Motivated Reasoning and Viewers' Reactions to the First 2012 Presidential Debate

Jeffrey W. Jarman, PhD
Wichita State University

Jeffrey W. Jarman, Ph.D. (University of Kansas)

Dr. Jarman is Director of Debate and Associate Director, Elliott School of Communication, at Wichita State University. He regularly teaches classes in communication analysis, persuasion, political communication, and research methods for graduate students. His current research focuses on audience evaluation of political information, in both presidential debates and political fact-checking.

Proper APA citation for this article is:

Jarman, J. W. (2016). Motivated reasoning and viewers' reactions to the first 2012 presidential debate. *Speaker & Gavel*, *53*(1), Pages.

Motivated Reasoning and Viewers' Reactions to the First 2012 Presidential Debate

Jeffrey W. Jarman, PhD

General election presidential debates are highly argumentative encounters filled with evidence, argument, and refutation. While the candidates come to the debates armed with evidence and arguments in support of their positions, it is unclear how the audience interprets the information. This paper reports the findings from a study of the first presidential debate in 2012. Participants evaluated the strength of arguments made by Obama and Romney, as well as which candidate won each segment of the debate. The study confirms that viewers do not dispassionately evaluate the debate, but instead are driven by partisan interests that lead them to find their candidate made stronger arguments and won the debate. Partisan motivations overwhelmed the structural changes in the 2012 debate format designed to encourage more in-depth discussion of the topic.

KEYWORDS: presidential debates, motivated reasoning, political information, political affiliation, Obama, Romney

Presidential debates are now a regularized part of the election process. Among their many benefits, debates offer the public an opportunity to compare the candidates and their positions, side by side. While presidential debates may not swing the outcome of an election, candidates engage in lengthy and time-consuming preparation to insure they are well-versed on the issues facing the country. The campaigns compile extensive amounts of information in order to prepare their candidate on the issues. "Nowadays, staffers assemble thick briefing books months in advance" (Shapiro, 2012). By some accounts, the material is "voluminous" (Baker & Parker, 2012). Candidates study the material to learn both their best points as well as how to respond to the arguments put forward by their opponents. "The goal is to exhaust every possible question and rehearse the perfect answer for each one, so by the time you get to the debate itself, there are no surprises" (Shapiro, 2012). Most candidates practice answers for days and follow-up the sessions with several mock debates in venues that recreate the actual conditions of the event. While image and style play an important role in the practice, evidence and refutation play a substantial part in the process.

The 2012 debates between Obama and Romney followed the same ritual. The result was a debate filled with evidence, argument, and refutation. Political commentators noted the abundance of argument. Cass (2012), for instance, suggested the debate contained "a detailed discussion of the issues," while Gleckman (2012) reported that those who "have been arguing for a substantive debate" got what they wanted. Others offered a more sardonic assessment. Baker (2012) argued the debate was "a wonky blizzard of facts." Similarly, Seib (2012) declared, "President Barack Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney engaged in a debate on economic issues that was detailed, serious and seriously wonky." Cillizza (2012) commented, "the first 45 minutes of the debate felt like a conversation between the heads of two opposing think tanks. Obama cited a study, Romney responded with a study of his own." In addition, Roy (2012) suggested, "the first presidential debate between Mitt Romney and President Obama was easily the wonkiest such debate I can recall in my lifetime." But, it wasn't just political pundits who noted the use of evidence by the candidates. Rowland (2013) analyzed the arguments made by Obama and Romney and reached a similar conclusion:

When faced with two well-supported and defended positions reaching opposite conclusions, how did viewers of the debate evaluate the arguments made by the candidates and did it affect their impression of which candidate won the debate?

> The debate was quite substantive with over 70 effective arguments made by the two candidates, 120 instances in which evidence was cited and more than 70 examples of effective refutation. After subtracting time talking by the moderator, this means that there were more than three instances of effective argument, evidence citation, or refutation in each minute of the debate. (p. 533)

The significant use of argument in the debate by the candidates raises an important question: when faced with two well-supported and defended positions reaching opposite conclusions, how did viewers of the debate evaluate the arguments made by the candidates and did it affect their impression of which candidate won the debate? To address these questions, this paper will first explore the relevant literature on debate effects, second, explain a survey conducted during the first presidential debate of 2012, third, explore the results of the survey, and finally, draw conclusions based on the findings.

Literature Review

Given the considerable preparation that precedes a presidential debate, it is not surprising that one of the most well-documented effects of watching a debate is increased political knowledge. As McKinney and Carlin (2004) explain, televised presidential debates "are an 'information-rich' source of campaign communication facilitating viewers' acquisition of issue knowledge" (p. 211). Similarly, the Racine Group (2002)

found "there is strong empirical support for the contribution of televised debates to viewer learning" (p. 207). While not universal (see Graber & Kim, 1978; Weaver & Drew, 1995), a substantial number of studies spanning nearly 40 years have confirmed that viewers learn information when they watch a presidential debate (Abramowitz, 1978; Becker, Sobowale, Cobbey, & Eyal, 1978; Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson, 2002; Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998; Drew & Weaver, 2006; Holbrook, 1999; Jacoby, Troutman, & Whittler, 1986; Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000; Kenski & Jamieson, 2006; Lemert, 1993; Maurer & Reinemann, 2006; Pfau & Eveland, 1994; Turcotte & Goidel, 2014; Zhu, Milvasky, & Biswas, 1994). This is not surprising. Watching a 90-minute debate between the major candidates for president ought to increase the viewers' knowledge of the issues. The sheer volume of information makes this likely. In other words, there is an *information outcome* associated with watching a presidential debate.

While the educational benefit derived from watching a presidential debate is important, the extent of the benefit must be tempered by several important factors. First, almost all of the studies are limited to investigations of viewer learning of candidate issue positions. The typical study compared debate watchers and non-watchers on their ability to correctly identify which candidate held which position. Not surprisingly, exposure to a debate increased the likelihood that a voter would learn which candidate held which position. While it is important for voters to know which positions are supported by which candidates, that is the most basic level of knowledge and provides little encouragement that debates can help viewers select from competing proposals. As Jamieson (2015) noted, "often overlooked in summaries stating that voters learn from debates is the question, what exactly did they learn that was worth knowing?" (p. 89). Ideally, debates allow viewers to compare the strength of competing policy options (as explained by the candidates). Knowing (or remembering) which candidate took which position is a necessary, but not sufficient outcome of a vibrant democratic process.

Second, a related challenge to the information outcome comes from the theory of motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning suggests "people sometimes look for reasons to justify an opinion they are eager to uphold" (Mercier & Sperber, 2011, p. 66). Described variously as a prior attitude effect (Taber & Lodge, 2006), an attitude congruency bias (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009), biased assimilation (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), and belief perseverance (Bullock, 2006), the point is the same: "people who feel strongly about an issue…will evaluate supportive arguments as stronger and more compelling than opposing arguments" (Taber & Lodge, 2006, p. 757). Biased processing of information influences interpretations of both proattitudinal and counterattitidinal arguments. Individuals will "judge confirming evidence as relevant and reliable but disconfirming evidence as irrelevant and unreliable" and will "accept confirming evidence at face value while scrutinizing disconfirming evidence hypercritically" (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979, p. 2099). Research in political science and

social psychology has documented the role of motivated reasoning in processing political information (Bullock, 2006; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006). In particular, political affiliation provides a strong source of motivation when evaluating information (Allen, Stevens, & Sullivan, 2009; Bullock, 2006; Gaines, Kuklinksi, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). "Political beliefs about controversial factual questions in politics are often closely linked with one's ideological preferences or partisan beliefs" (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010, p. 307). Even when Democrats and Republicans agree on the facts, they can reach different conclusions because they interpret the information differently (Gaines, Kuklinksi, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007).

The theory of motivated reasoning has received scant attention in research on political debates. The premise of motivated reasoning justifies the widely documented conclusion that pre-debate opinion of the candidates influenced the judgment of which candidate was perceived to have won the debate (Abramowitz, 1978; Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998; Bothwell & Brigham, 1983; Jarman, 2005; Jarman, 2010; McKinnon, Tedesco, & Kaid, 1993; Mullinix, 2011; Munro et al., 2002; Richardson, Huddy, & Morgan, 2008; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984). Unfortunately, the theory of motivated reasoning was rarely utilized to justify the conclusion. Most studies reported the the influence of pre-debate attitudes on the judgment of the debate without utilizing any theory to explain the relationship (with the exception of Munro et al. (2002) who did explicitly reference the theory).

...we know that viewers gain information from watching a debate, but what do they do with that information, especially when they are exposed to competing positions? How do viewers evaluate competing evidence, arguments, and refutation?

The tension between the information outcome and motivated reasoning raises new and important questions in the context of a presidential debate: we know that viewers gain information from watching a debate, but what do they do with that information, especially when they are exposed to competing positions? How do viewers evaluate competing evidence, arguments, and refutation? As Warner and McKinney (2013) noted, "debates, then, provide a unique opportunity to test…whether biased processing will diminish the value of exposure to balanced messages" (p. 511). This project advances the prior work done on debate effects, and the information outcome, to investigate not simply whether viewers learned new information, but more importantly, how did they evaluate the information they received. Presidential debates represent unique argumentative encounters, with skilled arguers presenting strong arguments on each side of a controversial topic. Do viewers of a presidential debate accept equally the information they learn or are they biased in their evaluation of the information? To investigate this topic, this project was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. Will evaluation of the strength of the arguments made by each candidate vary based on prior attitudes, including pre-debate feeling thermometer toward the candidates, attitudes regarding relevant political issues, pre-debate vote choice, and political affiliation?

RQ2. Will perception of the winner of each segment of the debate be associated with pre-debate vote choice and political affiliation?

The first presidential debate in 2012 provides an excellent opportunity to investigate this topic. The format used in 2012, first used in 2008, allowed for an extended debate on a narrow range of topics. Historically, the format for presidential debates restricted the amount of time that could be devoted to a topic. "During the 1996 CPD-sponsored debates, the candidates were collectively allotted a mere three minutes per question sequence: ninety seconds for Candidate 'A,' followed by a one-minute rebuttal for Candidate 'B,' followed by a thirty-second surrebuttal for Candidate 'A' (Farah, 2004, pp. 87-88). In contrast, in 2012, the Commission on Presidential Debates structured the non-town hall debates into six segments of 15 minutes. The intuitive appeal of the format change is understandable: instead of limiting answer time to barely more than a sound bite, the extended time gave the candidates the time needed to fully explain their positions on a few of the most pressing issues facing the country. In addition, for the first time ever, moderator Jim Lehrer released the general topics for each of the debates in advance (Flock, 2012). Going in to the debate, the candidates knew the six topics that would be discussed and could focus their debate preparation on those issues. The extended time and advanced notice of the topics meant that the candidates could focus their pre-debate preparations to insure the debate could be detailed and specific (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2007). The question remains: given the extended discussion to allow a vigorous exchange of information, were viewers able to set aside their partisan motivations and evaluate the arguments in an unbiased manner? Or, will their prior attitudes serve to influence their interpretation of the debate such that their prior positions were merely reinforced?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study included 175 undergraduate students (70 men, 104 women, and 1 person who did not report their sex) enrolled in lower-division communication classes at a Midwestern university who received extra-credit for participating. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 63 (M=21.46, SD=6.58). Some participants were international students (n=22). Even with a convenience sample, there was a good mix of political affiliations: a plurality of the participants reported no affiliation or some other affiliation (n=44), followed by Republican (n=43), Independent

(*n*=31) and Democrat (*n*=30). A few participants, including all of the international students, left the political affiliation question blank (*n*=27).

Procedure

Participants arrived on the evening of October 3, 2012 to watch the debate live (to eliminate the influence of news and commentary on their opinion). Participants completed a battery of questions prior to the start of the debate. These included basic demographics such as age, sex, political affiliation, and status (domestic student or international student). In addition, participants identified their pre-debate vote choice (international students were asked to report which candidate they wanted to win the election instead of who they intended to vote for) and attitude toward Obamacare, the economic stimulus, and tax cuts for the wealthy. Participants also completed a feeling thermometer for both Obama and Romney. Finally, prior to the start of the debate, participants were briefed on how to complete a semantic differential scale.

Participants watched the debate live, except that the video feed was paused after each 15-minute segment to allow the participants to answer questions regarding the debate. After each 15-minute segment, participants identified which candidate made the better arguments during the segment (Obama, Romney, Both/Neither/Tie/Unsure). In addition, participants rated the strength of the arguments made by both Obama and Romney (scale information below). Participants also completed a thought-listing exercise regarding the segment (not reported in this paper). The video feed was resumed when all participants were ready. The same process was repeated for segment 2 and 3. To minimize fatigue and maintain attention on the debate, only the first 3 segments of the debate were analyzed. After the third segment responses were recorded, participants also completed several post-debate questions including an assessment of which candidate won the debate, their post-debate vote choice, a feeling thermometer for each candidate, and a rating of the performance in the debate of both Obama and Romney.

Measures

Participants rated the strength of the arguments made by Obama and Romney during each of the first three time blocks. Strength of argument was measured using a 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from LaFrance and Boster (2001). The scale used the following pairs: informative/not informative, correct/incorrect, worthless/valuable, unsound/sound, well-reasoned/poorly reasoned, logical/illogical, reasonable/unreasonable. Items were recoded so that lower numbers indicated weak arguments. Scores for the seven items were averaged and ranged from 1 to 7. The scale showed strong internal consistency: Obama segment 1 (α=.95), Romney segment 1 (α=.91), Obama segment 2 (α=.94), Romney segment 2 (α=.92), Obama segment 3 (α=.94), and Romney segment 3 (α=.90). Finally, an overall argument strength score was created for each candidate by averaging the three segment scores.

Attitude toward Obama and Romney was measured before and after the debate using a standard 0-100 feeling thermometer (ANES, 2008). Pre-test results identify the audience as having a more favorable attitude toward Obama (*M*=56.26, *SD*=27.95) than Romney (*M*=39.01, *SD*=24.90).

Because moderator Jim Lehrer released the topics for the first debate in advance, several scales were used to measure prior attitudes toward issues that were likely to be topics of the debate. A 7-point semantic differential measured attitude toward Obamacare. The pairs were: good/bad, wise/foolish, harmful/beneficial. Items were recoded and averaged so that lower numbers indicate opposition to Obamacare (*M*=4.09, *SD*=1.57). The scale was reliable (α=.91). A 7-point semantic differential measured attitude toward the economic stimulus. The items were recoded and averaged so that lower numbers indicate opposition to the stimulus (*M*=4.26, *SD*=1.35). The pairs were: good/bad, worthless/valuable, unsound/sound. The scale was reliable (α=.89). Finally, a 7-point semantic differential measured attitude toward tax cuts for the wealthy. The items were recoded and averaged so that lower numbers indicate opposition to tax cuts for the wealthy (*M*=3.34, *SD*=1.74). The pairs were: good/bad, worthless/valuable, unsound/sound. The scale was reliable (α=.89).

Finally, two other pre-debate measures of prior attitude were collected. Participants recorded their current vote preference (Obama, Romney, other/undecided) and their political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, Other/no affiliation). After the debate, participants again were asked their vote preference (Obama, Romney, other/undecided).

Results

RQ1 asked if evaluations of the strength of the arguments made by Obama and Romney would vary by based on prior attitudes. There was overwhelming evidence to conclude that prior attitudes influenced the evaluation of the strength of the arguments made by the candidates. First, correlation was used to compare the pre-debate thermometer rating for each candidate and the argument strength evaluation for each candidate during each segment of the debate and for the composite argument strength score for each candidate. Table 1 shows the strong correlations between prior attitudes and evaluations of the debate. There were strong positive correlations between the pre-debate feeling thermometer for Obama and evaluation of his arguments. Similarly, there were strong positive correlations between the pre-debate feeling thermometer for Romney and evaluation of his arguments. In other words, as the rating for a candidate increased, so too did the evaluation of his arguments. The opposite pattern emerged when evaluating the opposing candidate. As predicted by motivated reasoning, there were strong negative evaluations related to the opposing candidate's arguments. There were strong negative correlations between the pre-debate feeling thermometer for Obama and the evaluation

of the arguments by Romney. Similarly, there were strong negative correlations between the pre-debate feeling thermometer for Romney and evaluation of the arguments by Obama.

Table 1. Correlation matrix. Pre-debate thermometers, issue attitudes and argument strength evaluations

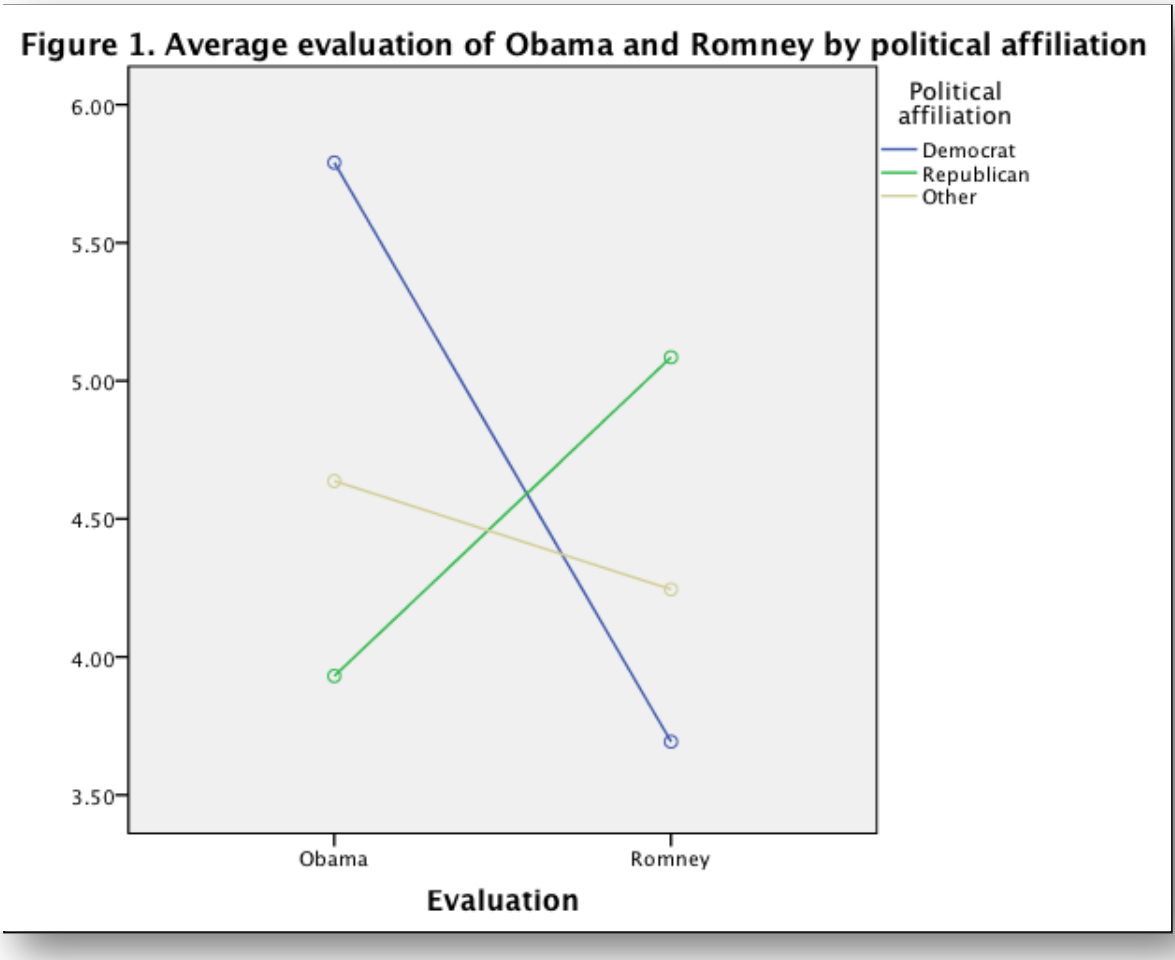
	Obama Segment 1	Romney Segment 1	Obama Segment 2	Romney Segment 2	Obama Segment 3	Romney Segment 3	Obama Overall	Romney Overall
1. Pre-debate Obama	.658	-.530	.685	-.565	.639	-.442	.718	-.557
feeling thermometer	171	171	169	169	159	162	170	170
	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
2. Pre-debate Romney	-.552	.514	-.569	.565	-.547	.480	-.602	.564
feeling thermometer	171	171	169	169	159	162	170	170
	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
3. Attitude toward	.622	-.489	.663	-.507	.608	-.429	.689	-.522
Obamacare	168	168	166	166	156	159	167	167
	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
4. Attitude toward	.416	-.368	.431	-.326	.415	-.343	.462	-.384
stimulus	167	167	165	165	155	158	166	166
	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
5. Attitude toward	-.100	.298	-.158	.234	-.175	.326	-.159	.305
tax cuts	169	169	167	167	157	160	168	168
	.078	.001	.021	.001	.014	.001	.020	.001

Initial attitude toward the topic also strongly influenced the evaluation of the strength of the arguments made by both Romney and Obama. Correlation was used to compare the attitude toward Obamacare, the economic stimulus, and tax cuts for the wealthy with the argument strength evaluation for each candidate during each segment of the debate and the composite argument strength score for each candidate (see Table 1). Higher levels of support for Obamacare and the economic stimulus were strongly associated with higher evaluations of the strength of the arguments made by Obama and lower evaluations of the arguments made by Romney. The relationships were statistically significant in every segment of the debate and for the overall argument strength score for both candidates. Increasing support for tax cuts for the wealthy was related to higher evaluations of the strength of the arguments made by Romney and lower evaluations of the arguments made by Obama. The relationship between tax cuts and argument strength was weaker (compared to Obamacare and the stimulus) and held in 5 of the 6 segments of the debate as well as the overall scores for both Obama and Romney. In addition, two mixed ANOVAs were used to address RQ1. A repeated measures ANOVA with political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, Other) as a between subject factor and evaluation of the candidates (Obama, Romney) as the within-subjects factor was used. There was a statistically significant interaction between political affiliation and candidate on the overall evaluation of the strength of their arguments, $F(2, 144)=24.58$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta 2 = .26$. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Figure 1 shows the divergent reactions to the candidates based on their political affiliation. There was a

statistically significant difference in ratings of Obama and Romney by both Democrats, t(29)=6.878, p<.001, d=2.18, and Republicans, t(42)=3.234, p=.002, d=1.02, but not for others, t(74)=1.709, n.s. The same pattern also existed regarding pre-debate vote choice.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and *n*s for argument strength by political affiliation

	Obama Overall			Romney Overall		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Democrat	5.79	0.87	30	3.69	1.32	30
Republican	3.93	1.24	43	5.09	0.96	43
Other	4.64	1.21	74	4.24	1.12	74



A repeated measures ANOVA with pre-debate vote choice (Obama, Romney, Other) as a between subject factor and evaluation of the candidates (Obama, Romney) as the within-subjects factor was used. There was a statistically significant interaction between pre-debate vote choice and candidate on the overall evaluation of the strength of

their arguments, $F(2, 171)=81.201$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .40$. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3. As with political affiliation, there was a statistically significant difference in ratings of Obama and Romney for those who supported Obama prior to the debate, $t(72)=8.358$, $p<.001$, $d=1.78$, and for those who supported Romney before the debate, $t(30)=34.897$, $p<.001$, $d=1.85$, but not for others, $t(70)=.815$, *n.s.*

Table 3. Means, standard deviations and *n* s for argument strength by predebate vote choice

	Obama Overall			Romney Overall		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Obama	5.53	0.94	73	3.79	1.2	73
Romney	3.29	0.95	31	5.35	0.93	31
Other	4.63	1.07	70	4.56	0.93	70

Analyzing the interactions provides additional information to address RQ1. A one-way ANOVA found significant differences between groups based on political affiliation in the overall assessment of the strength of the arguments made by Obama, $F(2,144)=22.892$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .24$. Post hoc comparisons using Dunnett's test showed statistically significant differences not only between Democrats and Republicans, but also between Democrats and others. In addition, a one-way ANOVA found significant differences between groups based on political affiliation in the overall assessment of the strength of the arguments made by Romney, $F(2,144)=14.733$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Post hoc comparisons using Dunnett's test again showed a statistically significant difference between Republicans and Democrats as well as between Republicans and others. The same pattern was present in the interactionased on pre-debate vote choice. A one-way ANOVA found significant differences between groups based on pre-debate vote choice in the overall assessment of the strength of the arguments made by Obama, $F(2, 171)=55.684$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. Post hoc comparisons using Dunnett's test showed statistically significant differences not only between Obama supporters and Romney supporters, but also between Obama supporters and those who supported some other candidate. In addition, a one-way ANOVA found significant differences between groups based on pre-debate vote choice in the overall assessment of the strength of the arguments made by Romney, $F(2, 171)=25.716$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .23$. Post hoc comparisons using Dunnett's test again showed a statistically significant difference between Romney supporters and Obama supporters as well as between Romney supporters and those who supported some other candidate.

RQ2 asked if perception of the winner of each segment of the debate would be associated with pre-debate vote choice and/or political affiliation. There is strong evidence to confirm that prior attitudes were associated with the perception of the winner

of the debate. Chi-square was used to compare pre-debate vote choice and political affiliation with the assessment of which candidate won each segment of the debate. Pre-debate vote choice was associated with the perception of the winner of segment 1, χ^2 (9, N=167)=79.928, p<.001, V=.40, winner of segment 2, χ^2 (9, N=163)=49.772, p<.001, V=.32, and the winner of segment 3, χ^2 (9, N=148)=41.822, p<.001, V=.31. Those who supported Obama before the debate were very likely to identify Obama as the winner of each segment of the debate. Similarly, pre-debate Romney supporters were very likely to identify him as the winner of each segment and the overall debate.

A similar pattern emerged between political affiliation and the winner of the debate. Political affiliation was associated with the perception of the winner of segment 1, χ^2 (9, N=140)=45.440, p<.001, V=.33, the winner of segment 2, χ^2 (9, N=125)=16.736, p=.047, V=.21, and the winner of segment 3, χ^2 (9, N=167)=79.928, p<.001, V=.40. Democrats were very likely to identify Obama as the winner of each segment of the debate. Similarly, Republicans were very likely to identify Romney as the winner of each segment of the debate.

Discussion

General election political debates should serve as an exemplar for argumentation. Strong candidates, usually well-spoken and well-prepared, with experience gained from prior elections and the primary season, are given time not only to make their best points, but refute those of their opponent in an unfiltered forum. For viewers, debates represent the best opportunity to compare not only the candidates, but also their positions on the issues. In the 2012 presidential debates, the candidates were given the topics in advance and were given an extended period of time to argue their points in depth. But, while the candidates made great efforts to come the debates armed with evidence and reasoning in support of their positions, it is unclear if viewers were able to process the information they receive in an unbiased manner. In an ideal world, "citizens must then use these facts to inform their preferences. They must absorb and apply the facts to overcome areas of ignorance or to correct mistaken conceptions" (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000, p. 791). However, as this research shows, most viewers of presidential debates interpreted the competing information provided in a political debate through a partisan lens. The results from this study suggest that viewers of a presidential debate were motivated reasoners when they evaluated the arguments in the debate. While *both* candidates marshaled evidence in support of their arguments, the audience regularly and reliably found *only one* candidate

While both candidates marshaled evidence in support of their arguments, the audience regularly and reliably found only one candidate made strong arguments: their own… viewers overwhelmingly were more likely to judge their candidate's arguments as stronger and their opponent's arguments as weaker.

made *strong* arguments: their own. For each segment of the debate, where each candidate was given the opportunity to develop their points in detail, viewers overwhelmingly were more likely to judge their candidate's arguments as stronger and their opponent's arguments as weaker. In addition, in assessing the winner of the debate, partisans were more likely to believe that their favored candidate won each major exchange. Rather than watching debates to learn new information and potentially update their opinions, viewers were guided by their prior opinions when assessing the contest. The first 2012 presidential debate provided the audience with extensive evidence, argument and refutation, and, in the face of competing arguments, the audience's assessment was overwhelmingly tied to their prior disposition.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, the results confirm the importance of motivated reasoning when viewing a presidential debate. Argumentation scholars should heed the call by Holbert, LaMarre and Landreville (2009) that "debate viewing effects must also be placed within the context of citizens' proclivity for biased processing of political information" (p. 158). Very little prior research explicitly linked the theory of motivated reasoning to evaluation of presidential debates. Yet, there is strong evidence to believe that motivated reasoning explains viewers' reactions to the debates. In particular, the role of political affiliation, prior vote choice, pre-debate attitude toward the candidates and prior attitudes on key issues strongly influence viewers' perceptions of the debate. This is especially important as researchers investigate other cognitive and behavioral effects of watching a political debate. In some cases, researchers may fail to find any differences in a particular outcome because they were obscured by divergent partisan reactions. As Bullock (2006) explains, "we see no overall effect because the treatment caused *two* effects—one for Republicans, another for Democrats—in opposite directions. Averaged together, they cancel each other out" (p. 12). This is a concern for scholars of debates, but it could easily extend to many other contexts of argumentation studies, too. Careful attention to the role of prior attitudes, especially on topics that might encourage biased processing of information, could lead to additional insights.

The move to debating fewer topics for an extended period of time has intuitive appeal, however… partisan viewers…are not likely to update their prior opinions based on an in-depth exchange between the candidates.

Second, from a practical standpoint, recent format changes have not produced significantly different outcomes. The move to debating fewer topics for an extended period of time has intuitive appeal, however, the results from this study suggest that partisan viewers (by far the largest portion of those tuning in) are not likely to update their prior opinions based on an in-depth exchange between the candidates, but rather are more likely to be guided by their prior opinions. As a result, at least for the traditional debate format in presidential elections, candidates and their campaigns should focus on

crafting messages that will resonate with viewers who desire to see their favored candidate succeed. While many commentators thought Obama lost the first debate (e.g., Halperin, 2012), our survey documented that Obama supporters thought he made stronger arguments and won each exchange in the debate. Candidates should embrace the power of debates to reinforce their supporters and center their preparations on this focus. This is not to suggest that major gaffes will not affect the trajectory of the campaign. Campaigns are complex and the debates are but one source of influence on vote choice. But, candidates should embrace the fact that their supporters want them to succeed in the debates and their initial reactions, prior to news reports and commentary, generally are that their candidate won.

Third, this project expands the role of argument strength as a topic in argumentation studies. Most prior research treated the concept as an independent variable: researchers would create "strong" and "weak" arguments and test for differences. In most cases, weak arguments are designed to lack strong evidence and/or reasoning to justify the conclusion. Such an approach assumes people can easily set aside their partisan interest on the topic and evaluate the claims based solely on accuracy goals. As this study makes clear, that is not easily accomplished. As such, argument strength also needs to be analyzed as a dependent variable. Well-meaning individuals naturally will hold divergent opinions on a wide range of topics. Researchers must begin to account for the audience's prior attitudes when evaluating the effect of particular messages. In addition, researchers themselves are not immune to the influence of motivated reasoning and must be careful to make sure their own political biases do not cloud their judgment of the weak and strong arguments used in their studies.

While these findings are important, several limitations do exist. First, this study exclusively used a student population. While student participants are common and not altogether unreliable, future research should actively investigate this topic with non-students and those most likely to watch presidential debates. Second, this study was focused on a general election presidential debate. Future research should investigate a broader set of political debates, including primary presidential debates, gubernatorial debates, and other down-ballot races. It is possible that partisan motivations are stronger when the race is well known and well publicized and that other races might be less subject to biased processing of information. Or, conversely, races that are less publicized and less well known may invoke a stronger influence of biased processing since the viewers may lack the knowledge and interest to pursue an accuracy-related goal. Future research should investigate the topic. Third, this project drew on reactions to a presidential debate using a standard format. Future research should investigate the influence of motivated reasoning in other debate formats, especially the town hall, to determine if the type of debate influences viewers' reactions. Finally, the role of undecided voters should be explored in greater depth. While they do not comprise a large segment of potential voters when the debates occur, they can influence the election in

swing states that are close. Future research should investigate the influence of motivated reasoning on undecided voters, both partisans and non-partisans, to determine its influence in political contexts. For instance, are undecided voters immune from motivated reasoning? Or, are they undecided because they have conflicting motivations regarding the candidates? Future research should attempt to understand how undecided voters make sense of the information in political debates.

Televised presidential debates now are a regular and expected part of a presidential campaign. They provide a range of benefits to the millions of viewers who take time to watch. But, as this research has shown, outcomes related to political information must be qualified: rather than serving as a source of new information and an opportunity to update prior opinions, the information provided in a presidential debate is judged first on how well it matches prior opinions. As prior research has shown, the perception of all political candidates improves when they participate in a political debate (McKinney & Warner, 2013), but that benefit is not equal insofar as the ingroup candidate receives a larger improvement than their opponent (Warner & McKinney, 2013). This study provides one explanation of how attitude polarization occurs: ingroup candidates are judged to make stronger arguments, win each exchange, and generally outperform their opponent. In the absence of a major gaffe, debates provide an opportunity for candidates to bolster their position with their supporters, even if they are unlikely win converts from the other side.

References

Abramowitz, A. I. (1978). The impact of a presidential debate on voter rationality. *American Journal of Political Science, 22,* 680-690.

Allen, B., Stevens, D., & Sullivan, J. (2009). *Not the whole story: from punditry to partisan processing of the power of the truth test*. Paper presented at 2009 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Toronto, Canada. Retrieved from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1449892.

American National Election Study. (2008). *American National Election Study, 2008: Pre- and post-election survey: Data collection instrument*. ICPSR 25383. Retrieved from http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/25383.

Baker, P. (2012, October 4). A clash of philosophies. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/04/us/politics/debate-a-clash-over-governments-role-news-analysis.html.

Baker, P. & Parker, A. (2012, September 28). Before debate, tough crowds at the practice. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/29/us/ politics/cramming-and-pruning-for-first-presidential-debate.html.

Becker, L. B., Sobowale, I. A., Cobbey, R. E., & Eyal, C. H. (1978). Debates' effects on voters' understanding of candidates and issues. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 126-139). New York: Praeger.

Benoit, W. L., & Hansen, G. J. (2004). Presidential debate watching, issue knowledge, character evaluation, and vote choice. *Human Communication Research, 30*, 121-144.

Benoit, W. L., Hansen, G. J., & Verser, R. M. (2003). A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates. *Communication Monographs, 70*, 335-350.

Benoit, W. L., McKinney, M. S., & Stephenson, M. T. (2002). Effects of watching primary debates in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. *Journal of Communication, 52*, 316-331.

Benoit, W. L., Webber, D. J., & Berman, J. (1998). Effects of presidential debate watching and ideology on attitudes and knowledge. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 34*, 163-172.

Bothwell, R. K. & Brigham, J. C. (1983). Selective evaluation and recall during the 1980 Reagan-Carter debate. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 13*, 427-442.

Bullock, J. G. (2006, October). *Partisanship and the enduring effects of false political information*. Retrieved from http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/politics/seminars/bullock_f06.pdf.

Cass, C. (2012, October 4). Debate viewers learn that Romney can be wonky, too. *CNS News*. Retrieved from http://cnsnews.com/news/article/debate-viewers-learn-romney-can-be-wonky-too.

Cillizza, C. (2012, October 3). First thoughts from the first presidential debate. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2012/10/03/first-thoughts-from-the-first-presidential-debate.

Commission on Presidential Debates. (2007, November 19). *Commission on presidential debates announces sites, dates, formats and candidate selection criteria for 2008 general election*. Retrieved from http://www.debates.org/pages/news_111907.html.

Drew, D. & Weaver, D. (2006). Voter learning in the 2004 presidential election: Did the media matter? *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 83*, 25-42.

Edwards, K., & Smith, E. E. (1996). A disconfirmation bias in the evaluation of arguments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71,* 5-24.

Farah, G. (2004). *No debate: How the Republican and Democratic parties secretly control the presidential debates*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Flock, E. (2012, September 21). In a first, debates give presidential candidates the topics ahead of time. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved from http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2012/09/21/in-a-first-debates-give-presidential-candidates-the-topics-ahead-of-time.

Gaines, B.J., Kuklinski, J.H., Quirk, P.J., Peyton, B., & Verkuilen, J. (2007). Same facts, different interpretations: Partisan motivation and opinion on Iraq. *Journal of Politics, 69,* 957-974.

Gleckman, H. (2012, October 4). What did we learn from Obama and Romney in the presidential debate? Not much. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/Tax-VOX/2012/1004/What-did-we-learn-from-Obama-and-Romney-in-the-presidential-debate-Not-much.

Graber, D. A. & Kim, Y. Y. (1978). Why John Q. Voter did not learn much from the 1976 presidential debates. In B. Rubin (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 2* (pp. 407-421). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Halperin, M. (2012, October 3). Grading the Denver donnybrook. *Time*. Retrieved from http://thepage.time.com/2012/10/03/grading-the-denver-donnybrook/.

Holbert, R. L., LaMarre, H. L., & Landreville, K. D. (2009). Fanning the flames of a partisan divide: Debate viewing, vote choice, and perceptions of vote count accuracy. *Communication Research, 36,* 155-177.

Holbrook, T. M. (1999). Political learning from presidential debates. *Political Behavior, 21,* 67-89.

Jacoby, J., Troutman, T. R., & Whittler, T. E. (1986). Viewer miscomprehension of the 1980 presidential debate: a research note. *Political Psychology, 7,* 297-308.

Jamieson, K. H. (2015). The discipline's debate contributions: then, now, and next. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 101,* 85-97.

Jamieson, K. H. & Adasiewicz, C. (2000). What can voters learn from election debate? In S. Coleman (Ed.), *Televised election debates: International perspectives* (pp. 25-42). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Jarman, J. (2005). Political affiliation and presidential debates: A real-time analysis of the effects of the arguments used in presidential debates. *American Behavioral Scientist, 49,* 229-242.

Jarman, J. (2010). The effects of format changes on viewers' perceptions of arguments made by Obama and McCain in the 2008 presidential debates. In D. Gouran (Ed.), *The functions of argument and social conte*xt (pp. 202-210). Washington: National Communication Association.

Kenski, K. & Jamieson, K. H. (2006). Issue knowledge and perceptions of agreement in the 2004 presidential general election. *Presidential Studies Quarterly, 36,* 243-259.

Kuklinski, J.H., Quirk, P.J., Jerit, J., Schwieder, D., & Rich, R.F. (2000). Misinformation and the currency of democratic citizenship. *Journal of Politics, 62,* 790-816.

La France, B. H., & Boster, F. J. (2001). To match or mismatch? That is only one important question. *Communication Monographs, 68,* 211-234.

Lemert, J. B. (1993). Do televised presidential debates help inform voters? *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 37,* 83-94.

Lord, C. G., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1979). Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: the effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37,* 2098-2109.

Maurer, M. & Reinemann, C. (2006). Learning versus knowing: effects of misinformation in televised debates. *Communication Research, 33,* 489-506.

McKinney, M. S. & Carlin, D. B. (2004). Political campaign debates. In L. L. Kaid (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research* (pp. 203-234). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

McKinney, M. S. & Warner, B. R. (2013). Do presidential debates matter? Examining a decade of campaign debate effects. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 49,* 238-258.

McKinnon, L. M., Tedesco, J.C., & Kaid, L. L. (1993). The third 1992 presidential debate: Channel and commentary effects. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 30,* 106-118.

Mercier, H., & Sperber, D. (2011). Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 34,* 57-111.

Mullinix, K. J. (2011). *A motivated audience: An analysis of motivated reasoning and presidential campaign debates*. (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Kansas: Lawrence, KS. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/1808/7896.

Munro, G. D., Ditto, P. H., Lockhart, L. K., Fagerlin, A., Gready, M., & Peterson, E. (2002). Biased assimilation of sociopolitical arguments: Evaluating the 1996 U.S. presidential debate. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 24*, 15-26.

Nyhan, B. & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: the persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior, 32,* 303-330.

Pfau, M. & Eveland, W. P. (1994). Debates versus other communication sources: The pattern of information and influence. In D.B. Carlin & M.S. McKinney (Eds.), *The 1992 presidential debates in focus* (pp. 155-173). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Racine Group. (2002). White paper on televised political campaign debates. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 38,* 199-218.

Richardson, J. D., Huddy, W. P., & Morgan, S. M. (2008). The hostile media effect, biased assimilation, and perceptions of a presidential debate. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 38,* 1255-1270.

Rowland, R. C. (2013). The first 2012 presidential campaign debate: the decline of reason in presidential debates. *Communication Studies, 64,* 528-547.

Roy, A. (2012, October 4). In the first presidential debate, Mitt Romney told the truth on health care and Obama tried not to. *Forbes*. Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/aroy/2012/10/04/in-the-first-presidential-debate-mitt-romney-told-the-truth-on-health-care-and-obama-tried-not-to/.

Sib, G. F. (2012, October 5). A debate aimed at the center, minus the fireworks. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443635404578035152466253868.

Shapiro, A. (2012, September 6). Never too early to prepare for presidential debates. *NPR Morning Edition*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2012/09/06/160654720/its-never-too-early-to-prepare-for-presidential-debates.

Sigelman, L. & Sigelman, C. K. (1984). Judgments of the Carter-Reagan debate: The eyes of the beholders. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 48*, 624-628.

Taber, C. S., Cann, D., & Kucsova, S. (2009). The motivated processing of political arguments. *Political Behavior, 31*, 137-155.

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science, 50,* 755-769.

Turcotte, J. & Goidel, R. K. (2014). Political knowledge and exposure to the 2012 US presidential debates: Does debate format matter? *PS: Political Science & Politics, 47*, 449-453.

Warner, B. R. & McKinney, M. S. (2013). To united and divide: The polarizing effect of presidential debates. *Communication Studies, 64*, 508-527.

Weaver, D. & Drew, D. (1995). Voter learning in the 1992 presidential election: did the "nontraditional" media and debates matter? *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 72*, 7-17.

Zhu, J., Milvasky, J. R., & Biswas, R. (1994). Do televised debates affect image perception more than issue knowledge? A study of the first 1992 presidential debate. *Human Communication Research, 20*, 302-333.