics discussed by the people who define that agenda; in a debate, the candidates and the moderator set the debate agenda, which in turn can influence the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). Thus, candidates in a debate are distinctly limited by the topics of the questions the moderator poses to them. Still, candidates can decide how much of their debate time to devote to the topics presented and how much time to spend “straying” to other topics that might be more advantageous. Thus, candidates do have agenda-setting power in this context. Candidates pursuing the heresthetics strategy will use agenda setting to draw attention to those topics on which they hold an advantage over their opponent. Thus, Democratic candidates might emphasize education, the environment, health care, and social programs, while Republicans might emphasize crime and foreign policy (Petrocik, 1996; Sides, 2006).

At the same time, the economy can cross-cut party strategies of heresthetics. Out-party candidates in a bad economy and in-party candidates in a good one (whom Vavreck, 2009, calls clarifying candidates) have the advantage on the economy. However, out-party candidates in a good economy and in-party candidates in a bad economy (insurgent candidates in Vavreck’s terminology) are disadvantaged by the economy. Thus, the heresthetics strategy predicts clarifying candidates will use agenda setting to draw attention to the economy, while insurgent candidates will draw attention to non-economic topics on which they have the advantage.

Alternatively, a candidate pursuing the playing-to-the-crowd strategy will focus on the topics that the news media and voters already deem important (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). Because voters’ evaluations of candidates are formed on the basis of the topics voters feel are most important (Krosnick, 1990), candidates may see their best move as appealing to voters through their strengths on these topics. Playing to the crowd may also be an advantageous agenda-setting strategy because, in the aggregate, salience can change

rapidly in response to current events and conditions (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Page & Shapiro, 1992), and thus candidates may need to address newly salient topics to demonstrate their grasp of the topic and their ability to react in a crisis. For instance, in the 1960 presidential campaign, civil rights emerged as a major topic, aided in part by the arrest of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. just a few weeks before the election. In response, John F. Kennedy called Coretta Scott King to express his concern over the arrest, and Robert Kennedy helped to secure the release of Dr. King from jail. These actions sent a strong signal that Kennedy was engaged with civil rights, and doing so helped secure the endorsement of Dr. King and other prominent civil rights leaders (Kuhn, 1997). In the end, Kennedy won 70% of the Black vote—much more than was previously predicted, particularly given the religious dynamics of the race (Jamieson & Kenski, 2006). At least in this case, playing to the crowd appeared to be a smart campaign move.

Of course, candidates' ability to set the debate agenda is limited. Since moderators select the questions, candidates attempting to use agenda setting will necessarily have to deviate from the moderator's question at times—and doing so carries some risk. A candidate's (and his or her political team's) decisions about when and how often to go "off topic" are constrained by the same kinds of social norms that govern human interactions in other contexts. If the moderator in a debate asks the candidate a direct question about a topic, the candidate would be ill-advised to ignore that topic altogether, no matter how much he or she might prefer not to talk about it, as doing so might be seen as "dodging" the question. Going off topic is thus a moderately costly signal, one that a candidate has the incentive to send only when the potential votes gained by shifting to the more favored topic outnumber the potential votes lost by bucking social protocol (Damore, 2005).

Of course, the economy often tops the public's list of concerns, making the heresthetics and playing-to-the-crowd strategies one and the same for clarifying candidates. But for insurgent candidates, these strategies stand at cross-purposes. We thus expect clarifying candidates to use mechanisms of agenda control primarily to emphasize the economy. On the other hand, we expect insurgent candidates to adopt a hybrid of the two strategies—focusing on advantaged topics as prescribed by heresthetics but also attending to the topic(s) most salient to the public. In this way, insurgent candidates are not only disadvantaged by the economy but also by needing to adopt a hybrid strategy that is, at a minimum, a less efficient use of resources than clarifying candidates' singular approach. It is precisely these characteristics—the perpetual salience of the economy coupled with the ephemeral nature of the advantage it confers—that lead Vavreck (2009) to argue that the economy is so crucial in U.S. electoral campaigns.

### ***Framing***

The candidates' second major tool of debate agenda control is framing, or emphasizing a particular interpretation of a topic over competing interpretations (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). Every topic has multiple dimensions of interpretation, allowing a candidate to decide how best to describe, or frame, each topic that arises in a debate. Candidates can therefore use framing in a way similar to how they use agenda setting, to draw attention either to their advantaged topic or to the topic of greatest public concern.

As an example of the application of the heresthetics or issue-ownership strategy, in response to a question about health care, the GOP candidate may choose to use an effectiveness frame—describing the nationalization of the health care system as a bureaucratic nightmare and thereby drawing attention to Republicans' "small government" credentials.

The Democratic candidate, on the other hand, may respond to the same question with a moral frame—describing the provision of health care to all citizens as a moral responsibility and thereby drawing attention to Democrats' reputation as defenders of social safety nets.

Whereas the heresthetics strategy would encourage only clarifying candidates to use economic frames, the playing-to-the-crowd strategy would suggest both clarifying *and* insurgent candidates utilize economic frames whenever the economy is particularly salient. For instance, a candidate responding to a question about defense during a time of economic turmoil can play to the crowd, whose concerns are focused on the economy, by framing defense missions and programs in economic terms. Thus, although candidates may feel obligated to talk about the topic of a question posed by a moderator or an audience member, they have discretion over *how* to talk about it. Framing can save candidates from having to go completely off topic in response to an unfavorable question in order to communicate their messages.

In this way, framing offers candidates a nuanced but potentially significant element of agenda control. In the 1988 presidential campaign, for instance, George H. W. Bush used the case of Willie Horton to frame crime in terms of public safety (and, some argue, race) (McLeod, 1999). Through Bush's emphasis of this frame, other aspects of the topic, like rehabilitation, prison overcrowding, wrongful convictions, and racially skewed incarceration rates, were absent from the discussion, and the topic was considered in terms of the GOP-advantaged safety frame.

### ***Tone***

Finally, candidates are also able to exercise agenda control through the tone of their remarks. Specifically, candidates may choose to use a negative, positive, or neutral tone when talking about the substance of the issues as well as when talking about their opponent.

A change in tone can have a significant effect on the meaning and intent of the communicator and represents another way that candidates can control the agenda. If a candidate responds to a question about missile defense with a strongly positive tone, for example, he or she is exercising agenda control by communicating important information to debate viewers, even though the moderator chose the topic. Campaign messages with positive tone tend to reinforce partisan predispositions (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007) and generate feelings of hope (Brader, 2006). Thus, the strongly positive tone in this case can draw attention to a party's reputation on the topic (for instance, the reputation of the GOP as being "strong on defense"), or it may encourage hope that the candidate has a solution for a problem that is troubling the public (for instance, nuclear security regarding the threat of the USSR during the Cold War).

In contrast to positive messages, a negative tone tends to trigger anxiety and encourage viewers to ignore predispositions in favor of new information (Brader, 2006; Lau et al., 2007). Thus, clarifying candidates may benefit by employing a negative tone in their substantive statements to encourage viewers to gather information about prevailing economic conditions. Conversely, insurgent incumbents may benefit from a positive tone that can reinforce the incumbency advantage and generate optimism about future economic performance.

With specific regard to personal statements, research indicates that "going negative" by overtly criticizing one's opponent may prove the best strategy for challengers and those behind in the polls (Lau & Pomper, 2002; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). But doing so also entails some political risk, especially in a face-to-face debate where social norms may

limit the number and veracity of negative attacks, compared to the impersonal medium of television ads. Negative statements may end up making a candidate look snarky or just plain rude, but a pithy quip can also make for a good sound bite—think Senator Lloyd Bentsen’s “you’re no Jack Kennedy” comment to Senator Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice-presidential debate. Insurgent candidates may find personal attacks especially useful, as they serve as another way to draw attention away from the economic topic on which they are disadvantaged.

## **Debate Context**

We expect the economic context to play a significant role in shaping candidate behavior (Vavreck, 2009), but the salience of the economy relative to other topics will determine the viability of potential strategies. We expect clarifying candidates to seize this advantage by using agenda setting, framing, and tone to communicate their economic messages. They can do so by staying on topic on economic prompts, going off topic to the economy on non-economic prompts, framing other topics in economic terms, and using a negative tone when discussing the economy. The more salient the economy is to the public, the more these candidates should emphasize it. Conversely, insurgent candidates should instead use the tools of agenda control to shift the focus to a non-economic topic on which they have some prior advantage. Given the importance of topic salience, however, this strategy is only likely to be effective when an alternative topic is salient enough to compete with the salience of the economy.

The centrality of the economy to U.S. politics is likely to prevent insurgent candidates from avoiding entirely discussion of the economy in debates. When they feel compelled to discuss the economy, insurgent candidates may try to use a non-economic frame. For example, an out-party candidate may use a legal or moral frame to question the current administration’s relationship with corporations and regulatory agencies. In the 2004 debates, Kerry criticized Bush’s “corporate giveaways,” framing them as unfair and immoral (second 2004 debate). An in-party candidate might use a political frame to emphasize the difficulties of passing economic legislation through a hostile Congress. In the first 1992 debate, Bush said that his economic program would be successful, but that it could only happen if “we’re going to have a brand new Congress.” This political frame may have drawn attention away from the economic problems of the Bush administration.

Another important contextual variable is the state of the public agenda. In debates, candidates must respond to the prompts provided by the moderator. If these prompts are predicated on the topics salient to the public, candidates may be constrained in their ability to discuss owned issues. Yet, to the extent that their advantaged topics are already salient in the public, candidates may be able to shift the debate agenda further in their direction by selectively staying on topic on prompts about these advantaged topics and going off topic on prompts about less salient topics. We therefore expect that candidates’ ability to emphasize advantageous topics is conditional on the range of topics that are salient in the public—that is, on candidates’ incentives to play to the crowd. For instance, a Republican candidate advantaged by party and personal experience on the topic of crime might find it beneficial to go off topic from an energy question to talk about crime. However, if a sharp spike in gas prices in the weeks and months before the debate has made energy policy much more salient to the public, the candidate may not gain as much by going off topic to crime. Thus, while the heresthetics strategy seeks to shape the salience of topics, its success is likely moderated by current topic salience.

## Research Design

To develop baseline expectations for assessing candidate strategy in debates, we begin with an experiment examining voters' reactions to candidate debate behavior. We then conduct a systematic content analysis of debates in 1992, 2004, and 2008 in order to assess the degree to which candidate behavior follows our theoretic expectations.

### *Experimental Design*

We recruited 557 subjects from political science courses at two research universities in exchange for a small amount of extra credit. Subjects read two fictional candidates' responses to a debate prompt asking about either the economy or defense. The candidates responses were designed to be fairly general, so by making small changes (e.g., simply replacing "economy" with "defense"), we are able to change the substance of the argument without changing the quality of the argument. Thus, the experimental conditions are as similar as possible in order to isolate the effects of going off topic and off frame.

Subjects were randomly assigned (with equal probability) to one of the two prompt topics. The first candidate provided an on-topic and on-frame response (i.e., talking about the economy in economic terms). The second candidate's response was experimentally manipulated to provide one of the following: (a) an on-topic/on-frame response in similar fashion (e.g., "Well, fixing the economy is critical. I have a five-part plan to address the economy, and it starts with reinvesting in our workforce"), (b) an on-topic/off-frame response emphasizing safety aspects of the economy in the economic prompt condition and economic aspects of national security in the defense prompt condition (e.g., "Well, fixing the economy is critical, especially because threats to our economy really mean threats to our national security"), or (c) a response that was entirely off topic (e.g., "Well, fixing the economy is critical. But I'd like to use this time to talk about an even more pressing concern: defense"). Subjects were randomly assigned (with equal probability) to one of the three response styles. Thus, our experiment constituted a 2 (prompt topic: economy vs. defense)  $\times$  3 (second candidate response: on-topic/on-frame vs. on-topic/off-frame vs. off-topic) design. For the three economy treatments, the on-topic/off-frame condition employed a safety frame and the off-topic condition focused on defense, while for the three defense treatments the on-topic/off-frame condition employed an economic frame and the off-topic condition focused on the economy. The randomization was successful in achieving balance across treatments on key political attitudes and demographic variables.

Each candidate's response was divided into five statements. After each statement, subjects were prompted to choose whether they liked or disliked the statement (they could also choose neither). Subjects were also asked whether they believed the statement was a "spin," a "dodge," or "boring." After viewing the two candidates' statements in their entirety, subjects provided an overall evaluation of support for each candidate (using a 5-point scale). A subject should rate a candidate more favorably if the candidate goes off topic (or off frame) to the subject's most important topic than if the candidate goes off topic (or off frame) to the other issue. Such a finding will provide support for our idea that playing to the crowd is an important but conditional strategy.

Like many experiments, this one sacrifices generalizability in order to identify causal effects in a controlled environment. In addition to the many differences between college students and the general population (Sears, 1986), subjects motivated by course credit may pay attention to different considerations than viewers tuning in to presidential debates. Also, and perhaps most importantly, the candidates in the experimental conditions are not



identified as members of any particular party. This feature of the design prevents the powerful impact of party affiliation from masking the effect of the debate text, but necessarily omits a fundamental feature of U.S. politics.<sup>3</sup> More generally, requiring subjects to read debate transcripts may make them more attentive to verbal content than real debate viewers because they are not distracted by the myriad nonverbal cues that candidates provide (see, e.g., Druckman, 2003). Thus, the magnitude of effects estimated here may overstate the true impact in debates. Nonetheless, the chief goal of the experiment is to isolate potential effects of debate behaviors in order to develop expectations about real-world candidate strategies. Thus, the experiment provides a baseline to generate expectations but should not be construed as an accurate estimate of voters' responses to debates.

### *Content Analysis*

We collected the full transcripts from all three presidential debates for each of the election years 1992, 2004, and 2008. We chose these three elections to provide an especially good test of Vavreck's argument about clarifying versus insurgent candidates. For most modern presidential campaigns that included debates, the economy has been the dominant topic. This was certainly the case in the 1992 campaign ("It's the economy, stupid") and in the 2008 campaign (coinciding with the housing and economic collapse of 2007–2008). In response to Gallup surveys conducted in 1992 and 2008 (not including those surveys after election day), an average of, respectively, 49% and 36% of survey respondents identified the economy (or specific economic issues) as the "most important problem" facing the country.<sup>4</sup> While the consistent high salience of the economy over time prevents us from selecting a year where the economy was completely unimportant to voters (Vavreck, 2009, p. 29), 2004 provides a contrasting case where the salience of a second topic (defense) surpassed that of the economy, especially as the election neared. While Gallup surveys between January and June showed that an average of 30% of respondents identified the economy as the most important problem (25% identified defense), in Gallup surveys between July and October, an average of 25% of respondents identified the economy, but 30% said defense was most important. Selecting these three debates allows us to evaluate Vavreck's argument in the context of two debates where the economy dominated and one where defense took center stage.

In content analyzing the transcripts for the 1992, 2004, and 2008 debates, we coded the questions posed to the candidates as well as the candidates' responses, isolating each independent clause of each candidate's remarks and using these clauses, or "statements," as our unit of analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Each statement was coded according to several variables, focusing in particular on tracking the topic, the frame, and the tone of the statement.<sup>6</sup> We began by coding the topic of the question posed by the moderator or audience member.<sup>7</sup> We coded these topics based on the Policy Agendas Topics Codebook (Baumgartner & Jones, 2006), containing 19 major policy topic codes (e.g., macroeconomics, health, defense). Next, we coded the topic of the statement itself, again using the Policy Agendas Topics coding scheme.<sup>8</sup> Then, by cross-referencing the topic of the statement with the topic of the question on the table, we calculated a binary "on/off topic" variable for each statement indicating whether or not the candidate's topic matched that of the question posed by the moderator or audience member.

We also coded each statement according to the frame the candidate used in conveying it. Specifically, we coded for eight different frame dimensions general enough to span policy topics: economic, political, logistical, patriotic, legal, moral, safety, and effectiveness (plus an "other" category). For example, we coded John McCain's statement in the

first 2008 debate, “And it was the House Republicans that decided that they would be part of the solution to this problem [the economic crisis],” as being on the topic of the economy and framed in political terms. By contrast, we coded his statement “I have a fundamental belief in the goodness and strength of the American worker” as being the same topic of economics but framed in patriotic terms.

The next variable that we measured was tone. We coded whether the tone of the statement was generally positive (e.g., supportive/hopeful), negative (e.g., critical/fearful), or neutral. For example, also in the first 2008 debate, we coded Obama’s statement “I’ve put forward a series of proposals that make sure that we protect taxpayers as we engage in this important rescue effort” as positive, but we coded his statement “And there are folks out there who’ve been struggling before this crisis took place” as negative.

In addition to coding the general tone of each candidate’s statement, we also tracked the tone each employed with reference to his opponent. Any statement that included a reference to the opponent, either by using the proper name of the opponent or by using a pronoun or clearly in context, was coded as a candidate reference. For example, McCain’s statement about Obama, “Again, a little bit of naiveté there,” was coded as personally negative. We can think of these statements as times when the candidates stopped focusing on the substantive topics and started focusing on each other. Each candidate reference was also coded negative, neutral, or positive, in order to capture whether and when either candidate “went negative” in this regard.

We compare the agenda-setting, framing, and tone behaviors of both candidates within and across debates in order to get a clear picture of the role these tools of agenda control played in the debates. We expect topic salience to be a primary determinant of candidate rhetoric. Moreover, we expect candidates to employ strategies consistent with heresthetics, but only to the extent that advantageous topics are already salient to the public.

## Findings

### *Agenda Setting*

We summarize the key findings from our experiment in Table 1, which shows the average overall support subjects gave to the second (experimentally manipulated) candidate, by treatment.<sup>9</sup> In both the economy and defense topic prompt treatments, subjects in the treatment where the second candidate stayed on topic liked him more than subjects in

**Table 1**  
Average overall support of second candidate, by treatment

	On-topic	Frame change	Topic change
Economy	2.5	2.2	1.1
Defense	2.4	2.4	1.7
Total	2.4	2.3	1.4

*Note.* Overall support is a posttest measure of subjects’ support for the second (experimentally manipulated) candidate using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (very negative) to 4 (very positive). In each row, the average support in the Topic change condition is significantly less ( $p < .05$ , two tailed) than in the On-topic and Frame change conditions.

the other two treatments. Thus, subjects on average preferred to hear the candidate talk about the prompt topic, which suggests that in the aggregate, candidates may face penalties for going off frame or off topic in order to set the agenda. Additionally, we found that, compared to on-topic candidate responses, subjects were significantly more likely to identify frame-change responses as “spin” responses and more likely to recognize topic-change responses as “dodge” responses.<sup>10</sup> Frame shifts and topic shifts were not only distinguishable, but subjects had different reactions to the two, preferring, on average, the frame-change response to the topic-change response. Thus, framing may be a more effective tool for agenda control than is agenda setting.

Before the experiment, subjects completed a battery of items asking for the priority they attached to the economy and defense (using a 5-point scale), as well as other topics. We use these measures to test how subjects’ topic priorities condition their evaluations of the second candidate’s statements. Due to citizens’ tendency to disproportionately accumulate (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008) and recall (Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005) information about topics they deem most important, we believe subject evaluations of the candidates and statements will be conditioned by topic salience. We hence expect that approval of the second candidate in the off-topic treatments will increase with the relative level of priority the subject associates with the response topic compared to the prompt topic. For instance, a subject whose topic of greatest concern is the economy will rate a candidate who goes off topic to the economy higher than will a subject whose topic of greatest concern is defense.

We find support for this expectation in Figure 1, which shows the marginal effect of an off-topic response compared to an on-topic response on subjects’ overall support of the experimental candidate as the relative priority of the two topics changes. The figure suggests that voters dislike candidates who go off topic to discuss relatively unimportant topics, but are less critical of candidates who go off topic to discuss relatively important topics. The strategy only nets an increase in support over staying on topic in instances where subjects maximally prioritize the off-topic topic and place minimal priority on the prompt

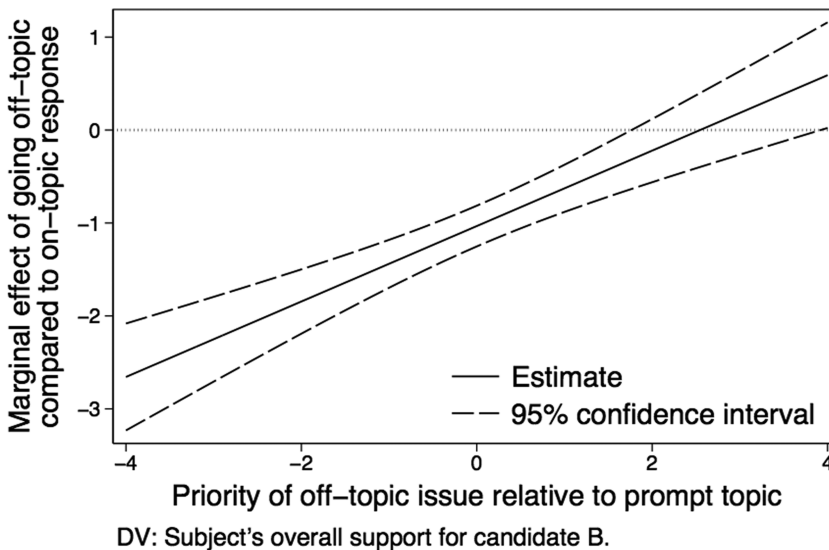


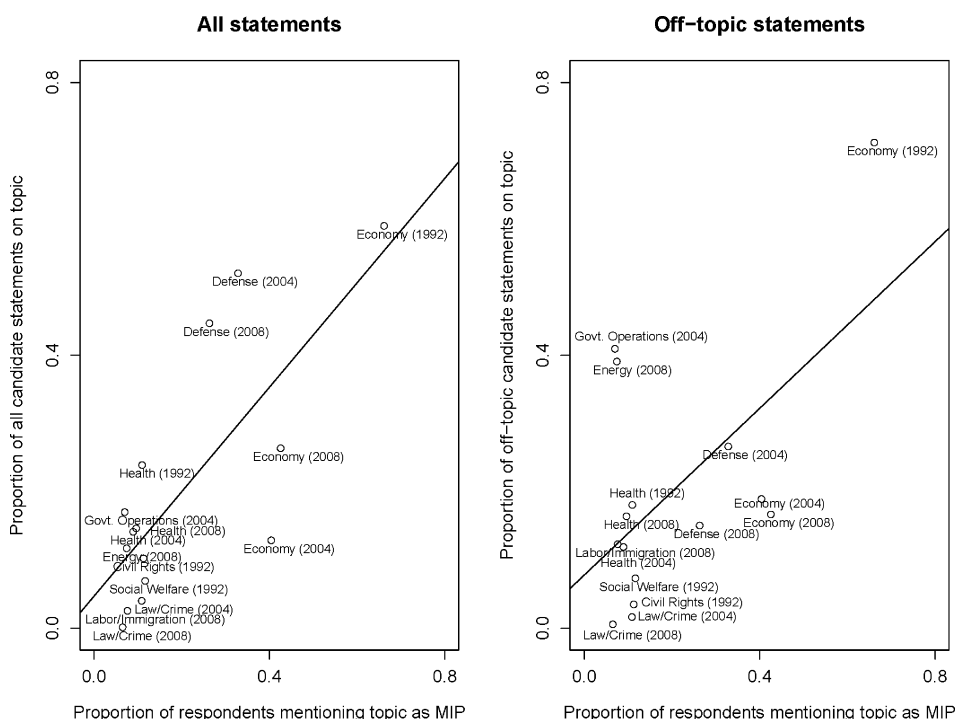
Figure 1. Effect of off-topic responses on candidate support, by topic priority.

topic. Therefore, the relative importance of topics in the public view constrains candidates' ability to emphasize advantageous topics, in line with our expectations regarding the importance of topic salience. Candidates may desire to shift the agenda toward a specific set of topics, but in so doing, they may also be diminishing their support.

Thus, the playing-to-the-crowd strategy in a debate will only be advantageous if the benefit of the new agenda outweighs the penalty for shifting topics. These experimental findings suggest that candidates can minimize this penalty by shifting the agenda toward the topics most prioritized in the electorate but also by framing topics rather than explicitly changing topics.

Turning to the actual presidential debates, we indeed see evidence that candidates tend to focus on those topics of high public salience. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the average proportion of Gallup respondents identifying a topic as "the most important problem facing the country" (MIP) in the first two-quarters of the election year (x-axis), as mapped onto the proportion of all presidential candidate statements during that election's debates that focus on that topic (y-axis).<sup>11</sup> Focusing on public opinion from the first half of the year provides a conservative test due to the ephemeral nature of topic salience and decreases the threat of endogeneity due to campaign effects.

When looking at all candidate statements (left panel of Figure 2), it appears that in 2004 and 2008, defense receives more attention than its salience would predict. This finding



**Figure 2.** Debate topic attention by topic salience in first half of election year. Figure shows only those topics that received more than an average of 5% of MIP responses in the first half of the election year. Proportions were calculated using only those topics. Lines indicate the predictions from a bivariate OLS regression. Data were drawn from the Policy Agendas Project, which offers Gallup's "most important problem" response categories coded by topic ([www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)).

likely occurs because each of those elections featured one debate focusing on foreign policy. When looking only at off-topic statements, defense no longer receives more attention than its salience would predict.

Consistent with our expectations, then, Figure 2 suggests that candidates tend to focus on those topics that are most salient to the public and that candidate attention to a topic does indeed increase with its salience. Whether or not the candidates we examine actively chose playing to the crowd as a campaign strategy, the data show that the attention they gave to topics did systematically covary with public salience. This trend holds when looking at all candidate statements in the debates (left panel) as well as when restricting the analysis to off-topic statements only (right panel). When considering all topics in the Policy Agendas codebook, the correlation between MIP responses in the first half of the year and candidate debate attention to the topic is .64. The correlation between MIP responses and off-topic attention in the debates is .44. The strength of this correlation between MIP responses and off-topic statements suggests that candidates' focus on salient topics is not only a product of the moderator's agenda but also due in part to candidate rhetorical patterns.

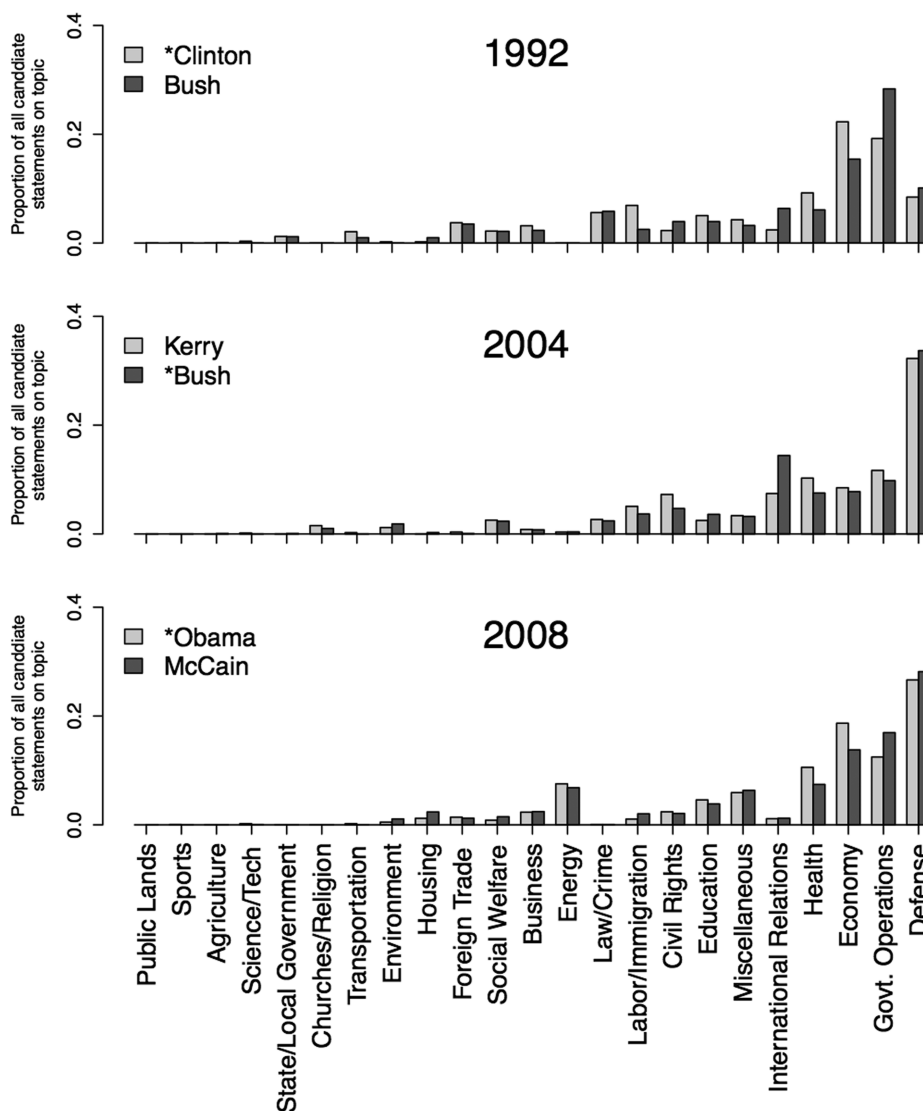
The figure also demonstrates the disproportionate salience of the economy and defense relative to other topics. Omitting the economy, the correlation between MIP responses in the first half of the year and candidate debate attention to the topic rises to .72. At the same time, the correlation between MIP responses and off-topic attention in the debates falls to .30. Similarly, omitting defense, those correlations are .58 and .42, respectively. When omitting both topics, the correlations fall to .35 and .26, respectively. Conversely, when looking at *only* those two topics, the correlations are .14 and .50, respectively. Therefore, the economy and defense appear to occupy a preeminent place in the minds of voters and on the debate agenda. Nonetheless, the relationship between salience and debate attention persists across subsets of topics, though the strength of the relationship varies.

We can gain a more detailed look at candidate agenda setting in Figure 3, which shows the distribution of candidate statements across topics by candidate in each election year. This figure shows more clearly that while topics like defense, government operations, and the economy are mainstays of presidential debates, some interesting variance also exists between election years. We also see that, within each election, the topics covered by both candidates are quite similar, as the candidates converged upon those topics that were most salient at the time. For instance, defense dominated the agendas of both candidates in 2004, the lone year where the salience of defense (as measured by MIP responses) outpaced the salience of the economy at the time of the debates. This finding reinforces the idea that candidates do not focus only on those topics that they personally and habitually deem most important (or politically advantageous). Rather, candidates play to the crowd by gravitating toward a common set of topics—those most salient to the country at the time.

### ***Framing***

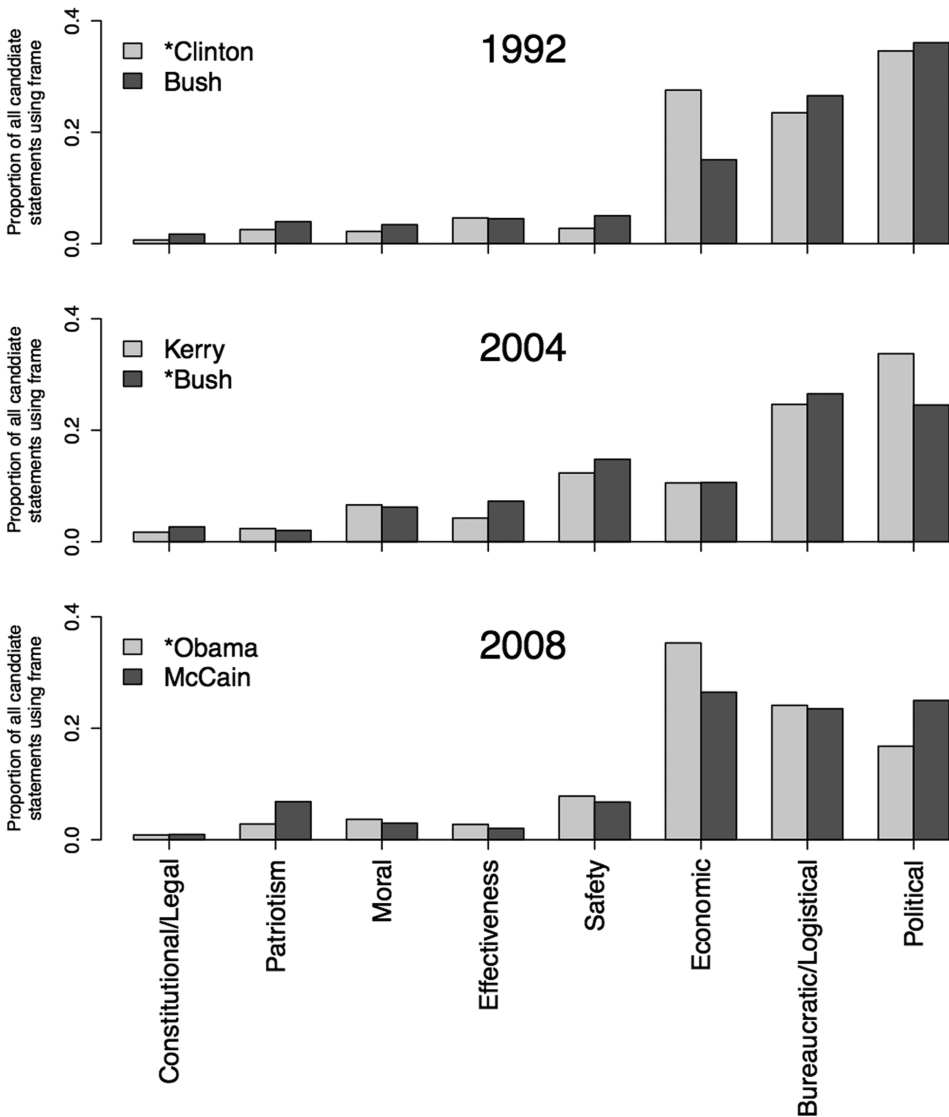
We examine the candidates' framing behaviors in Figure 4, which shows the distribution of candidate statements across frames by candidate in each election year. As with candidate agenda setting, we see that candidates tend to employ some frames—political, logistical, economic—much more than others.

Yet, at the same time, we see interesting variance in the use of framing across election years. As with candidate attention to topics, Figure 4 suggests that candidates frame



**Figure 3.** Debate topic attention by candidate. Topics are sorted in order of total attention given, summed across candidates and years. Asterisks indicate candidate designated as clarifying by Vavreck (2009, p. 38).

topics in such a way as to reflect salient concerns of the time. In 2004, when U.S. military operations in Iraq were still rapidly unfolding, both candidates played to the crowd by framing topics in terms of safety much more than candidates in the other two elections. And, most notably, economic frames were used much more in 1992 and 2008, especially by Clinton and Obama, the clarifying candidates in those two election years. Given the poor economies that dominated the campaign context in 1992 and 2008, these patterns may reflect deliberate attempts on behalf of these two challengers to prime voters' economic attitudes, consistent with our theory of context-dependent heresthetics.



**Figure 4.** Debate frames by candidate. Frames are sorted in order of total attention given, summed across candidates and years. Asterisks indicate candidate designated as clarifying by Vavreck (2009, p. 38).

The strong salience of the economy in 1992 and 2008 raises the question of whether the mechanism underpinning the results we have presented is the salience of topics generally or the salience of the economy alone. We have argued that candidates' abilities to control the debate agenda are conditioned by those topics of salience at the time. Specifically, we have said that we should expect to see candidates play to the crowd by focusing on whatever topic is currently salient—and indeed, we argue that candidates will generally benefit from doing so. But does this story apply uniquely to the economy, or does it generalize to other salient topics? We turn next to examining this question.

### *Playing to the Crowd via the Economy and Other Salient Topics*

As discussed above, the centrality of economic conditions in presidential races means that clarifying candidates can solidify their chance of victory by helping the public learn about the state of the economy, while insurgent candidates should try to shift public attention toward more favorable topics (Vavreck, 2009).

The debates we examine provide evidence that candidates' debate rhetoric, intentionally or not, matches Vavreck's theory regarding the centrality of the economy. Early economic forecasting models of electoral outcomes gave the advantage to Clinton in 1992, Bush in 2004, and Obama in 2008 (Vavreck, 2009, p. 38). Vavreck's theory would suggest the other three candidates were better off shifting the agenda away from the economy toward more favorable topics. Figure 5 shows that clarifying candidates were less likely than their insurgent opponents to change the topic when prompted by the moderator with economic questions and more likely to change the topic to the economy on non-economic questions. Additionally, clarifying candidates were more likely than were insurgent candidates to use economic frames in their responses to economic and non-economic questions. Nonetheless, both clarifying and insurgent candidates placed a great deal of emphasis on the economy relative to other topics, as shown in Figures 1 and 3. Thus, candidates' use of heresthetics in debates occurs at the margins, with topic salience playing a critical moderating role.

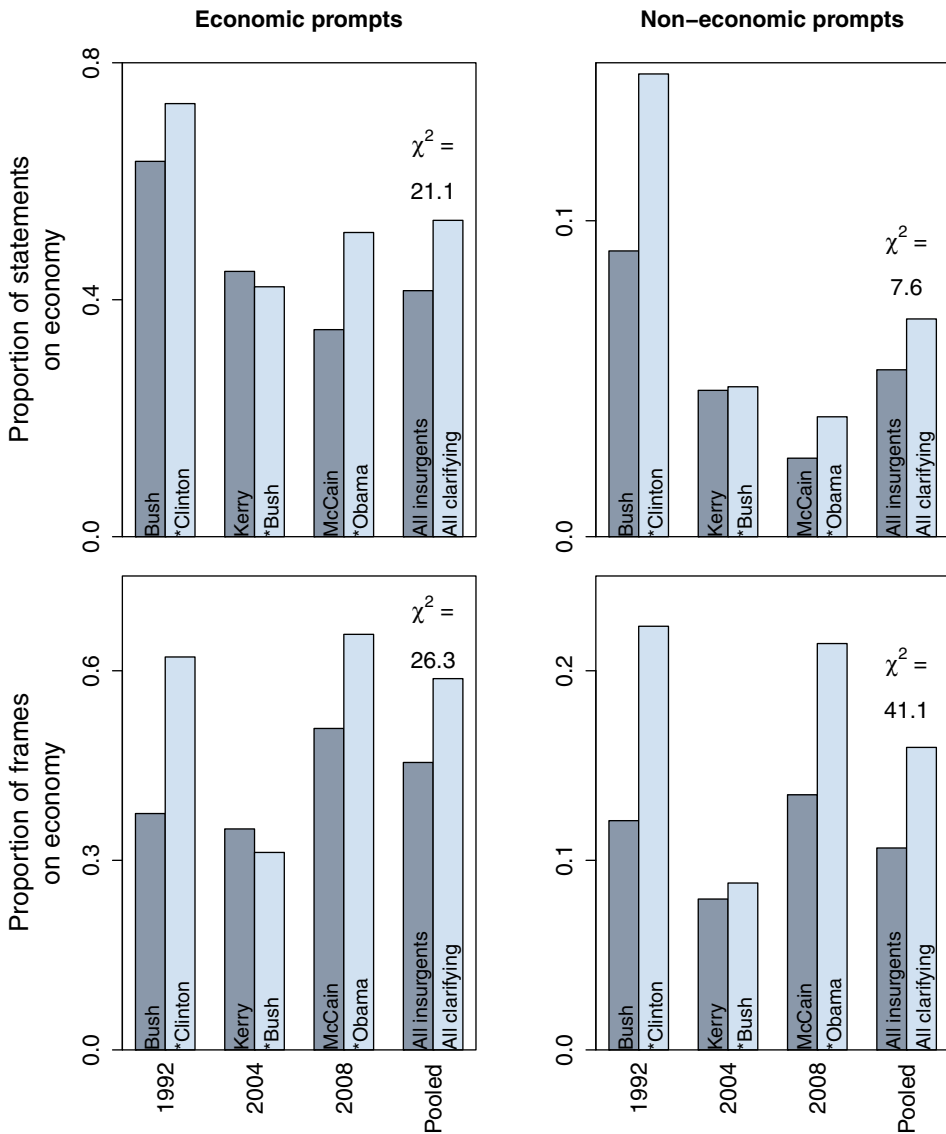
The 2004 results are the least supportive of Vavreck's theory, as Bush and Kerry gave roughly equal attention to the economy. Importantly, the 2004 economy was also more mixed at the time of the debates than was the economy in 1992 or 2008. For instance, the combined index of consumer sentiment gathered by De Boef and Kellstedt (2004) shows an average index of 95.25 for January–October 2004, whereas the average index values for the first 10 months of 1992 and 2008 were 75.07 and 64.96, respectively. Therefore, which candidate was advantaged by the economy may have been less clear. Additionally, 2004 was the first post-9/11 election, and it took place while U.S. troops were deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq. The salience of the national security topic may have also influenced candidate debate behaviors.

This single election case of 2004 may thus suggest that when a topic other than the economy is highly salient, candidates tend to play to the crowd on that topic, muting the economic messages of clarifying candidates. While the economy was the most salient topic during the first half of 2004, Figure 6 shows that the salience of defense surged in April while the salience of the economy declined. This was likely due both to positive economic news (e.g., improving job numbers and softening gas prices), which boosted consumer confidence (Associated Press, 2004), and to troubling news out of Iraq in particular, with the release of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse photos, an increase in U.S. casualties, and difficult showdowns with insurgents in places like Fallujah (Kifner, 2004). In contrast, the economy was more salient than defense in 1992 and 2008. In those years, the relative salience of the economy may have facilitated candidates' ability to follow Vavreck's strategy. With a second salient topic, the candidates in 2004 could not change the topic from defense to the economy without facing increased disapproval from voters, as our experimental results in Figure 1 suggest.

### *Tone*

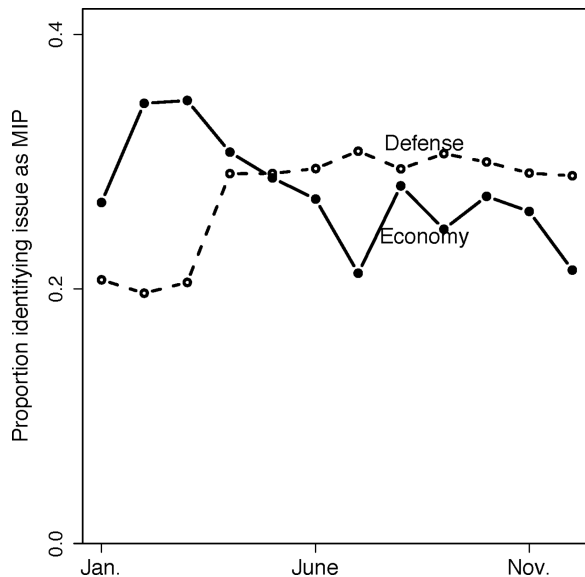
A final tool that candidates can use to control the agenda is the tone of their statements. Figure 7 displays the mean tone of each candidate's statements, with positive statements coded 1, negative statements coded  $-1$ , and neutral statements coded 0. Thus, bars above



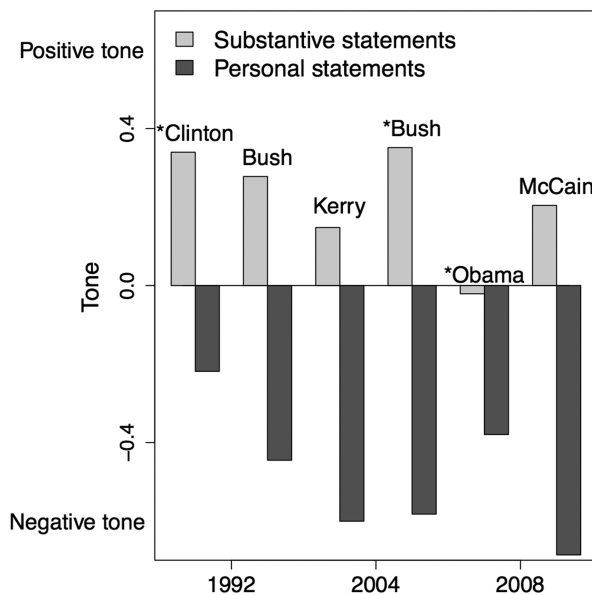


**Figure 5.** The role of the economy in candidate debate rhetoric. Chi-square statistics are for pooled candidate differences and are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level. Asterisks indicate candidate designated as clarifying by Vavreck (2009, p. 38) (Color figure available online).

the zero line indicate more positive than negative statements, whereas bars below the zero line indicate more negative than positive statements. Recall that candidates can choose to “go negative” either with the substance of their remarks or through personal attacks. Figure 7 reports data for both tone categories. In terms of substantive statements in high-economic salience years, Clinton in 1992 actually made slightly more positive statements than Bush, including more positive statements about the economy. This finding is somewhat surprising, as Clinton was a clarifying candidate in 1992 and, as discussed above, negative statements would have been more likely to encourage voters to learn about the state of the



**Figure 6.** Economy and defense topic salience in 2004. Data were drawn from the Policy Agendas Project, which offers Gallup’s “most important problem” response categories coded by topic ([www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)). In order to give equal weight to each time period regardless of how many surveys were conducted, the data were collapsed into a monthly series with each month capturing the average proportion of responses on each topic that month.



**Figure 7.** Debate mean tone by candidate. Asterisks indicate candidate designated as clarifying by Vavreck (2009, p. 38).

economy. Obama in 2008 fits this expectation much more cleanly, making 129 negative economic statements (49% of all of his statements on the economy) to McCain's 86 (42% of all of his economic statements). And Figure 7 shows that Obama was more negative than McCain in his substantive policy discussion in general.

Turning now to personally negative statements, Figure 7 reveals the interesting results that both Bush in 1992 and McCain in 2008—the two candidates disadvantaged by the high salience of poor economies in those years—made many more personally negative statements than their opponents. Unable to satisfactorily address the most pressing topic of the day, these candidates may have opted for personal attacks instead. In 2004, the year when defense was the most salient topic at the time of the debates, Bush and Kerry both discussed each other with a predominantly negative tone, though Kerry was even more critical; 65% of Bush's statements about Kerry and 75% of Kerry's statements about Bush were negative. Bush was more positive on substance (60% of his substantive statements were positive, as opposed to 50% of Kerry's substantive statements). In particular, we see a sharp contrast in the tone of each candidate's discussion about defense: Of the defense statements that Bush and Kerry made, 58% and 35% were positive, respectively (while 32% and 52% were negative). These numbers may suggest that Bush tried to draw public attention to those parts of his defense policy that he believed were working well.

Obama's substantive negativity in the 2008 debates is especially intriguing because it contrasts sharply with the positive nature of his "hope" campaign message. Only in personal framing was he more positive in his tone than McCain. This asymmetry—Obama being more negative on policy topics but more positive on personal references to his opponent—matches our understanding of the broader context of the 2008 campaign. The fact that opinion polls in 2008 consistently indicated that most respondents perceived McCain's campaign to be more negative<sup>12</sup> reinforces the motivation for research that distinguishes the policy dimensions of negative campaigning from the personal dimensions (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009; Geer, 2006).

In summary, the candidates in all three debates used the tone of both their personal statements and their substantive statements to communicate a particular message to the public, conditioned by the circumstances of the campaign and the most pressing topics of the day.

## Conclusions

Debates are valuable opportunities for candidates to communicate their messages, but our results suggest that the messages they communicate (specifically, through agenda setting, framing, and tone) are strongly shaped by the context of the campaign and the demands of the public. Candidates have the best chance at priming, informing, and persuading if they use agenda control behaviors judiciously to draw attention to their advantaged topics and, at the same time, demonstrate that they share the public's concerns. In many elections (and two of the three elections studied here), the economy is the most salient topic in the nation, and in these cases clarifying candidates have particular incentives to steer the agenda toward salient economic issues. But we think the notion that candidates should and do play to the crowd holds more generally. Whatever the economic conditions, if the public is concerned about another topic, candidates are wise to—and will tend to—focus on that topic too.

In this way, our content analysis extends the findings of Vavreck (2009)—who looks at candidate rhetoric in campaign ads—to debate rhetoric. Yet, our study also builds theoretically on past research by identifying topic salience more broadly, whether surrounding the economy or another topic, as a key constraint on candidates' ability to emphasize favorable

topics. In the presence of multiple salient topics and the context of a limited agenda space, our experimental and content analysis findings together suggest that candidates may be unable to shift the agenda to advantageous topics without facing potential backlash from the public—unless the topic in question is one of top concern to citizens.

The relationship found here between topic salience in the public and candidate debate rhetoric suggests a complicated dynamic in which the public influences candidates, who then attempt to influence the public. This dynamic is made more complicated by the presence of the media, whose agenda also influences topic salience in the public (Soroka, 2003). Thus, our study finds indirect support for Wolfsfeld's (2004, 2011) politics-media-politics principle, which suggests a continuous interplay between politics and the media; political events affect media coverage, which then, in turn, affects subsequent political events. Public salience may function as an intervening variable in this interplay. Alternatively, the relationship found here between public salience and debate rhetoric may be spurious if candidates and the public are taking their cues directly from the media (or other external events and conditions).

Although this study cannot disentangle the roles of media coverage, public salience, and debate rhetoric, it does provide us with a better understanding of *how* candidates navigate between the dual pressures of heresthetics (sticking to their advantaged topics) and playing to the crowd. The unique environment presented by televised presidential debates limits the strategic communication of the candidates (Bennett & Manheim, 2001). Instead of being able to target their messages to a specific audience, candidates have to play to a national crowd. The experimental results give us an indication of how debate viewers are likely to respond to various agenda control techniques, but real-time analysis of actual debates is where the future of this research agenda lies. Such research will help us better understand the dynamic relationship among the media, the public, and the candidates in debates.

## Notes

1. We can only go so far in inferring underlying strategy from observed messaging behaviors (and resulting rhetorical patterns). Still, the systematic rhetorical patterns that we observe can provide suggestive evidence of strategies candidates may have pursued and can identify strategies that candidates did *not* pursue successfully. Whether intentional or not, candidates' debate behavior sends important cues to citizens.

2. Riker derives this strategy from two general principles. First, his dominance principle asserts that candidates avoid topics on which the other side has an advantage. Second, the dispersion principle argues that both sides ignore topics on which neither holds an advantage (Riker, 1996). These principles conflict with the strategy of playing to the crowd because they suggest little issue convergence between opposing campaigns, whereas the playing-to-the-crowd strategy suggests competing campaigns will each address the same salient issues (Sides, 2006, p. 412).

3. We are able, however, to control for the partisanship and ideology of subjects, which is important because these fundamental political attitudes should condition subjects' receptivity to various topics and frames (Jost, 2006; Lakoff, 2006).

4. As coded by the Policy Agendas Project ([www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)), based on raw Gallup survey results archived in the Roper Center iPOLL databank.

5. In the case where statements were vague or did not contain any substantive information, we coded the statement in the context of the surrounding discussion by reading the statements the candidate made both before and after the given statement. If the statement in question was clearly an extension of remarks that the candidate made before and/or after, we then coded the statement so that it was consistent with the overall message the candidate was conveying.

6. Content analysis of the 1992, 2004, and 2008 debates was conducted by four trained coders: Two coders completed the 2008 debates, and then one of these original coders as well as two additional coders completed the 1992 and 2004 debates. At least 300 of the statements coded by each coder were also coded by another coder, without the coders knowing which statements were being cross-coded. Pairwise tests showed strong intercoder reliability. Specifically, the minimum percentage agreements between coders on the variables of topic, frame, and tone were 94.6%, 85.1%, and 86.5%, respectively. The minimum Cohen's kappa scores for topic, frame, and tone were 0.922, 0.794, and 0.769, respectively. The minimum Krippendorff's alpha scores for topic, frame, and tone were 0.922, 0.795, and 0.768, respectively. These scores are based on a minimum of 75 statements in each pairwise test and include the full range of values for each variable. For topic and frame, an "other/not codeable" option was available; this code was employed for 4% of all candidate statements for topic and for 18% of all candidate statements for frame. A "neutral" option was employed for 28% of all candidate statements for tone; when cases of agreement about a neutral code are removed from the statements tested for intercoder reliability, coders demonstrate 85.5% agreement, a Cohen's kappa score of 0.73, and a Krippendorff's alpha score of 0.729.

7. The second debate in 1992, the second debate in 2004, and the second debate in 2008 all utilized the "town hall" format, with questions coming from the audience. In 2008, questions in this town hall debate were also posed via YouTube.

8. In the rare case that the candidate mentioned more than one policy topic in a single statement, we coded the statement according to the topic that dominated the statement. However, in the very few cases that the candidate gave two or more topics approximately equal consideration, we coded the statement according to the first topic mentioned.

9. After reading the debate text, subjects were asked to rate their overall support for each candidate using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (very negative) to 4 (very positive).

10. This finding is based on additional analyses not presented in the main body of this article. These analyses also include: a model of the core results shown in Table 1; a replication of these results using an alternative dependent variable in the form of the number of like/dislike clicks subjects gave the second candidate while reading his response; and the regression analysis that produced the results for Figure 1.

11. In Figure 2 and all other findings presented, we consider only the two main candidates in each debate, excluding Perot's statements in 1992.

12. For example, an Ipsos-Public Affairs/McClatchy Poll conducted in October 2008 showed that 53% of respondents believed McCain was "engaging in more negative campaigning," as compared with 30% who cited Obama as being more negative (see [http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data\\_access/ipoll/ipoll.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html)). A George Washington University Battleground survey conducted the same month showed that 57% of respondents believed that McCain was running a "somewhat" or "strongly" more negative campaign, with 20% citing Obama as being more negative.

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