Dueling For Their Votes: A Study on the Impact of Presidential Debate Rhetoric on Public Opinion

Daniel J. Cohen
The College of Wooster, dancoh58@gmail.com

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DUELING FOR THEIR VOTES: A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF PRESIDENTIAL
DEBATE RHETORIC ON PUBLIC OPINION

by

Daniel Jacob Cohen

An Independent Study Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Course Requirements for
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Advisors: Dr. Bas van Doorn and Dr. Beth Boser
Abstract: The debates are key events for presidential candidates to influence public support for their policies. This study examines the impact of rhetorical strategies during presidential debates on public perceptions of unpopular issue stances. Using generic criticism, I examined the first two 2012 debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney and uncovered four rhetorical strategies used by the candidates: issue framing, appeals to authority, use of rebuttals, and appealing to liberal and conservative presumptions. I then tested an example of issue framing from each candidate to determine its effectiveness in persuading public opinion on unpopular issue stances. My results showed that Obama’s use of the strategy lowered the favorability of Romney’s proposed economic policies, while Romney’s use of it showed no significant relationship. Overall, the study provides a clearer picture of how politicians use rhetorical strategies during presidential debates in order to gain public support in areas where they are weak.

Keywords: Presidential Debates, Rhetoric, Public Opinion, Issue Stances
Acknowledgements

MODERATOR: We’ve come to the end of the project and it is time for the closing statements. Mr. Cohen, you have several paragraphs.

COHEN: Thank you very much. This is not the perfect document, nor is it meant to be. What it is, is the culmination of nearly two full years of sweat, tears, procrastination and inspiration.

This opportunity would never have presented itself without The College of Wooster, an institution which has presented me with opportunities and possibilities that I could have never conceived of four years ago. Without the dedication of the professors at this institution, who always pushed me a little further than I wanted to go and made me try a little harder than I thought I could, this project would never have been possible. Thank you to my wonderful advisors, Professors Bas van Doorn and Beth Boser, for putting up with my missed deadlines, run-on sentences and most of all, bad sense of humor. And a special thanks to Professors Bos, Bostdorff and Weaver for helping to instill in me the love of political science, communication, and debate that really inspired this analysis.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

- Purpose Statement ........................................................................................................... 1
- Rationales ......................................................................................................................... 2
- Definitions ......................................................................................................................... 5
- Description of Methods ..................................................................................................... 7
- Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 8

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

- Public Opinion and Public Perceptions ............................................................................ 11
  - Formation of Public Opinion and Political Learning ...................................................... 12
  - Persuasion, Misperceptions and Correction .................................................................. 16
  - Priming, Framing and Other Tools ................................................................................ 21
- Genre Theory .................................................................................................................... 29
  - Origins of Genre Theory ............................................................................................... 29
  - Assumptions of Genre Theory ....................................................................................... 30
- Presidential Debates as a Recurring Genre ..................................................................... 33
  - History of Presidential Debates ..................................................................................... 34
  - Presidential Debate Format and Strategies .................................................................... 37
  - Presidential Debate Impact on Public Opinion .............................................................. 41
- The 2012 Election .............................................................................................................. 44
  - Candidates ...................................................................................................................... 44
  - Issues ............................................................................................................................. 47
Limitations .................................................................................................................................................. 87
Recommendations for Future Research .................................................................................................... 89
Final Thoughts .......................................................................................................................................... 90
WORKS CITED ........................................................................................................................................ 82
APPENDIX A: ECONOMIC CONDITION SURVEY ............................................................................. 102
APPENDIX B: HEALTH CARE CONDITION SURVEY ........................................................................ 103
TABLE OF TABLES

Table 5.1: Influence of Economic Condition .................................................................79
Table 5.2: OLS Regression for Support for Romney Economic Policy ......................80
Table 5.3: Proportion of Respondents Supporting Obama’s Economic Policy ........81
Table 5.4: Influence of Health Care Condition ..............................................................82
Table 5.5: Proportion of Respondents Supporting Obama’s Health Care Policy .....83
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, presidential elections occur every four years. Election years are often characterized by the highly charged rhetoric of the candidates and parties, each of them exerting all of their collective efforts to win the favor and support of the American public. While every campaign season is unique, many constants have come to define the system. Each campaign brings a new influx of ads, dominating commercial breaks, drowning inboxes, and dominating internet pages. Presidential campaigns will crisscross the country, trying to make sure that their candidate or surrogate appears the most times in the most important areas. And every four years since the 1976 election, at least two presidential debates have taken place, in which the competitors meet in the same location, at the same time, for a head-to-head discussion about their specific policy views and ideas. These debates—which are widely watched, covered, and discussed by the media and the public—give candidates an excellent opportunity to change how the public views them by utilizing such strategies as addressing a weakness, bolstering a strength, or changing the criteria upon which they are viewed on specific issues. In this chapter, I will state the purpose and the rationales behind my study of presidential debates. I will then provide definitions for the key terms of the study and briefly describe the study's methodology.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of my study is to determine what rhetorical strategies presidential candidates use during debates in order to improve public perceptions of unpopular issue stances, and how effective those strategies are at influencing public opinion. Specifically, this study uses a modified version of the generic method of rhetorical criticism to examine the first two debates of the 2012 presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Using this form of
rhetorical criticism, I was able to uncover rhetorical strategies used by the candidates in their attempts to influence public opinion regarding issue stances upon which the public viewed them unfavorably. These strategies were then tested experimentally to determine how effective they were at persuading the public to support previously unpopular issue stances.

**Rationales**

This study should prove significant for three main reasons. First, the presidential debate process is one of the few times that candidates are able to speak directly to a national audience about specific issues. These debates give candidates “a well-publicized opportunity to convince, appeal, persuade, and please” (Halmari 248). In other instances during the campaign, candidates have the ability to--and do--address particular issues or policies. However, only the debates provide an opportunity for a candidate to formally address an issue, prompted by a moderator or an opponent, with tens of millions watching and even more aware of the event through the media's coverage. The presidential debates have secured a spot as an integral and unique part of the election process (Berquist and Golden 125). With the tremendous amount of focus that these unique events receive, their potential impact should be examined.

Second, this study is significant because it expands the scholarly literature. The study looks at the 2012 election, an election that has not yet received much attention from rhetorical critics or political scientists. While the previous debates over the past five or so decades have been thoroughly studied (eg., Benoit; Berquist and Golden; Fein, Goethals and Kugler; Zichermann), scholars have only just begun to analyze the debates or strategies used during the 2012 election. Looking at these specific debates will help to expand knowledge of not only the
2012 election and the candidates who participated, but also provide political scholars with information on the structure and strategies used within the debates as a whole.

This study will also help to expand the scholarly literature on how presidential candidates attempt to influence public opinion and perceptions. While it is widely assumed that politicians have the ability to influence public opinion, scholarly research has devoted little attention to the impact of their use of different rhetorical strategies (Edwards 26). Often research has examined what rhetorical strategies are used, or what the impact of a specific speech or rhetorical event is, but rarely have these two approaches been combined in one analysis. This study combines the two approaches to see if rhetorical strategies used during presidential debates influence public opinion, expanding the literature in an area that has not received the focus it deserves.

Third, an understanding of how rhetoric is able to influence perceptions of issue stances has a variety of real-world implications. For example, if candidates and campaigns understand the most effective strategies for changing the public perception of an issue, then they can gain a political and strategic advantage and would be able to connect with the public more effectively. The campaign could then ensure that their message is understood and interpreted by the audience in the way that the campaign intends. This type of information could theoretically allow a candidate or campaign to impact the course of an election by swaying the public's perception of an issue that could have been detrimental to the campaign's efforts. This type of persuasion would be exceedingly useful to a campaign.

This knowledge would also be beneficial to presidents in their attempts to govern. Congress has become more polarized than ever in recent years, with studies showing that it is the most polarized in history (Rosenthal and Poole) and that members of Congress are unable or
unwilling to be flexible in resolving issues once elected (Poole 447). If a president wants to change minds in his or her efforts to govern, it will not be done by convincing Congress to act in one way or the other on policy issues. Instead, a president will have to reach out directly to the American public by advocating for his or her views and policies. According to Tulis, “Popular or mass rhetoric has become a principal tool of presidential governance...Today it is taken for granted that presidents have a duty constantly to defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population” (4). In addition, Druckman and Holmes have found clear evidence that a “president can use rhetoric to influence his own approval” but that the issue is “understudied and poorly understood” (774). The research presented in this study will help to fill in this knowledge gap by uncovering some of the rhetorical strategies that can be used by presidents or presidential candidates during the debates and determining the impact of one of these strategies impacting public opinion. The study could also help to influence future research in this all-important area.

Looking at the issue from the other side, a greater understanding of debate strategy and the influence of rhetoric would allow the public to be more resistant to attempts by politicians to manipulate their opinion and vote. Scholars have noted that the ability of politicians to use rhetoric to manipulate the public is a pressing and troubling issue (Druckman and Holmes 774). Knowing what strategies to look for would help the public recognize the strategies that could be used by politicians attempting to persuade them, allowing them to hold a more well-reasoned political view and to be aware of at least some of the influences that could change how they view politics and the world.
Definitions

To understand this study, several terms must be defined. The first of these is *rhetoric*. Rhetoric as a scholarly discipline has existed since the fifth century BCE (Foss 3). While the term rhetoric is used in a wide variety of ways, in this instance, *rhetoric* can be defined as “the human use of symbols to communicate” (Foss 3). Rhetoric can refer to a wide variety of messages, from the written or spoken word, to visual texts or non-verbal cues that an individual displays. It is important to our everyday lives, as rhetoric allows for the entirety of human communication to exist (Foss 5). According to Zarefsky, rhetoric is also a reflection of worldviews, “a work of practical art, often richly layered and multivocal, that calls for interpretation” (“Presidential Rhetoric” 610). In the context of a public presentation or a political argument, rhetorical strategies are those strategic choices that a rhetor makes. “The rhetor makes choices, with an audience in mind, about the best way to achieve his or her goals in the context of a specific situation. Those choices…are embodied in the text that the rhetor composes and the context in which it is delivered” (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 609). The understanding and use of rhetoric is key to argumentation, policy proposals, debates and politics as a whole.

*Presidential debates* are events where candidates for the presidency of the United States engage in argument with each other on policy issues in a structured discussion typically facilitated by a moderator. Modern presidential debates first appeared in the United States when a debate was held during the 1948 Republican primary (Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock 97). Though not a staple of American electoral politics until the 1976 election, they occurred several times during the next several decades, such as the 1960 presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy and during the 1956 Democratic primary (Commission). Today the
debates are shown on television, with 67 million people watching the first presidential debate between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama in 2012 (Morales). While debates also occur during the primaries between multiple candidates angling for the presidential nomination of their own party, for the purpose of this study, unless otherwise noted, *presidential debates* will only refer to the recurring debates between candidates of different parties and not the itra-party debates that also occur. Though the format of the debates can vary slightly from election to election, presidential debates typically involve a moderator asking questions of two or more candidates who have a chance to answer and then respond to what their opponent(s) have said. Since 1987, the presidential debates have been run and administered by the Commission on Presidential Debates, a 501(c)(3), non-partisan organization (Commission).

Lastly *public perceptions* are the empirical views that an individual holds (Nyhan and Reifler 306). In a political context, individuals hold views about a variety of topics including, but certainly not limited to, politicians, political or social policies that have or could be enacted, and the state of the country in general. When combined on an aggregate level, these views can be referred to as public opinion or “the free and public communication from citizens to their government on matters of concern to the nation” (Speier 376). Politicians attempt to quantify public opinion and individual perceptions in order to gain a greater understanding of what the public wants. These perceptions can be estimated based upon public opinion polls done today by hundreds of different organizations that measure public perceptions on nearly every issue imaginable. This type of survey research is the central measure of public opinion within the United States. (Korzi 58-9). The perceptions that are examined within this study are those that are held by the public on the unpopular issue stances of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. These
perceptions will be examined in order to determine how effective rhetorical strategies used by presidential candidates during debates are at influencing public opinion.

**Description of Methods**

For this analysis, I used two distinct methods. The first of these is the generic method of rhetorical criticism, which is ideal for examining a particular “genre” of speech. In this case, that genre that I am examining is that of rhetoric used by presidential candidates during debates. According to Zarefsky, “political argumentation is neither random nor unpredictable. Across situations and even eras, one can find recurrences that help to define the genre and to establish its conventions” (“Strategic Maneuvering” 318). Generic criticism looks at these types of artifacts that are “a member of a potentially recurring class...an example of a larger genre” (Olson 299-300). This type of criticism “is rooted in the assumption that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations in audiences and thus call for specific types of rhetoric” (Foss 137). Analysis of this type enables artifacts to be examined not just in the context of one particular event or situation, but in the context of a series of recurring events allowing them to be used as a tool to gain a greater understanding of the entire class to which that artifact belongs. In this instance, this study uses generic criticism to uncover rhetorical strategies employed by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential debates.

The second method that I used within this study is an experiment, which is ideal for examining the influence of a particular phenomenon in a controlled setting. An experiment is defined as a “study in which investigators retain control over the recruitment, assignment to random conditions, treatment, and measurement of subjects” (McDermott 32). This type of method allows for the impact of a particular variable to be examined by removing all other
potential factors, providing a picture of the influence of the variable and a high amount of internal validity (Kinder and Palfrey 6-7). In this instance, I looked at how persuasive the rhetorical strategies uncovered in my rhetorical analysis are at influencing public perception of the candidate’s unpopular issue stances. The combination of these two different types of analysis shed light on the rhetoric of the 2012 election and on presidential debate strategies as a whole in a way that one alone could not, adding to the literature on the subject and granting a clearer understanding of the influences and strategies at play.

Conclusion

In Chapter I, I have stated my research question and the rationales behind my study. I have also provided definitions for the key terms of the study and described my methodology. Overall, the goal of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how presidential candidates can use the presidential debates to influence how the public understands them and their issue stances. Understanding this influence is significant, as the presidential debates are some of the most influential events in each election cycle and can greatly affect public opinion and the outcome of the election. Understanding effective rhetorical strategies will allow for presidential candidates to craft the messages that they send to their audience in more effective ways and allow for the general public to recognize ways in which politicians could attempt to influence public opinion. Rhetorical strategies have a variety of real world effects. This study looked at what those effects were during the specific circumstance of the 2012 elections, in order to gain a greater understanding of rhetoric, political opinions and debate strategy as a whole.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed” (Lincoln). Public opinion impacts what politicians are able to do, how they think, and even what they say. The slightest shift in opinion on a subject can have ripple effects that reverberate throughout the country. It can start a war, lead to funding towards the next great scientific discovery, or even can oust a politician from office. Having the support of the public grants politicians the freedom and ability to wield power, and to enact the agenda that they desire. For this reason, the ability to influence public opinion is a long sought-after goal for those involved in the political process. During a presidential election where the stakes and issues are elevated to a magnitude rarely seen at any other time, this goal is especially important. A slight shift on one issue by a few percentage points can elect one presidential candidate or another, completely changing the future of a nation and the course of human history.

However, a large part of the populace is often isolated from any direct contact with the political process and have an unclear view of how different policies will impact them. Outside of those who actually go to see a presidential candidate or a surrogate speak, the presidential campaign is experienced by the public through snippets heard or seen second-hand, or through the distorted lens of the media. Presidential candidates have very few opportunities to directly reach out to the entirety of the American populace at one time. However, the presidential debates
are one instance where candidates are able to reach a significant amount of the general public, making them an important opportunity to subtly influence the public opinion of the country.

The presidential debates and the opportunity that they present to candidates is invaluable. During the months leading up to a presidential election, potential voters are bombarded with a deluge of political advertising nearly twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This onslaught of increased and constant information can potentially lead to a voting populace overloaded with information, left unable to process or make political decisions (Iyengar 35). The debates are the only instance during the campaign that provide candidates the prospect to speak directly to the American public and to refute the claims and policy proposals that his or her opponent makes on the spot. In order to take advantage of this unique opportunity, candidates must carefully select the rhetorical strategies that they employ during the debates if they hope to use the opportunity to influence public opinion in their favor.

This opportunity is especially important when the public has an unfavorable opinion of the policy stances of a candidate. If the public has an unfavorable view of the candidate's positions, and any of those positions are made the focus of the campaign, a significant portion of the public is likely to vote for the opposing candidate(s). The debates give presidential candidates a chance to directly engage those who disagree with them, be it their opponents or the viewing audience, and subsequently, an opportunity to change the public's perception of their unpopular issue stances.

In this study, I examined rhetorical strategies used by Mitt Romney and Barack Obama to change the perception of unpopular issues stances during the first two debates of the 2012 presidential election and then tested the effectiveness of those strategies. Before I begin my
Public Opinion and Public Perceptions

In order to understand how people make political decisions, and how politicians can attempt to persuade individuals during debates, the idea of mass public opinion and perceptions must first be understood. Public opinion is the “free and public communication from citizens to their government on matters of concern to the nation” (Speier 376). This communication is the backbone of representative democracy, helping to drive the decisions and actions that our elected officials make. In today’s age, public opinion is typically measured by polling agencies and political operations, who constantly measure the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of the public. This type of information paints a picture of what the populace cares about, and on which issues they believe politicians should focus.

Politicians can react to public opinion information in a number of ways. They can direct their actions based on that opinion, they can discount the opinion, or they can attempt to influence and shape public opinion in order to gain more support for their currently held issue stance. The latter option—which invokes persuasive techniques—is often the choice of politicians, especially during a campaign, where the other candidates are also working to influence public opinion in their own favor. To understand public opinion and issue stances of the general public and the ability of politicians to influence them, many different areas of study
must be understood, including how public opinion forms, framing and priming of political issues, and political misperceptions.

**Formation of Public Opinion and Political Learning**

Presidential candidates and their campaigns must understand how and why individuals come to hold certain political beliefs and “learn” politically if they wish to persuade the public on a particular policy point. Political learning is defined by Holbrook as “the acquisition of political information as a consequence of exposure to the campaign process” (68). Through this learning process, individuals are able to better understand the political world, come to political conclusions, and ultimately act on those conclusions through the political process. Zaller argues that these new opinions are formed based upon two different elements: the information received, which allows for the individual to “form a mental picture of the given issue” and the “predisposition to motivate some conclusions about it” which looks at how individuals relate to the new piece of information based upon their prior knowledge and experiences related to it (6). Between these two factors, individuals receive information and form new opinions that can potentially shift their political attitudes and beliefs.

There are several factors which influence how much a single piece of political information will impact an individual. Holbrook argues that the value of a piece of information is based upon the scarcity of information on that topic in the public sphere:

If voters have been exposed to relatively little information about a particular candidate, each additional piece of information is not likely to have been previously encountered and may be deemed relevant to the candidate evaluation and incorporated into long-term memory. On the other hand, if voters have already been exposed to large amounts of information about a candidate, the likelihood of an additional piece of information being relevant—or new—is relatively low. (Holbrook 69)
Politicians use this scarcity of information to their advantage by focusing on getting their side of the story out to the public before their opponent(s) can. If a politician is able to get the public to hear his or her side of an issue first, it will force the public to evaluate all future pieces of information on that specific issue through the lens of the initial information that the politician provides. Speed is of the essence when addressing a political issue. Addressing an issue first allows a politician to lay the framework for and control the debate over the issue.

Scholars have examined the impact of the presidential campaign on political learning. According to Holbrook, “campaigns [influence] public opinion by generating persuasive information—information that, once acquired, has potential to move the electorate in one direction or the other” (67). He argues that there are two major models for political learning during campaigns, a memory-based model and an on-line model. Memory models assume that individuals acquire different pieces of political information during the course of a political campaign and then recall these when it is time to make a political decision or vote. On-line models assume that voters have an evaluation of candidates which then is modified with each new piece of information that they acquire (Holbrook 68). Both models argue that when people receive new political information it influences how they think about political issues, with the only difference between the two models in how soon that influence occurs.

This theory has strong implications for learning how people react to information from presidential debates. If the memory-based model is true, then it means that the debates should be a strong opportunity for candidates to give the public a large amount of information that they can later use when they make a political decision. The candidates should then focus on providing as much information on as many policies as they can in the allocated time so that this information
can be recalled when voters make their decisions. The debates would also impact public opinion if the on-line model is true. In that circumstance, the debates would present each of the candidates a chance to directly rebut what their opponent had said previously or during the current debate. Each refutation would play into an individual’s evaluation of the candidates’ policies. Either way, each of the models show how the debates present candidates with a strong opportunity to influence how the public views particular political issues.

Gilens looked at the issue of political opinion formation from a different perspective and found that information on policy, whether true or false, has a greatly diminished impact on the politically uninformed who struggle to process the new political issues of the day (Gilens 392). This conclusion is important as it shows that perceptions and opinions of political issues often exist not because an individual has thought about the particular issue or policy, weighed the positives and the negatives of both sides, and come to an informed and well thought out conclusion, but rather because those who are less politically informed are unable to process new political information. As a result, a significant segment of the population is likely to believe pieces of information that are not entirely true, whether they have been intentionally twisted and manipulated to the point where they hold little semblance of fact or simply are just a small piece of a larger puzzle. This lack of understanding by a large part of the populace offers advantages to politicians who focus more on broadcasting their views than on insuring that the populace understands both sides of the debate. If a politician is able to get his or her side of the story to the politically uninformed, it will be believed regardless of content.

The findings of Gilens and Holbrook suggest that one of the most important tactics that a politician can use is to make sure that the public hears his or her side of a political issue before
the public hears the politician’s opponents’ views. These theories suggest that the massive amount of campaign and political advertising that is commonplace in today’s political reality is extremely advantageous, as it allows politicians to get their messages out to the public as early as possible. In the context of a debate, this literature implies that it can be extremely important for a presidential candidate to quickly express his or her own view and to frame a version of his or her opponents’ plans in a negative light before the opponent has a chance to frame and articulate it him or herself. It also implies that the use of easy to remember, quick sound bites or analogies are more advantageous and more likely to stick in voters’ minds than long, drawn out policy explanations.

The scholarly literature has also directly examined how the public comes to political conclusions about issues on which they know very little. Popkin argues that voters make decisions based upon what he calls “low information rationality” (212). Based upon this theory, voters often use shortcuts in order to make political decisions. According to Popkin, “When direct information is hard to obtain, people will find a proxy for it. They will use a candidate's past political positions to estimate his or her future positions. When they are uncertain about those past positions, they will accept as a proxy information about the candidate's personal demographic characteristics and the groups with which he or she has associated” (213). This shortcut gives voters the ability to focus only on certain segments of the campaign and the capacity to draw conclusions based on information that they already have, instead of paying attention to the entire campaign. Unfortunately, these shortcuts can lead voters to draw false conclusions and hold incorrect perceptions, also known as misperceptions, about political views or facts. These misperceptions are a major roadblock to presidential candidates who want to
impact public opinion, in a debate or otherwise. Changing members of the public’s minds, whether they hold an incorrect perception about an issue, or just view a candidate’s policy negatively, is a major goal of the presidential debates. In order to understand what the most productive strategies would be in that circumstance, political persuasion must be first understood.

**Persuasion, Misperceptions and Correction**

Politics is often considered a topic unfit for discussion in polite company. Often, political opinions have been hardened over years of discussion, and emotions tend to be intense when arguing over political issues. Based upon the personal experience of everyone who has tried to change the mind of a friend, a parent, a family member, or even a significant other, it should come as no surprise that people’s minds are not easily changed. This rigidity is especially true when individuals have misperceptions about or fail to accurately grasp facts about the political world. These misperceptions may come from a number of sources, including, but certainly not limited to, the media or competing campaigns. Regardless of how the idea took hold, these misperceptions have the ability to radically change the public conversation and public opinion as a whole.

According to Nyhan, political misperceptions are “demonstrably false claims and unsubstantiated beliefs about the world that are contradicted by the best available evidence and expert opinion” (2). Prominent examples of political misperceptions that have been studied in scholarly research include events from the two separate debates over federal health care plans, first in the mid-1990s and then before, during, and after the 2008 election, and also in the debate over the religion of presidential candidate, and later President, Barack Obama. With both of these
issues, when falsehoods were stated and further propagated, political misrepresentations emerged (Nyhan 1; Hollander 59).

In 1994, despite evidence to the contrary, many people believed that the health care plan proposed by then President Bill Clinton and the Democrats in Congress would deny people the ability to go to the physician of their choice (Nyhan 3). Specifically, “approximately half of all Americans believed they would 'lose the power to choose the doctor they want' under Clinton's plan” (PRSA/Newsweek qtd. in Nyhan 1). The myth was continually repeated in the media by conservatives and opponents of President Clinton who found the attack to be highly effective (Nyhan 1).

A similar tactic was seen almost a decade and a half later, in 2008 and 2009 during the debate over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, colloquially known as Obamacare, proposed by President Obama and Democrats in Congress soon after Obama’s election in 2008. Conservative politicians and commentators latched onto the idea that so-called “death panels” would ration health care available to the sickest and oldest individuals. Naturally, voters were horrified at this possibility. Although such rationing was not and never had been part of the proposal, 41% of surveyed individuals stated that they believed death panels were a part of the proposed plan (Nyhan 15).

Similarly, Hollander conducted a study which examined false perceptions held by individuals about Obama's religious faith. During the 2008 presidential election, a rumor emerged that the Democratic candidate, a Christian, was secretly a Muslim (Hollander 55). The rumor appeared to originate from the internet during mid-summer of that year and was given heavy coverage by other media sources. Despite the fact that coverage of the controversy
plateaued during the fall months, by the time of the November election, nearly one-third of all coverage of religion in the election had focused on the story (Hollander 55). The study tracked those who still believed that Obama was a Muslim from September through November. In these three months, the percentage of people who held that belief barely changed, with 20.2% believing it in September and 19.7% believing it in November (Hollander 59).

Hollander found several factors associated with the belief that Obama was Muslim. These included “being younger, of lower income, white, less interested in politics, more conservative, less likely to talk about politics with friends, less likely to have voted, and those who scored lower on a basic test of political knowledge” (Hollander 60). This analysis suggested that those who already disagreed with Obama politically and were generally less politically informed were more likely to believe misinformation, and were also less likely to be influenced by the constant corrections in the media. Because they were resolute in their views, these individuals were also those that were less likely to be persuaded by any type of rhetorical strategy within a presidential debate.

By studying cases like these, scholars have been able to draw conclusions about misperceptions. The first conclusion is that people who are “misinformed, [are] not only inaccurate in their factual beliefs but confident that they are right....It is one thing not to know and be aware of one's ignorance. It is quite another to be dead certain about factual beliefs that are off the mark” (Kuklinski et al. 809). This is an important distinction. If people were simply inaccurate in their opinions due to lack of information, it could be a sign that political messages were simply not reaching these individuals. Instead, research shows that in spite of the corrective messages reaching them, people continue to hold false beliefs, suggesting that larger systematic
issues are at stake. Based on this research, once an opinion is formed on an issue, an individual will believe it is true and will not examine alternatives. This seems to suggest that the debates could work to provide political information to individuals who watch them without preconceived political stances or beliefs. However, it also suggests that a significant amount of the population will not change their view during a presidential debate, no matter what arguments are made or presented.

Studies have found political knowledge is not directly influenced by the cost or availability of information (Bimber 64). In fact, contrary to what one might expect, when presented with additional information that conflicts with what they already know or believe, an individual is more likely to have his or her initial belief reinforced regardless of the content of the new information. The belief could be completely contradicted, yet the individual would hold on to his or her own belief all the more strongly (Nyhan and Reifer 323). Though this seems to be counterintuitive, once an individual believes something, when presented with conflicting evidence, he or she will hold even tighter to the original belief.

Several studies have documented this phenomenon. In Nyhan's research on the various health care debates, he found that “Republicans who believed they knew about the plan were paradoxically more likely to endorse [a] misperception [about the health care plans] than those who did not” (Nyhan 13). Likewise, Hollander's study on perceptions of Obama's religion during the 2008 election found that “Christian conservatives who tend to vote Republican [were]...more likely to persist in the perception that Obama was Muslim” (Hollander 64). This persistence occurred despite the fact that both campaigns and the media, including major parts of the conservative media, spent months debunking this perception. That particular election was also
unique in that two different rumors about Barack Obama's religion existed. One claimed that he was a Muslim, while the other argued he was a radical Christian (Hollander 55). Though it would seem that these two beliefs would directly contradict each other, the view that Obama was Muslim persisted.

Research has explained the idea of people maintaining these misperceptions despite evidence to the contrary in several ways. The first is that people tend to remember more information with which they agree than information with which they disagree (Wiley 95). If the piece of information conforms to a person’s personal beliefs or values, then it is easy for the person to recall. If not, they are more likely to dismiss it and not utilize it when making a judgment or forming a political decision. The second is that “individuals generally lack the cognitive skill, time, resources, and will to capture, assimilate, and interpret all information and its relative certainty. As a result, they rely on cues and predispositions in forming judgments” (Wood and Vedlitz 564). Altogether, then, people tend to utilize past information much more heavily than current information, making it difficult to correct past misperceptions. This tendency suggests that in order to persuade the public on an issue, politicians must aim to be the first to define their respective stance on an issue, by clearly stating their position early in the campaign process and defining the issue and their stance on it before their opponent is able to define it for them.

Politicians “have strong incentives to actively manage public perceptions of salient proposals for new legislation in anticipation that rivals will counterattack and highlight specific costs [of the legislation]” (Jacobs and Shapiro 25). It is extremely difficult for politicians to shape how the public perceives their issue stances and those of their political opponents. Once an
individual believes something, it is almost impossible to change his or her mind. However, evidence has also emerged that certain techniques, rhetorical and otherwise can help to circumvent this intransigence. Because much of the literature has suggested a positive correlation between the earliness of information and the belief of that information by the public, finding any way to change the perception or viewpoint of the public later in the campaign, once the issue is already at the forefront of public discussion, is invaluable for a political campaign or operation.

**Priming, Framing and Other Tools**

Can the president or other politicians use persuasive or rhetorical techniques to influence public opinion? Edwards outlines two different ways in which presidents can use their influence, by acting as a “director,” or by acting as a “facilitator.” Each of these techniques influences the populace in different ways. The director “creates a constituency to follow his lead…restructure[ing] the contours of the political landscape to pave the way for change” while the facilitator “endows the constituency’s views with shape and purpose by interpreting them and translating them into legislation” and “exploits opportunities presented by a favorable configuration of political forces” (25). Through the use of rhetoric, politicians can “define political reality,” using strategies to “shape the context in which events or proposals are viewed by the public” (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 611). Politicians have a number of skills and tools at their disposal in order to persuade the American public on an issue. According to Jacobs and Shapiro, “legislators and presidents rely on three techniques in their efforts to change public opinion on specific policy issues: tracking public opinion through polls, focus groups, and other related methods; managing press coverage; and using the tactic of ’priming’ to influence the public” (47). Each of these influence public opinion in different ways.
Understanding what the public is thinking has numerous advantageous, allowing politicians to understand what issues the public favors and what the public wants them to do. The idea that political candidates track public opinion is not new. Efforts to comprehensively track the opinion of the public began with the Kennedy campaign and administration and have slowly expanded ever since (Jacobs and Shapiro 48). This information provides politicians with vital knowledge on what they can do to persuade the public to support their policies and provides politicians with two options on how to respond, known as “substantive responsiveness” and “instrumental responsiveness” (Jacobs and Shapiro 48). Substantive responsiveness relies upon the idea that politicians track public opinion in order to shift their policy proposals in favor of what the public approves, while instrumental responsiveness relies on the idea that “politicians track public opinion to identify the words, arguments, and symbols about specific policies that the centrist public finds appealing and that they believe to be the most effective in changing public opinion to support their policy goals” (Jacobs and Shapiro 48). Either strategy would be impossible without knowledge of what the public is thinking. With this knowledge politicians have the opportunity to either change their own view on a political issue or work to persuade the current opinion of the public. The second of these is often the more difficult option.

One way that politicians can influence public opinion or perceptions is by using the media to their advantage. As the media reaches into the home of nearly every potential voter—be it via the internet, twenty-four hour news networks, mail, or other means—its potential uses within a political context are numerous. Jacobs and Shapiro argue that the media can be used to a politician’s advantage in two key ways. First, they argue that politicians use advertising to blanket the press with their arguments and message, crowding out any other piece of
information. This can be done through direct political advertising, advocating their position on a television or radio show appearance, or having a political ally or surrogate make the argument for them (Jacobs and Shapiro 49). Another strategy that can be used is what is known as “crafted talk” where “politicians craft how they present their policy stances in order to attract favorable press coverage and ‘win’ support for what they desire” (Jacobs and Shapiro 27). They package their arguments “in terms of simple, attractive themes that would both satisfy the media's economic pressures to draw audiences and override the press' preoccupation with the maneuvering of politicians” (Jacobs and Shapiro 49). The pervasiveness of media usage in our culture offers politicians a quick and easy method of reaching a wide number of constituents. The media makes for an interesting middle-man in any type of political strategy, as any action taken by a politician will be noticed and reported on by the media. Without the media’s influence, persuasion would be nearly impossible, and events and rhetorical strategies (such as presidential debates) would never reach the intended audience. Because of this influence, the media must be considered when any type of rhetorical strategy is used.

Another strategy politicians can use to reach and influence an audience, either through the media or otherwise, is priming. Priming is the strategy of “raising the priority and the weight that individuals assign to particular attitudes already stored in their memories” (Jacobs and Shapiro 50). Instead of focusing on intricate policy proposals, which are often disregarded as too complex or too easy to manipulate by opponents, politicians will often use the strategy of priming to tap into public opinion that already exists. They “use public statements and press coverage they can generate to influence which attitudes and information individuals retrieve
from memory and incorporate into judgments” (Jacobs and Shapiro 50). Using this type of strategy offers politicians several strategic advantages.

First, priming is a much easier strategy to utilize than is changing the fundamental values that individuals hold. Instead of forcing individuals to completely shift how they view the world, priming acts as a shortcut to ideas that they already hold. In a study on presidential priming Druckman and Holmes noted that, “priming does not involve changing perceptions of how well the president is doing on an issue—it simply alters the issue on which individuals base their overall evaluations” (757). This allows for politicians to introduce other variables into the evaluation of a particular issue stance. By staying on message and incorporating different themes into their rhetoric, politicians can dictate the criteria by which the public views and evaluates policy arguments (Jacobs and Shapiro 50-51). This type of strategy is especially useful in the midst of political campaigns, where huge political operations work with multiple prominent political issues and a near infinite number of moving pieces to produce a coherent and consistent message. Using the idea of priming, candidates and their campaigns can redirect how the public perceives an issue or policy.

Second, priming is incredibly difficult to manipulate or distort by either political opponents or the media. Because it relies upon themes and values instead of on specific policy proposals, priming encourages those themes to be present in any discussion of the policy from either side. It essentially allows for a politician to create the initial framework for how the issue will be discussed. By giving the media and political opponents a sound bite, instead of the entirety of the nuts and bolts of a proposal, they have much less information to argue with,
distort, or to fight back against. Boiling the debate down in this manner allows for a campaign to define the debate on their own terms, within their framework (Jacobs and Shapiro 51).

Lastly, priming is the easiest way for the public to understand a political issue. Instead of understanding every element of a policy proposal, it allows for the public to comprehend a theme. For instance, instead of having to learn the intricacies of a policy proposal that deals with coal-burning and environmental policy, advocates for environmental reform can prime the debate as a dichotomy over keeping the air and water clean or not. Opponents to environmental reform can use the same strategy and attempt to make the debate over lower energy costs and unnecessary government interference in business. These themes are easy for public to process, making priming an ideal strategy, as it reaches both the most politically informed and the lowest common denominator.

Framing is another major tool used by presidential candidates and politicians. Framing has been viewed by the literature and by society at large in both positive and negative ways. According to Zaller, “Framing and symbol manipulation by elites are sometimes discussed in conspiratorial tones, as if, in a healthy democracy polity, they would not occur” (95). While it is considered controversial that the citizenry can be influenced so easily, a review of the literature, by Sniderman and Theriault found that “it is now widely agreed that citizens in large numbers can be readily blown from one side of an issue to the very opposite depending on how the issue is specifically framed” (133-134).

It is clear that how an issue is framed can have a significant impact on political thought. Slothuus argues, “Issue frames can exert their influence on opinion through two different psychological processes, by changing importance and by changing content of underlying issue-
relevant considerations” (20-21), while Druckman defines the framing effect as the influence of “frames in communication” in the “frames in thought.” Under the Druckman definition a framing effect is how the “words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a speaker uses when relaying information to another” influence “an individual's understanding of a given situation” (Druckman “Implications of Framing Effects” 227-228). Druckman defines two different types of framing “equivalency frames” and “issue frames” (“Political Preference Formation” 672). The first, equivalency frames, look at how “the use of different but logically equivalent, words or phrases can cause individuals to alter their preferences” (“Implications of Framing Effects” 228). They “typically involve casting the same piece of information in either a positive or a negative light” (Druckman “Political Preference Formation” 672).

Tversky and Kahneman performed a study on framing in which they examined what kind of impact the use of different wording would have on policy opinions. The experiment included two different experimental groups. The first stated as follows:

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimate of the consequences of the programs are as follows: If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If Program B is adopted, there is 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and 2/3 probability that no people will be saved. Which of the two programs would you favor? (Tversky and Kahneman 453)

Under this framework 72% of respondents expressed support for Program A and 28% expressed support for Program B. Despite the fact that the two policies were essentially the same, with an average of 200 people saved, the policy where the 200 people saved was portrayed as an absolute was favored by a 3-1 margin.
However under a slightly modified framework, the results were completely different. The second experimental group was given the same introduction, but two different program possibilities: “If Program C is adopted, 400 people will die. If Program D is adopted there is 1/3 probability that nobody will die, and 2/3 probability that 600 people will die. Which of the two programs would you favor?” (Tversky and Kahneman 453). Under this framework, 22% chose option C and 78% chose option D (Tversky and Kahneman 453). Again, both of the programs were essentially the same, with both having an average survival rate of 200 people. However, this time the consequence that focused on the absolute negative outcome (the amount of people who “died”) was the favored policy. Despite all of the policies being essentially the same, the framing and the word choice surrounding the issues radically changed how the public perceived them.

The second type of framing, issue framing, “refer(s) to situations where, by emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker leads individuals to focus on these consideration[s] when constructing their opinions” (Druckman “Political Preference Formation” 672). For example, a candidate can “emphasize economic issues when discussing the campaign” to suggest that “economic considerations are pertinent” (Druckman “Implications of Framing Effects” 227). By emphasizing the information in this way, it then causes the focus of the campaign or debate to be on economics. This technique can have a huge advantage during a campaign as this allows for the person attempting to frame an issue to control how this issue is viewed by the public. Utilizing strategies as simple as talking about a health care issue in terms of cost of the program instead of the benefits to the recipients, or framing the debate over fracking as an issue of providing funds to poor communities instead of over the environment,
allows for the information to be understood and processed in a completely different manner and a different opinion or response to be formed.

Framing allows for an issue to be defined in a way that is strategically advantageous to a politician. It defines the issue, “advancing a claim and offering support for it” even though “no explicit claim is offered and no support is provided” (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 612). By not offering an explicit claim and instead allowing implicit assumptions to emerge between parts of an argument, it assumes that those claims made are “natural and uncontroversial rather than chosen and contestable” (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 612). This makes it less likely that the validity of a claim will be challenged and more likely that it will be received and assumed to be an accurate representation of an issue even when it is defining the issue in a new way.

The literature behind public opinion and public perceptions is complicated and includes a wide variety of research in the fields of political science, communication studies and political psychology, among others. It attempts to look at how and why individuals make political decisions and why and when they decide to hold onto these political beliefs even in the face of different or contrary information. Public opinion is far from a definite science, and continued research is required to understand exactly what factors influence the political decisions of the American public. The research has indicated that the use of techniques such as framing and priming allow politicians and presidential candidates to shape public opinion on the issues that they deem to be important. With the intense scrutiny and nearly endless media attention that the debates are given, they are the perfect opportunity for candidates to use these strategies to influence public opinion in their favor. Candidates are given a spotlight and a prime time audience to use techniques such as priming or framing strategies. These strategies can work to
shape the world and how those who live in it, view it. To understand exactly how this happens within debates, understanding what genre theory is and how presidential debates exist within a genre is essential.

**Genre Theory**

This study utilizes genre theory in order to analyze rhetoric used during presidential debates. Genre theory argues that situations call for particular kinds of messages, which in turn lead to recurring message types (Foss 137). According to Hart and Daughton, a genre is “a class of messages having important structural and content similarities and which as a class creates special expectations in an audience” (116). Genres are “composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic” (Campbell and Jamieson 17). Though rhetors use diverse structure and content, it is the repeated combination of these similar, repeating factors that create a genre. Examining an artifact through the lens of a recurring genre allows for greater insight into the background and assumptions of the rhetorical artifact.

**Origins of Genre Theory**

Genre theory emerged among critics who believed that too much emphasis was being placed on singular rhetorical artifacts. In their groundbreaking work *Form and Genre*, Campbell and Jamieson noted, “Ironically, the traditional emphasis on individual speeches and speakers as rooted historically in a particular time and place is...anti-historical, because it fails to recognize the impact of rhetorical acts on other rhetorical acts, and it fails to recognize the powerful human forces which fuse recurrent forms into genres which...transcend a specific time and place” (22). Genre theory allows for the entire context of the situation to be considered when analyzing a piece of rhetoric, a context that includes the generic expectations that have developed over time.
Genre theory is unique in that it incorporates a social and historical perspective into rhetorical analysis, which other forms of rhetorical analysis do not (Miller 151). Utilizing genre as part of an analysis allows for an in-depth look at a subject that is based upon social and historical situational constraints and goals, such as the presidential debates.

**Assumptions of Genre Theory**

According to Hart and Daughton, five basic assumptions of genre theory exist. The first is that “Generic patterns necessarily develop” (Hart and Daughton 116). This assumption is based on the idea that a limited number of rhetorical situations exist. Although some situations are unique, most either will have occurred before or will occur again, such as a college commencement address, or the presidential debates that are examined in this study. As these situations recur over time, similarities and standards for them begin to emerge (Hart and Daughton 116-117). Each particular genre creates its own standards that recur again and again.

Campbell and Jamieson stated that “rhetorical forms are phenomena--synthesis of material that exists objectively in the rhetorical act and of perception” (22). As these rhetorical forms develop naturally, using them in a rhetorical setting can be both advantageous to a politician as well as unavoidable.

The second assumption is that “Generic patterns reveal societal truths” (Hart and Daughton 117). By looking at rhetorical patterns that emerge across time, scholars can decipher information on both the speaker and society each time the same pattern is used. Because genres are constant, often over very long periods of time, identifying recurring rhetorical characteristics allows them to be isolated and analyzed separately from the message as a whole. This separation allows for both the recurring characteristics and other parts of the message to be looked at by
themselves revealing information about the individual situation. Looking at the genre allows for an examination of how the rhetor has used the genre, while looking at what had not previously recurred, and allows for that segment to be examined in comparison with the historical and characteristic strategies that typically recur within that genre.

Genre theory relies on the idea that genres tend to be stable, and that because of this stability, any change in the expected recurring genre would draw significant attention by society, pointing out that the genre exists. Hart and Daughton gave the example that “if a new President failed to mention God in an inaugural address...the resulting furor would call attention to the persistence of the special bond between religion and government in the United States” (Hart and Daughton 117). Because genres are stable, they reflect the idea that society has developed patterns and strategies that it uses time and again, often for decades or longer. Campbell and Jamieson compared genres to a constellation, stating that “Like genres, constellations are perceived patterns with significance and usefulness--they enable us to see the movements of a group of individual stars and they enable us to understand the interrelated forces in celestial space” (21). By understanding generic constraints of a situation or the characteristics of a situation that influence messages developed within it, scholars can map larger rhetorical patterns and note movement if incremental changes begin to occur.

The third assumption of genre theory is that “knowledge of generic forces is largely implicit” (Hart and Daughton 117). That is, audiences have unrecognized and often unstated expectations for what a particular genre should entail. It is generally understood that high school commencement addresses will include both a wish of good luck to the graduates and a line about how the graduates are ending one part of their life and beginning another. Though these patterns
are rarely expressly acknowledged, they emerge over time and are generally understood to be the standard. Any deviation from the standard will draw greater attention to the message in question. Though patterns are implicitly understood, they are key to the understanding of the genre. Understanding assumptions helps to reflect audiences' reactions to the specific instance of the genre (Hart and Daughton 117).

The fourth assumption is that “Generic patterns stabilize social life” (Hart and Daughton 117) by encouraging similar fusions of content and structure in the future. According to Campbell and Jamieson, “Generic exemplars have internal consistency” (17). What emerges as a genre is a steady pattern that has been repeated over and over. In this way, genres are conservative, encouraging that which has already been done (Hart and Daughton 117). For instance, if every president were to end each and every speech with the line: “God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America,” the next holder of the office would feel compelled to do the same, unless he or she wanted to cause controversy or draw attention to the lack of such statement. Genres encourage repetition and an acknowledgment of what has come before.

The last assumption of genre theory is that “Generic perceptions affect subsequent perspectives” (Hart and Daughton 118). All messages within a genre borrow from and use what has previously appeared in that genre to some extent. For instance, all concession speeches by a presidential candidate are in some way influenced by previous concession speeches given by previous candidates. Those previous speeches laid the groundwork for the style, expectations, and usage of the speech. In this way, almost all types of rhetoric are part of some genre as they are all influenced by some other factor (Hart and Daughton 118). Almost no rhetorical situation is completely new, hence no rhetorical message is completely new either, making an
understanding of the genre in which a rhetorical strategy or event belongs crucial to the understanding of the message itself. Presidential debates are a recurring genre, and an analysis and comprehension of them is contingent on a grasp of how they exist as a genre.

**Presidential Debates as a Recurring Genre**

Every four years, the presidential candidates from the two major political parties face each other and the nation in a series of debates. Every four years, they endure questioning, nit-picking, and scrutiny of their political decisions and ideals. They subject themselves to this formalized interrogation because the debates have become an essential part of American political and social discourse and because the debates could potentially have the power to significantly impact the election and change who will be the next president of the United States of America.

Presidential debates are an example of a recurring genre. According to Campbell and Jamieson, “A generic perspective applied to the major types of presidential discourse emphasizes continuity within change and treats recurrence as evidence that symbolic institutional needs are at least as powerful as the force of events in shaping the rhetoric of any historical period” (8). Because presidential debates occur over and over, examining one individual instance can allow for the study of the genre as a whole, despite the fact that there are individual contexts for each situation (Zarefsky “Strategic Maneuvering” 317). In my own study, applying a generic perspective allows for a greater understanding of the strategies the candidates used during the debates. The strategies that I uncovered in this study can then be used to examine other debates, both past and future, to see if the same strategies are used and if the same characteristics are present. Before examining the rhetoric of the 2012 presidential debates, the genre of presidential debates, including history, format, and strategies used within, must be understood.
History of Presidential Debates

Presidential debates are often said to have their origins in the famed 1858 Illinois Senate debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglass (Commission). However, those seven debates over the span of two months have little in common with the modern presidential debate. Each of those debates lasted three hours with one candidate speaking for an hour, followed by an hour-and-a-half rebuttal, followed by a half-hour rebuttal by the original candidate (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 165). The debates were held in seven different congressional districts across the state of Illinois and focused almost exclusively on the issues of slavery and the Union (Commission). When the same two candidates ran against each other in the 1860 presidential election, as the nominees of the two major political parties, they did not engage each other in debate.

Not for another hundred years did debates occur between the major candidates, though there were several attempts to organize them. In 1940, Wendell Wilkie challenged sitting President Franklin Roosevelt to debate. Roosevelt, who was well on his way to his third consecutive electoral blowout, wished to deny his opponent the exposure and declined the request (Gordon). Likewise in 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower refused a challenge from Governor Adlai Stevenson (Lang and Lang 98).

However, after the 1956 challenge from Stevenson, public support began building for a presidential debate between the nominees of the two major parties. However, several obstacles stood in the way. Chief among these was a clause in the Federal Communications Act of 1934 that required any and all broadcasters to offer “free and equal time” to any and all candidates for office (Lang and Lang 98). This requirement that all parties be represented created several
complications. Sixteen officially declared political parties existed in 1960, including the “Socialist Labor party, the Prohibition party...the American Vegetarian party...the American Beat Consensus, the Tax Cut party, and the Afro-American Unity party” (Lang and Lang 98). Trying to figure out the logistics of sixteen different political candidates debating at once was impossible, so progress towards a debate was temporarily halted. Finally, television executives convinced Congress to suspend the equal time rule for one month, allowing the debates to occur (Lang and Lang 99).

The 1960 presidential debates have been called “the most significant, groundbreaking American political campaign events of the twentieth century” (Self 361). After a series of negotiations, the two campaigns agreed to four debates, each to be sponsored by and moderated by one of the three major networks: ABC, NBC and CBS (Commission). The debates were the most watched event in television history up to that point, with each debate drawing an audience of at least 63 million people (Samovar 211).

Partially due to Richard Nixon's poor performance during the debates and his perceived loss in the election because of said performance, and partially due to the equal airtime requirement, no presidential debates occurred in 1964, 1968, or 1972. Though Congress had granted the exception to the requirement for the 1960 debates, they refused to do so again. In 1976, broadcasters got around the rule by advertising the debates as a “sponsored news event” organized by the League of Women Voters, rather than as a public service function of the networks. President Gerald Ford also was motivated to ensure that the events took place by the fact that he was down thirty points in the polls and believed that the debates could help him to draw even with his opponent (“Everything”).
The debates occurred in 1976 and had similar formats in 1980, and 1988. However, prior to the 1988 debates, the League of Women Voters withdrew their sponsorship. The League stated, that the “demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetrate a fraud on the American voter” and that they had “no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public” (League). According to the League, the campaigns had presented them with a 16-page document detailing the conditions of the debate. Included were the demands that the campaigns control the “selection of questioners, the composition of the audience, [and] hall access for the press” (League). The league considered these demands to be completely unreasonable.

In response, the two major political parties created their own organization to oversee and host the debates, the Commission on Presidential Debates which has continued to administer the debates for the past seven election cycles (Commission). The primary goal of the Commission is to “ensure that debates, as a permanent part of every general election, provide the best possible information to viewers and listeners” (Commission). While still run by the Democratic and Republican parties, the debates allow candidates from each side to appeal directly to the American public.

Since 1988, the debates have had nearly identical formats with multiple hour-and-a-half debates held each election cycle between the two presidential candidates (except for 1992 where there were three candidates) and one debate between the vice presidential candidates. The debates are typically hosted by a news journalist or anchor and located on the campus of a major college or university (Commission). The debates are constantly analyzed by the media and meticulously prepared for by the candidates.
Often, the candidates will go as far as to bring in an outside politician or actor to pose as their opponent for debate preparation. In 2012, Barack Obama brought in a different Bay Stater, former presidential nominee, Senator John Kerry, to portray Romney, while Mitt Romney brought in Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, to portray Obama (Halperin and Heilemann 405). These preparation sessions have evolved into extensive camps with the candidates working on breaking down their campaign speeches and policies into sound-bites and rebuttals (Halperin and Heilemann 413-418). The strategies and arguments to be used within a debate are given enormous attention by the campaigns and could ultimately cause the success or failure of the campaign as a whole.

**Presidential Debate Format and Strategies**

Political argument seeks to solve the question that exist inherently at the very core of society: In what way can we best live together and thrive as a collective group? Answering this question has been one of the goals of human communication for as long as communication has existed. According to Zarefsky, political argumentation is “about gaining and using power, about collective decision-making for the public good, about mobilizing individuals in pursuit of common goals, about giving effective voice to shared hopes and fears” (“Strategic Maneuvering” 318). Debates are a specific form of political argumentation that have unique nuances, rules, and strategies. There are four essential elements that form a debate. First, there is “a topic of controversy typically known as the resolution.” Second, there are “two sides to oppose one another on the topic—typically know as affirmative and negative sides.” Third, each speaker has an equal amount of time to present his or her argument. Last, there is “a judge to review and render a decision as to which side won the performed debate” (Voth 46). The combination of
these factors allows for a fair chance for each side to present their argument (Voth 46). For presidential debates, each of these factors are governed by the campaigns and the Commission on Presidential Debates. By having a standardized, established set of rules, the candidates can focus on “wining the debates”, using different strategies in order to persuade the public that they are the best candidate for president.

Political candidates have used a wide variety of strategies throughout the decades to gain an advantage over their opponents during debates. In his study of the Lincoln-Douglas Senate debates of 1858, Zarefsky identified four types of arguments that the candidates used to gain a strategic advantage, some of which still exist as focal points of debates, including presidential ones, over 150 years later. He argued that the four types of recurring arguments within those debates were: conspiratorial, legal, historical, and moral (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 165).

The conspiracy argument is one that is common in American politics, though rarely used by mainstream politicians and rather, often “advanced by radicals or fanatics.” The argument boils down to the fact that the opponent of the individual attempted to use secret means in order to come up with an end result that the audience would find radical and unappealing. (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 165). This type of argument exists in today’s public discourse, though not to the same level as in the 1850s, and certainly not in formalized presidential debates. Lincoln and Douglas accused each other of attempting to manipulate and trick the country through a variety of schemes (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 165-170). While the exact strategy may not exist, the goal behind the strategy, to change the subject to a different issue that
is difficult for the opposing candidate to respond to does and is often used by politicians (Zarefsky “Strategic Manuvering” 322-323).

According to Zarefsky, the second type of argument that occurred within the Lincoln-Douglas debates was that of a legal argument (“Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 168). This type of argument, even more so than the conspiracy argument is seen as antiquated (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 169). While at the time of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the American legal system was still in flux, today the functions of the Supreme Court and the process of overturning a Court decision are well established. Lincoln and Douglas argued about the validity of a Supreme Court decision, but this topic is not one that is nearly as likely to occur today (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 168-174).

The last two types of arguments that Lincoln and Douglas used are the two most likely to be used in today’s presidential debates. Both Lincoln and Douglas utilized the historical argument, basing their claims on an appeal to the founding fathers and a historical approach to argumentation and policy making (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 174-178). This is a popular argument, even today. When making a political argument, in the debate context or earlier, going back to an earlier time as a defense of a position has several strategic advantages. For example, it allows for a candidate to utilize the reputation of a prior politician. While Lincoln and Douglas cited Henry Clay and the founding fathers, today’s politicians are more likely to cite more contemporary figures such as Ronald Reagan or Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Either way, the citing of a historical precedent gives the arguer some of the authority of that earlier person, without having that historical person there to confirm whether or not his or her policies and positions are being represented correctly.
Lastly, Lincoln and Douglas utilized the morality argument. This type of argument, based upon values, is very common in modern day argumentation and debate. Within a morality argument, an orator makes a value-based statement about a piece of information, attempting to sway the audience with emotions (Zarefsky “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 178-180).

These arguments and others like them are the backbone of modern day presidential debates. Zarefsky noted that the debates were influenced by “history, culture, and character” to go along with other situational constraints (“Lincoln-Douglas Debates” 181). The Lincoln-Douglas debates set the framework for how debates should work and these factors are in play even today.

In an analysis of the presidential debates through 1996, Friedenburg found that there were two main categories of strategies utilized by the presidential candidates: Issue-oriented strategies and image oriented strategies. Issue-oriented strategies focus on using specific issues that appeal to key demographics to the candidate’s advantage, while framing his or her opponent as very poor on those same issues. The same is true of image-oriented strategies which attempt to portray the debater as a strong leader and as a worthy member of their party to assume the highest office in the land (Friedenburg 75-84).

Presidential debates are a formalized process that have stayed consistent for much of the past fifty years and share many similarities to the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Each of the debates featured the candidates trying to convince the audience that his policies were better than his opponent’s. While the issues have changed in each election, the debates have not. This is because presidential debates exist as a genre, each with the same or similar constraints, goals and strategies. Looking at the 2012 election through a generic lens should help to understand what
rhetorical strategies the candidates used in their attempts to sway public opinion and to make the argument that they would be the better president of the country.

**Presidential Debate Impact on Public Opinion**

Over the years, the presidential debates have evolved into major media spectacles. No longer viewed as simply an opportunity for a basic conversation between two candidates about the direction of the country, each is a major event in its own right. On the networks, each debate is preceded by and followed by segments such as interviews with experts, discussion of instant polls, replaying of highlights, and commentary of candidates’ spokespeople (Fridkin et al. 771) while dozens of websites conduct live-blogs of commentary during the debate. In the most recent presidential debates of 2012 between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, over fifty-nine million people watched each debate (Commission). The experimental part of this study looks at the effectiveness of the debates at influencing public opinion. Ironically, despite all of the fanfare, little consensus on the exact impact of the debates exists. Some research supports the amount of attention that the events receive, while others suggest that the debates are not significant.

Some past research has concluded that debates can have a positive impact on public perceptions of candidates or issues. Statistician Nate Silver found that the presidential debates give a slight advantage to candidates who are challenging incumbent presidents. Challengers improved from an average of 42.4% points nationally, to 43.9%, while incumbents held steady at 45.5% in polls taken before and after debates (Silver). Silver theorized that this advantage to the challenger is due to the fact that the debates permit the challenging candidate to “stand on a literal public stage, and a proverbial level playing field, with the incumbent president” (Silver). A study by Fridkin et al. agreed that the debates have a significant influence. The study showed
that the debates were one of the few parts of the campaign that were able to directly influence public opinions and perceptions. They found that attitudes were directly influenced by arguments made during the debates surrounding an individual candidate's “personal traits, policy performance, and overall performance” (783). This finding supports the idea that the debates are an important part of how public perceptions form of the different candidates.

Other research has shown that the debates have a significant impact on political knowledge. One such study showed that the debates influenced the perceived importance of policy issues and can impact perceptions of candidates on a wide variety of issue- and trait-based scales (Benoit, McKinney and Holbert 270-271). Additional studies have argued that the debates significantly enhance voter knowledge and comfort with political issues. A study that examined the 2008 primary debates co-hosted by CNN and Youtube found that no matter the format, debate messages “significantly enhance political information efficacy” (McKinney and Rill 402). The authors concluded that being exposed to ninety minutes of intense policy discussions helped voters to feel much more comfortable with their level of knowledge about the upcoming election (McKinney and Rill 401-402). Conversely, an analysis of the 1976 Jimmy Carter- Gerald Ford debate found that the event increased mistrust in the government (Wald and Lupfer 381). Instead of that showing that the debates were able to work as a public civics lesson, as was the authors' hypothesis, the study concluded that the debates played a role in causing cynicism about the government to reach new highs (Wald and Lupfer 381).

On the other side, some scholarly research has called these effects into question, concluding that the debates have little or no significant effect on public opinion. Hellweg, Pfau and Robert argue that “presidential debates do affect viewers’ attitudes about candidates, at times
sufficient to help shape and/or alter viewers’ attitudes about candidates’ preference. This impact, however, is largely limited to voters who are uninformed or conflicted” and does not have any impact on the vast majority of viewers (Hellweg, Pfau and Robert 122). Others have argued that the debates themselves have little influence. According to a study by Fein, Goethals, and Kugler, public perceptions of a debate has little to do with the candidates or their rhetorical strategies, but rather with the location in which individuals watch the debate. When shown a 1984 presidential debate between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale, participants’ perceptions of certain lines spoken by the candidates improved by as much as thirty percentage points when those lines were accompanied by a track of audience applause (Fein, Goethals, and Kugler 187). The same study analyzed of the 1992 debates, in which participants viewed a tape of the debate alongside either pro-Clinton or pro-Bush confederates, who audibly vocalized their opinions throughout the ongoing debates. If they were in a room with a confederate, study participants assessed the debate performance of the confederate’s preferred candidate an average of 45% more positively across all experimental conditions (Fein, Goethals, and Kugler 187). This result suggests that the rhetoric, policy positions, and general performance of debaters are irrelevant, or at least not nearly as influential as the reactions of others watching the debate are on an individual’s perceptions. A study by Berquist and Golden concluded that the debates are irrelevant, finding that the actual content of the debates made no impact but instead gave “priority to perceived candidate advantage rather than enlarging public understanding” (137). The debates simply reinforced what people already believed about the candidates, instead of causing any change in what they perceived.
Despite the disagreement in the literature, the debates have found a place at the heart of the presidential campaign. While their direct impact may be in question, they are, without a doubt, a major part of the campaign process. Because the debates occur over and over, and feature similar strategies and constraints in each one, they exist as a rhetorical genre. Understanding the debates and the strategies used by the presidential candidates participating in the debates is the central goal of this study.

The 2012 Election

On November 6, 2012, President Barack Obama was reelected over his challenger, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, by a 51.1% to 47.2% margin in the popular vote and a 332 to 206 margin in the electoral college (“2012 Presidential Election Results”). Over the previous year and a half the candidates and parties had sparred and battled back and forth in the roller-coaster ride that is the presidential election. While in the end, the margin of victory was significant, the election was perceived as a toss-up until the final votes were counted (“2012 Election Maps”). Intense scrutiny was given to the two major party candidates for president, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, and to the issues that they argued for and against.

Candidates

The two candidates had very different rises to power and fame. One spent his formative years as American royalty, the son of a man who was a state governor and chairman of a major auto company, while the other was born to a single mother and spent the first decade of his life living in several locations all over the globe.

The future 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, was born on August 4, 1961, in Hawaii to a Kenyan father and American mother (“President Barack Obama”). Obama
grew up in Hawaii and in Indonesia before attending school at Occidental College in Los Angeles and Columbia University in New York City ("American President: Barack Obama"). After working in Chicago as a community organizer with communities which had been hurt by the closure of local steel mills, he attended Harvard Law School where he became the first African-American president of the Harvard Law review ("President Barack Obama"). Upon graduating, he took a position at a law firm before running for and winning a seat in the Illinois Legislature ("American President: Barack Obama"). In the legislature he was considered a "pragmatic" and "successful" leader (Burnside and Whitehurst 87-88). After a failed run for the United States House of Representatives in 2000, he was elected to the United States Senate in 2004, helped by his prominent keynote address at the 2004 Democratic convention ("American President: Barack Obama").

In 2007, he declared his intention to run for the office of President of the United States. He won the Democratic nomination by defeating a variety of favored and more experienced candidates including Senator Hillary Clinton and former senator and vice-presidential candidate, John Edwards. Challenging Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, Obama trailed in the polls until mid-September of 2008 when the country's financial sector “went into a sudden tailspin” ("American President: Barack Obama"). Obama won the election 53-46% and with a 365 to 173 electoral vote margin, and took office on January 20, 2009 ("American President: Barack Obama"; "President Barack Obama").

Mitt Romney was born on March 12, 1947, in Detroit, Michigan. The son of George Romney, a Republican governor and presidential candidate, he grew up in Michigan before attending Brigham Young University. He then attended Harvard Law and Business School,
graduating in 1975 with law and Master of Business Administration degrees. After working for management consulting firm Bain & Company, he founded the investment firm, Bain Capital in 1984. In 1994 he ran for the United States Senate from Massachusetts against Democrat Ted Kennedy, but lost. He gained national recognition when he took over the Salt Lake Organizing Committee which was organizing the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City after allegations of bribery. Thanks in large part to his leadership, the games were considered a success. He used the experience to run for governor of Massachusetts and was elected in 2003. While governor, his primary accomplishments were reducing the state’s three billion dollar deficit and signing into law a near-universal health care law for Massachusetts residents. After serving one term, he declined to run for re-election, instead running for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, ultimately losing to Senator John McCain (“Mitt Romney Biography”).

President Barack Obama officially announced that he was running for reelection with a video posted to YouTube entitled “It Begins With Us” on April 4, 2011 (Epstein and Thrush). The video focused on grassroots supporters from across the country stating why they supported the president and did not show Obama himself at all. Reports of the announcement focused on the fact that it was a month and a half earlier than when George W. Bush had officially announced in 2003 and that it gave him a fund-raising advantage over a Republican field that had yet to have its top candidates declare (O'Brien). On May 5, Obama officially kicked off his campaign with events in Columbus, Ohio and Richmond, Virginia, stating that he was running again to “move this country forward” and to “finish what we started” (“President Obama's Campaign Kickoff Speech”). As the incumbent president, Obama never encountered a serious Democratic party challenger and led in the polls from the beginning of the race (O'Brien).
Unlike Obama, Mitt Romney faced stiff competition for the nomination. He first announced that he was forming an exploratory committee with an internet video, released on April 11, 2011. In the video, he stated that he was worried about the direction of the country but that he believed that “with able leadership, America's best days are still ahead” (Steinhauser and Yoon). At the time he was considered one of the frontrunners, along with individuals such as former Governors Tim Pawlenty, Buddy Roemer, Mike Huckabee, and former Godfather’s Pizza CEO Herman Cain (Steinhauser and Yoon). Over the course of the campaign he fended off fierce competition for the nomination before emerging victorious after winning the Texas Republican primary on May 29, 2012 (Holland). With the two candidates in place, the focus of the campaign changed from who the nominees would be, to what issues would be the focus of the election.

**Issues**

The campaigns focused on several important issues including the economy, climate change, health care, and the role of the federal government. Most of the issues that had the greatest scrutiny in the election year were domestic in nature. In terms of their foreign policy views, the candidates had very few significant differences, though neither of them would admit that their plans were so similar (Lauter).

One of the most significant divides between the candidates was on the issue of the economy. This divide could clearly be seen in their strategies for restarting economic growth. Obama emphasized that the government was able to and should help spur the economy while Romney advocated for the lack of governmental intervention into the economy (Lauter). In a speech a little under a month before the first debate, Obama stated the following:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American
system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business -- you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn’t get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet. (Obama)

Obama believed that that the government infrastructure and programs allowed individuals to become successful and make a difference in the world. Despite the fact that his phrase “you didn’t build that” was repeated over and over in television ads and speeches by Romney, Obama continued to make the theme prevalent throughout the campaign.

Romney made an opposing argument, stating that government was the problem. In remarks during the Republican primaries, he stated the following:

The best thing we can do for the economic well-being of the people of America is not to grow government; it is to restore freedom and opportunity. It is opportunity that has always driven America and defined us as Americans...Government must make America the best place in the world for entrepreneurs, innovators, small business and big business — for job creators of all kinds. Business is not the enemy. It is the friend of jobs, of rising wages, and of the revenues government needs to care for the poor and the elderly, and to provide for the national defense. (Romney)

Romney’s policy emphasized the role of private business to spur the economic recovery; his view was that overreliance on government programs was the major flaw in the Obama administration’s economic policy (Lauter).

The other issue which received the most attention in the election was health care. In 2010, Obama’s health care plan, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, passed through Congress and was signed into law. Despite the fact that it was similar to the plan that Romney had passed in Massachusetts, Romney came out firmly against the plan and vowed to repeal it on the first day that he entered office, though he failed to mention what his alternative to the plan was. Obama vowed to fully implement his plan and work to ensure that all Americans had access
to health insurance (Lauter). The tensions between these competing viewpoints and plans formed the backbone of the presidential debates.

**Past Debate Performance and Expectations Entering Debates**

The presidential debates were scheduled for October 3, 16, and 22, 2012. As is typical of the occasion, the debates were given a significant amount of attention. According to a Quinnipiac poll taken right before the debates, 93% of voters stated that they planned to watch the debates (“Quinnipiac University Poll”). According to a similar NPR poll, 82% of voters stated that they planned to watch (Liasson and Elving). Eleven percent of voters stated that they thought the debates could change their minds, while 86% said that change was not possible. Despite the large majority who say they will not change their minds, 11% of the population is still a significant number for the candidates to attempt to persuade (Liasson and Elving). As the overall race was considered to be very close, with Obama having between a 2% and 4% advantage (“Quinnipiac University Poll”; “NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”; “CNN/ORC Poll”; “Politico/GW Battleground Poll”; Liasson and Elving; “ABC News/Washington Post”), even the smallest swing in preference for one candidate or the other could make a significant difference.

Obama was considered the favorite in the debate. According to a poll, he was projected to win the debates by a 54% to 28% margin and was projected to win independents by a 52% to 28% margin (“Quinnipiac University Poll”). This projection was likely due to the fact that it is considered that he “won” each of the debates during the 2008 election against Republican candidate John McCain by between 10% and 20%.
Public Opinion of Issue Stances before Debates

Entering the debates, public opinion had solidified on several specific issue stances taken by the candidates. According to several polls taken in the days prior to the debates, Obama led on the vast majority of issues, including foreign policy, women's issues, and leadership (“Quinnipiac University Poll”; “NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”; “CNN/ORC Poll”; “Politico/GW Battleground Poll”; Liasson and Elving; “ABC News/Washington Post”). However, each of the candidates had a category in which their issues stances were clearly unpopular. Obama's unpopular issue stance was related to economic issues including the budget deficit, the state of the economy and government spending. According to an October 1, 2012, poll by the Washington Post and ABC News, voters disapproved of Obama's handling of the economy by a 52% to 47% margin (“ABC News/Washington Post”). A NBC/ Wall Street Journal Poll released the next day, October 2, had a similar margin, with voters disapproving 51% to 46%. In a head to head match-up in that same poll, voters preferred Romney's economic strategies by a 45% to 42% margin (“NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”).

Romney, on the other hand, trailed in several major categories, such as his ability to handle terrorism (53% to 39% Obama), handling an unexpected economic crisis (52% to 42% Obama) and handling the situation in the Middle East (48% to 32% Obama) (“NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”; “ABC News/Washington Post”). One area of polling in which Romney had a consistent deficit was health care and the government program, Medicare. In a CNN poll, Romney trailed Obama by a 50% to 45% margin on support of the candidates’ health care policy (“CNN/ORC Poll”). Other polls also had the health care policy margin at 50% to 45% (“Quinnipiac University Poll”), and at 49% to 40% (“NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”).
Romney was viewed particularly poorly on his Medicare policy with respondents favoring Obama's policy proposals by a 12% margin (48% to 36%) (“NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”). To either improve their already solid standing in the polls (Obama) or to make up ground (Romney), the candidates would have to use the opportunity of the presidential debates to specifically address the issues on which they were losing in an attempt to shift public perceptions on these unpopular issue stances.

**Conclusion**

Rhetoric’s influence on public opinion is complicated and intertwined with influences of education, bias, perception, and knowledge. This complexity makes it nearly impossible to come to a singular answer on the best way to correct or persuade the public regarding an issue stance or factual assertion. What makes understanding public opinion even more difficult is when individuals hold onto incorrect political perceptions. Once individuals believe an idea that is incorrect, research has shown that any efforts to change their mind will only make them believe the incorrect perception more. It is very clear that in order to change or modify public opinion, the current public opinion must be understood. Without this starting point, influencing public opinion is nearly impossible.

Though now perceived as a long standing tradition, presidential debates have only occurred regularly since 1976, and in the same format, have only been run by the same organization since 1988. Despite their relative youth compared to other election traditions, the debates have become ingrained in our political process and are one of the most talked about and influential parts of each election.
This influence is true of the 2012 debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Each had particular issues on which the public viewed them as weak. Each had the opportunity to use the debates as a chance to persuade the public on these unpopular issue stances. How exactly they did so and determining whether or not those strategies were effective is the purpose of this study. In this literature review, I examined the elements that influence the use of rhetorical strategies during presidential debates. These elements included public opinion and public perceptions, genre theory, presidential debates as a recurring genre and the 2012 election.
CHAPTER III: METHOD

Zarefsky states, “Rhetorical masterpieces can be studied in the same way that great works of literature are studied: with an eye both to offering new perspective on the case at hand and to suggesting broader principles that will help to explain rhetorical practice more generally” (“Presidential Rhetoric” 611). In order to complete my study, I conducted both a rhetorical criticism and an experiment followed by a quantitative analysis of the results. The purpose of my study was to determine what rhetorical strategies presidential candidates use during debates in order to improve public perceptions of unpopular issue stances and the effectiveness of these strategies at influencing public opinion. Specifically, this study used the generic method of rhetorical criticism to examine the first two debates of the 2012 presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in order to uncover rhetorical strategies used by the candidates to persuade the public on issue stances on which they are perceived to be losing to their opponent. These rhetorical strategies were then tested experimentally to determine how effective they were at persuading the public to support previously unpopular issue stances. This chapter provides a justification for the use of generic criticism and the experimental method, discusses the artifacts analyzed, and describes the methodological steps followed for generic criticism.

Justification of Method

Conducting rhetorical criticism and an experiment is appropriate in this situation for a number of reasons. The first is that rhetorical criticism is a qualitative research method specifically designed for the analysis and understanding of symbolic acts and artifacts that attempt to change the way that society thinks about or perceives the world (Foss 4, 6). Rhetoric is “the art of using language to help people narrow their choices among specifiable, if not
specified, policy options” (Hart and Daughton 2). Thus, critically understanding the rhetoric being used in any situation is essential to understanding how and why the world is viewed the way that it is. One of the central ideas of rhetoric is that it frames how we view issues (Hart and Daughton 15). Rhetoric does not simply aim to change our mind on an issue, but instead works to change the entire context in which that issue exists. The rhetor can use it as a means of navigation to help guide his or her audience to view the world and individual issues in a particular way.

In addition, rhetorical criticism allows for an insight into the mindset and strategies of the rhetor. According to Zarefsky, “Rhetoric is not only an alleged cause of shifts in audience attitudes. It is also a reflection of...values and world view”. Critically examining rhetoric by, “unpacking a text, probing its dimensions and possibilities, helps the scholar to understand better the richness of a very specific situation that already has passed and will not return in exactly the same way” (“Presidential Rhetoric” 610). In my study, I examine the rhetorical strategies used by presidential debaters to persuade the public in policy areas in which they are viewed negatively. Rhetorical criticism allows for an understanding of the lens through which the debaters would like their audience to see the world.

Secondly, the form of rhetorical criticism used in this study, generic criticism, focuses on the discovery of “commonalities in rhetorical patterns across recurring situations” (Foss 137). Generic criticism looks at a message not merely as a singular instance, but as just one part of a long pattern of recurring messages, each with similar goals and arising in similar circumstances. Whether an individual is aware of it or not, generic constraints influence how they present their message (Hart and Daughton 116). Generic situations exist with patterns that re-occur. While
every rhetorical situation is unique unto itself, “patterns of rhetorical choice do tend to repeat across situations with the same central characteristics” (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 610-611). This study looks at the rhetoric of presidential debates. Past debates have determined the structure, strategies, and rules that are in place for each debate and these guidelines must be understood when examining rhetorical strategies.

Third, generic criticism allows for an evaluation of how well a rhetor is able to meet his or her end goal (Campbell and Jamieson 12). Because messages are recurring, this method can analyze success or failure on the part of the rhetor at meeting their goals. This method allows for an understanding of the past events within a genre to be incorporated into an analysis of a new instance of that same genre. Some of the constraints, outcomes, situations, and methods used within the genre become standardized throughout time, allowing for a generic analysis to see if the new example has been able to meet the criteria that has previously been established.

Furthermore, conducting an experiment to test the findings from within the rhetorical analysis has several distinct advantages. According to McDermott, “Experiments offer unparalleled control over the variables of interest” (56). Because the experimental method allows for manipulation of a single variable at a time, it allows for the study to have extremely high internal validity, something which a rhetorical analysis lacks. This level of validity allows for “experimenters to make causal arguments about which factors cause certain outcomes, or contribute to them, and which do not” (56). In an experiment by Druckman and Holmes, they noted that experiments avoid any type of problem with selection bias, because of random assignment, and also allows experimenters to see the immediate impact of the study on their
dependent variable (763). In this study, this type of validity allows for a direct examination of the impact of the rhetorical strategies used by the presidential candidates during the 2012 debates.

**Artifacts**

The artifacts that I used in this study were the first and second 2012 presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Focusing on the topic of domestic policy, the first presidential debate of the cycle took place on October 3, 2013, at the University of Denver. The debate was moderated by Jim Lehrer of PBS (Commission). The second presidential debate took place on October 16, 2013 at Hofstra University. The debate was moderated by Candy Crowley of CNN and focused on both foreign and domestic policy in a “town hall meeting” style setting (Commission). For both debates, my analysis relied exclusively on the transcripts of the events.

**Specific Methodological Steps**

My study had two major parts. First I conducted a rhetorical analysis of the debates; and second, I conducted an experiment to test the findings from the rhetorical analysis. To conduct a generic criticism, several steps must be taken. The first is to select an artifact or artifacts to examine and to choose which form of generic criticism to be used. According to Foss, there are three different options for generic analysis: “generic description, generic participation, and generic application” (140). Each option allows for a slightly different level of analysis. Generic description is a process where artifacts are examined in order to determine what the recurring characteristics of a message or messages are. Generic participation looks at an artifact and compares it to an established genre to see if it belongs within that genre. Lastly, generic application involves analyzing an artifact for its strengths and weaknesses in relation to an established genre (Foss 140-144).
In this study I used the specific method of generic application in order to analyze the rhetorical strategies used by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. First, I examined the literature to determine constraints, tasks, requirements, strategies, and principles that exist within the individual genre of presidential debates. Second, I thoroughly read the transcript of the first and second presidential debates of the 2012 presidential election. Third, I looked for themes in the messages used by the candidates, both in terms of similarities that existed and also in terms of significant differences. I analyzed the themes that I discovered and organized them into categories of strategies.

After completing the rhetorical criticism, I took one of the strategies uncovered in my rhetorical analysis and designed and completed an experiment to test how effective it was at influencing perceptions of the issue stances of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The specific methodological steps of the experiment are explained more fully in my quantitative analysis.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the justification of the method, the artifacts used, and the methodological steps of generic criticism. I used generic criticism to examine the rhetorical strategies of Mitt Romney and Barack Obama in their attempts to modify public opinion during presidential debates. This analysis was done by using the first and second presidential debates of the 2012 presidential election as my artifacts. In Chapter IV I will provide analysis of the debates and examine how rhetorical strategies within them were able to shape public opinion on the key issues of the 2012 election.
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

Before stepping on the stage at the University of Denver on October 3, 2012, for the first presidential debate, Governor Mitt Romney was in good spirits, joking, “I can’t believe I’m about to go debate the president of the United States…I think we’ll have some fun.” President Obama’s staffers were much less confident, with some even dreading the event, believing that the president’s “head was in the wrong place” and that it wasn’t “going to be a good night” (Halperin and Heilemann 419-20). The candidates and their staffs knew the stakes of the night and of those debates that were to follow: The winner of the debates would receive positive media coverage, a probable boost in the polls, and just possibly, a win in the election. Moreover, a loss would be seen as a sign of weakness, potentially destroying Obama’s steady lead, or ending any possibility of a Romney comeback.

The debates gave both of the candidates a clear opportunity to stand in front of the American public and persuade them that their respective ideas were better for the country. Both candidates resolved to use every tool in their arsenal to score a resounding win in the all-important arena of public opinion and to persuade the viewing public that their positions, including those on which they were currently weak, were those that would take the country forward.

During the first two debates of the 2012 presidential cycle, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney used a number of different rhetorical strategies to attempt to influence public opinion on unpopular issue stances. Both candidates used framing to change the criteria by which their arguments and policies would be analyzed, used appeals to authority to change the public perception of the issues, directly rebutted the factual points that their opponent made, and
attempted to appeal directly to liberal or conservative presumptions. These rhetorical strategies were used by the candidates in an effort to shift the audience’s perspective on the issues where they were weakest, and gain support in the presidential election.

In the following, I analyze the rhetorical strategies used by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential debates to influence public opinion on issues for which the public preferred their opponent’s policy positions. I then took one of the strategies that I found and conducted an experiment to see if the strategy influenced participants in a controlled setting. This chapter will analyze the ways that the strategies were used within the debates and then will then examine the effectiveness of one of the strategies, issue framing, through an experiment.

**Generic Analysis**

By examining the debates through the lens of generic criticism, the strategies identified can then be used to look at debates as a whole as a larger part of the genre. Generic criticism relies upon the idea that genres occur again and again. Therefore what has occurred as a strategy in one debate, has likely been used before and will likely be used again in a similar context. By looking at the debates in this manner, using generic criticism, the strategies that are uncovered can then be looked for in other debates, allowing for a wealth of information to be obtained about each of the individual circumstances and within the genre as a whole.

**Issue Framing**

Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney went into the debates aware of the opportunity that they had and implemented a variety of strategies towards maximizing that opportunity. Many different rhetorical strategies exist to attempt to influence the public. One of the tools that politicians can use is that of framing. Issue framing, “refer(s) to situations where, by
emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker leads individuals to focus on these consideration[s] when constructing their opinions” (Druckman “Political Preference Formation” 672). This strategy allows politicians to influence how individuals view political issues by giving them different variables to use when making their political evaluations. By “postulating a different frame of reference than the one in which the subject is normally viewed…people see the thing ‘in a different light’ and their attitudes about it therefore change” (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 613).

Both candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, used the strategy of issue framing during the 2012 presidential debates in an attempt to associate issue stances on which they were viewed unfavorably with stances on which they were viewed more favorably. Obama used it to shift evaluations of his economic policies to be based upon his success in other areas such as the environment and education and to influence the audience to view Romney’s economic policies as only benefiting the wealthy or the defense industry. Romney used the strategy in order to shift the public’s view of his health care policy proposals to be evaluated based upon his success and Obama’s failure on economic issues.

Prior to the debates, Obama was viewed more positively than his opponent in nearly every area. The one area where Mitt Romney had a clear advantage was the economy (“Quinnipiac University Poll”; “NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey”; “CNN/ORC Poll”; “Politico/GW Battleground Poll”; Liasson and Elving; “ABC News/Washington Post”). Going into the debate, one of Obama’s central goals was to defend his handling of the economy and shift the public’s perception of his economic policies and future plans. Within the debates, Obama used framing to change the criteria the public used to evaluate the strength of the
economy and therefore his policies. He shifted the public from looking at pure economic numbers to looking at the real world implications of economic success through a variety of programs and policies that had strong public support.

He used this strategy early and often within the debates. Early during the first debate, the moderator posed a question about comments that Romney made characterizing Obama’s economic programs as “trickle-down government,” with Romney implying that the country’s economic situation was weak and government-run rather than spurred by economic innovation by the people. Obama responded by arguing that a variety of positive programs had become possible only because of his skilled handling of the economy, specifically within the field of education and that in the next four years he would take the programs even further. He argued that “we've got to improve our education system…We've got a program called Race to the Top that has prompted reforms in 46 states around the country, raising standards, improving how we train teachers. So now I want to hire another 100,000 new math and science teachers…And I want to make sure that we keep tuition low for our young people” (“October 3, 2012 Debate”).

By framing evaluations about the economy based upon education, an issue on which he was strongly favored, Obama attempted to improve public perceptions of his economic policies. Through the use of the strategy, he attempted to lead the public to view the economy not based upon typical economic standards, such as jobs or GDP, but through considerations of how his policies had led to an economic system that allowed for increased educational opportunities. Based upon his economic policies, the country would next be able to hire 100,000 more teachers. A debate strictly on the economy would be one that he potentially could lose. But one based upon education? He had strong support on that issue and could win that debate. By tying the two
issues together he attempted to transfer the support that he had on education issues to the public’s evaluation of his economic policies.

Another example of Obama’s use of the same strategy came later in the same debate when he was asked another question on the economy. When discussing his goals for the economy he stated:

> I think we've got to invest in education and training. I think it's important for us to develop new sources of energy here in America, that we change our tax code to make sure that we're helping small businesses and companies that are investing here in the United States, that we take some of the money that we're saving as we wind down two wars to rebuild America and that we reduce our deficit in a balanced way that allows us to make these critical investments. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

By associating the economy with three areas where he had a significant amount of public support (energy, education and ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), he was able to frame his economic plans in a positive light. Again, he didn’t mention most of the typical phrases or themes that are prevalent in discussions of the economy. Instead, he focused on the themes of infrastructure and revitalization of the country. Framing the issue in this way allowed him to emphasize these positive themes and issues in an area, the economy, where the public preferred Romney’s policies to his own.

Obama did not just use the strategy of framing to attempt to influence how individuals would evaluate his own policies, but also used it to preemptively attack his opponent. In another example of his usage of this strategy, he argued that Romney’s “central economic plan calls for a $5 trillion tax cut -- on top of the extension of the Bush tax cuts -- that's another trillion dollars -- and $2 trillion in additional military spending that the military hasn't asked for. That's $8 trillion” (“October 3, 2012 Debate”). Here he associated Romney’s economic policies, which were viewed positively by the public, with two issues on which Romney’s views were not popular,
increased military spending and tax cuts for the wealthy. By stating that the central part of Romney’s plan was based upon these two issues, he attempted to change how the public viewed the one issue on which Romney was viewed positively.

Obama also pointed out that when Governor Romney appeared on the television program 60 Minutes, he was asked if it was fair that he paid a lower tax rate on his 20 million dollar a year income than most middle class earners. Romney had responded that he thought his tax rate was perfectly fair and that when upper income earners paid low tax rates, that economic strategy helped to grow the economy. Obama stated that he “fundamentally disagree(d) with that. I think what grows the economy is when you get that tax credit that we put in place for your kids going to college. I think that grows the economy. I think what grows the economy is when we make sure small businesses are getting a tax credit for hiring veterans who fought for our country. That grows our economy” (“October 3, 2012 Debate”). Here he was able to do two things at once: paint Mitt Romney as someone only looking out for the upper class and connect his economic policies with those that benefited veterans, children, and owners of small businesses, three key demographics.

One of the constant attacks against Romney during the election was his perceived elitism, part of which was spurred by comments that Romney had made at a fundraiser, claiming that he didn’t represent the 47% of Americans who didn’t pay taxes (Hendricks). By associating Romney with the military-industrial complex and with the ultra-wealthy, Obama attempted to tap into this discontent with Romney.

Governor Romney also used the strategy of issue framing in a manner similar to that of Obama. He attempted to frame his health care policy, an area on which the public viewed his
policy negatively in comparison to Obama’s, using economic terms, an area where he had strong public support. He used the strategy of framing in order to change the criteria through which his policies would be viewed. In the first debate he said the following in regard to health care:

The key task we have in health care is to get the cost down so it’s more affordable for families. And then he has as a model for doing that a board of people at the government, an unelected board, appointed board, who are going to decide what kind of treatment you ought to have. In my opinion, the government is not effective in -- in bringing down the cost of almost anything. As a matter of fact, free people and free enterprises trying to find ways to do things better are able to be more effective in bringing down the cost than the government will ever be. The example of the Cleveland Clinic is my case in point, along with several others I could describe. This is the private market. These are small -- these are enterprises competing with each other, learning how to do better and better jobs. I used to consult to businesses -- excuse me, to hospitals and to health care providers. I was astonished at the creativity and innovation that exists in the American people. In order to bring the cost of health care down, we don't need to have a board of 15 people telling us what kinds of treatments we should have. We instead need to put insurance plans, providers, hospitals, doctors on target such that they have an incentive, as you say, performance pay, for doing an excellent job, for keeping costs down, and that's happening. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

Within the statement he quickly pivoted from discussing health care to discussing his economic strategies and belief in the private market. Instead of talking about health care in terms of health, or care, he framed it as an issue of economic policy. He attempted to frame the current system under Obama as a conflict between the government and American innovation and implied that he would use his economic experience to promote a health care system that would bring costs down.

In the statement he also made a Freudian slip that directly showed what ideas he was trying to connect. He stated that he “used to consult to businesses -- excuse me, to hospitals and to health care providers” (“October 3, 2012 Debate”). This statement shows that Romney was attempting to frame health care, and his own health care policy and experience, as part of his business experience. One of the strengths of using a framing strategy is that it can create an
association between terms (Zarefsky “Presidential Rhetoric” 612). While cost is not always a term that is used in association with health care, Romney brought it to the forefront of the debate by discussing the health care system in economic terms. This association could also help to improve the public’s perception of his health care policy, by showing to them that it was really just another part of his economic policy, which they already favored. By framing the issue in this way he attempted to raise public support for his health care policy.

Both Obama and Romney used the strategy of issue framing in order to gain support. However, Obama used it in much more dynamic ways throughout the debates, connecting his unpopular stance to a variety of other issues on which he had strong support. This ability to connect issues more frequently could be because he was viewed favorably on more issues than Romney was and could more easily connect the one issue on which he was losing, the economy, to other issues. Romney, on the other hand, was only viewed to be winning on one issue, the economy. This issue was the only one that he could connect to in order to shift public support. Romney did use the issue several times during the debates in order to connect to his unpopular stances. Focusing on only the economy in this manner may be advantageous, because some research has suggested that in presidential elections, the only issue that makes a significant difference on the outcome of the election is the economy (Vavreck). Based upon this research, Romney could hammer home his point about his ability to fix the economy when discussing nearly any issue and potentially gain a significant amount of support from the American public.
Appeal to Authority

In order to persuade an audience on a particular issue stance, another strategy that presidential candidates use are appeals to an outside authority. These often take the form of statistics, examples, or statements from sources that are implied to have knowledge of or about a specific situation. Often this outside authority is an advocacy or lobbying group, a think-tank or an independent government agency. Sometimes the authority can also be an expert in an individual field or just an ordinary person who has experience with an issues. Regardless, of the source of the authority, these types of appeals are often used as a means to evaluate policies or future proposals. Appeals to an authority can be a very useful strategy as it provides a systematic way for individuals to assess the validity of an argument (Woods and Walton 135). During the debate both Romney and Obama used the strategy to bolster their claims on issues on which they were unpopular and to attack their opponent’s strengths while presenting outside evaluations of their opponent’s ideas.

Romney used the strategy multiple times in order to offer the country an evaluation of Obama’s economic performance. An example of his usage of the strategy was when, during the first debate, he presented evidence from an outside authority that the Obama administration had hurt the nation’s small businesses, stating that, “It's small business that creates the jobs in America, and over the last four years, small business people have decided that America may not be the place to open a new business because new business startups are down to a 30-year low” (“October 3, 2012 Debate”). Romney provided information that was more comprehensive than simply saying that Obama was bad for small business. By focusing on a statistic, namely that new business startups are at a 30-year low, he was able to provide a simple-to-remember and
repeatable fact to the audience. This use of facts fits well with the idea of “low information rationality”. Based upon this idea, many voters have difficulty processing difficult political concepts and will rely upon past information they have of candidates or simple ideas that are easily remembered in order to make decisions (Popkin 212). Using this appeal to outside authority, using a simple fact, Romney was able to provide a piece of evidence that Obama’s plan was bad, attempting to persuade the audience that Obama’s economic policies could never be successful and prevent Obama from gaining ground in this area.

By placing the emphasis on the fact that it was “small business that creates jobs in America”, and that Obama is bad for small business, Romney was able to use a type of priming strategy in conjunction with his appeal to authority to emphasize that Obama’s plan was bad for the economy. Priming relies on changing the criteria through which the public makes evaluations (Druckman and Holmes 757). After establishing the criteria on what helps the economy (small business creates jobs in America) himself, Romney then used a source to say that Obama acts contrary to this criteria (new business startups are at a 30-year low). In this way it implies that an outside authority is stating that Obama is bad for America.

Later in the same debate Romney also used an appeal to authority to combat a claim that Obama had made. Obama, utilizing an appeal to an outside authority, argued that Romney’s economic plan would cost the middle class money. In response, Romney stated the following:

Now, you cite a study. There are six other studies that looked at the study you describe and say it's completely wrong. I saw a study that came out today that said you're going to raise taxes by $3,000 to $4,000 on middle-income families. There are all these studies out there. But let's get at the bottom line. That is, I want to bring down rates. I want to bring the rates down, at the same time lower deductions and exemptions and credits and so forth, so we keep getting the revenue we need. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

By pointing out that there were six other studies that discredited the one that Obama cited and by also citing an alternative study that stated that Obama’s plan would raise taxes, Romney attempted to both discredit Obama’s authority and cite his own. This appeal to authority helped him to reinforce his point that Obama’s policies were hurting the economy. By again emphasizing this point, he attempted to prevent Obama from persuading the public on the one issue on which Obama was viewed negatively. Because people are more likely to remember and respond to political issues when they do not already have established opinions of them (Holbrook 69), being on the forefront of the issue by applying authority to it, is likely to give candidates an advantage.

Another example of Romney’s use of the strategy was his appeal to authority by way of an example. He discussed a small business owner in St. Louis:

Now, and -- and I've talked to a guy who has a very small business. He's in the electronics business in -- in St. Louis. He has four employees. He said he and his son calculated how much they pay in taxes, federal income tax, federal payroll tax, state income tax, state sales tax, state property tax, gasoline tax. It added up to well over 50 percent of what they earned. And your plan is to take the tax rate on successful small businesses from 35 percent to 40 percent. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

Romney pointed to the electronics businessman in St. Louis, using him as a representative example for all small businesses. By saying that he was struggling, he implied that other small businesses were struggling as well, based upon the crushing weight of Obama’s policies. Using the authority of outside examples such as statistics and a representative example, Romney attempted to prevent Obama from gaining any type of advantage on the economy.

Romney also used the strategy in an attempt to influence perceptions of Obama’s health care plan, which had been one of the keystones of Obama’s first term and one of the issues in which Romney had the lowest support (“Politico/GW Battleground Poll”). In order to make the
argument that the Affordable Care Act would hurt the economy, Romney turned to an appeal to authority. He argued that the plan would hurt both small business and families. When asked if he wanted to repeal the plan he answered,

I sure do… I met a couple in Appleton, Wisconsin, and they said, we're thinking of dropping our insurance, we can't afford it. And the number of small businesses I've gone to that are saying they're dropping insurance because they can't afford it, the cost of health care is just prohibitive….when you look at Obamacare, the Congressional Budget Office has said it will cost $2,500 a year more than traditional insurance. So it's adding to cost. And as a matter of fact, when the president ran for office, he said that, by this year, he would have brought down the cost of insurance for each family by $2,500 a family. Instead, it's gone up by that amount. So it's expensive. Expensive things hurt families. So that's one reason I don't want it. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

By articulating his appeal using both the Congressional Budget Office, and a representative example, Romney attempted to make the argument that Obama’s health care plan would hurt the country, and that Romney’s alternative plan--to repeal it--would help the country. Using the various forms of authority and examples, allowed for Romney to present a more vivid picture of the faults of Obama’s plans.

Obama also used the strategy of an appeal to authority when articulating the issues with Romney’s economic plan, the one area of the campaign in which Romney had an advantage.

According to Obama:

Governor Romney's proposal that he has been promoting for 18 months calls for a $5 trillion tax cut, on top of $2 trillion of additional spending for our military. And he is saying that he is going to pay for it by closing loopholes and deductions. The problem is that he's been asked over 100 times how you would close those deductions and loopholes, and he hasn't been able to identify them. When you add up all the loopholes and deductions that upper-income individuals can -- are currently taking advantage of, you take those all away, you don't come close to paying for $5 trillion in tax cuts and $2 trillion in additional military spending. And that's why independent studies looking at this said the only way to meet Governor Romney's pledge of not reducing the deficit or -- or -- or not adding to the deficit is by burdening middle-class families. The average middle-class family with children would pay about $2,000 more. Now, that's not my analysis. That's the analysis of economists who have looked at this. And -- and that kind of top --
top-down economics, where folks at the top are doing well, so the average person making $3 million is getting a $250,000 tax break, while middle-class families are burdened further, that's not what I believe is a recipe for economic growth. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

Obama attacked the plan by making the clear argument that outside evaluators stated that Romney’s economic plan would not help the middle class as Romney argued, but rather would benefit the upper class and the military, two groups that traditionally support Republican candidates and again helped to portray Romney as an elitist, who would only look out for the interests of the upper income earners in the country. By appealing to outside individuals who have authority on the topic, economists, he gave greater credence to his claims and further hurt Romney’s arguments. This form of attack, of directly opposing what the opposing side has said, is also known as a rebuttal and is the third major strategy that my rhetorical criticism uncovered within the debates.

Rebuttal

A rebuttal is defined as a situation when “an initial appeal is challenged by a statement making the opposite prediction” (Jerit 411). It allows for a candidate to immediately confront what their opponent has said. This opportunity is one of the strong advantages of the presidential debates. While a candidate can always refute or rebut what their opponent has said, it is often done hours, days or even weeks later and almost never face to face. During the debates, the candidates only have to wait a matter of seconds before contradicting what their opponent said. Both candidates used the rebuttal to its fullest extent during the debates, even at times directly interrupting their opponents. According to Voth, in the two debates analyzed here, Obama directly interrupted Romney while he was speaking forty times, four in the first debate and thirty-six times in the second, while Romney interrupted Obama twenty-nine times, once in the
first debate and twenty-eight times in the second (54). Both candidates realized the usefulness of the rebuttal and took advantage of it often in the debates.

During the debates, Obama used this strategy multiple times. As the incumbent candidate, the debates inherently focused on his record as president. Often, Romney would make a claim and then Obama would respond with a direct rebuttal. For example, Romney claimed that he hadn’t actually called for the Detroit automakers to go into bankruptcy. Obama responded with the following:

What Governor Romney said just isn't true. He wanted to take them into bankruptcy without providing them any way to stay open. And we would have lost a million jobs. And that -- don't take my word for it, take the executives at GM and Chrysler, some of whom are Republicans, may even support Governor Romney. But they'll tell you his prescription wasn't going to work. And Governor Romney's says he's got a five-point plan? Governor Romney doesn't have a five-point plan. He has a one-point plan. And that plan is to make sure that folks at the top play by a different set of rules. That's been his philosophy in the private sector, that's been his philosophy as governor, that's been his philosophy as a presidential candidate. (“October 16, 2012 Debate”)

By directly rebutting what Romney said, Obama attempted to change evaluations of Romney’s record. If he had not responded Romney’s claims, Obama could have allowed the message that Romney really hadn’t wanted to take Detroit into bankruptcy to be the prevailing one on voters’ minds. He also was able to attack Romney’s claim of a five point plan. By attacking Romney’s plan with a simple sound bite Obama was able to give the public a simple piece of information to remember when they tried to recall Romney’s economic plan. Several of the models on political learning reinforce that a quick sound bite works to persuade a significant portion of the populace who are often uninformed on political issues and react to simple, easy-to-decipher political information (Gilens 392; Holbrook 68-69; Nyhan and Reifer 323; Jacobs and Shapiro 51).
Obama also used the strategy of a direct rebuttal in order to counter Romney’s claims on Obama’s record on the economy and oil and natural gas production. Romney claimed that Obama had pulled back oil drilling on public lands. Obama responded by stating that, “there's no doubt that world demand's gone up, but our production is going up, and we're using oil more efficiently. And very little of what Governor Romney just said is true. We've opened up public lands. We're actually drilling more on public lands than in the previous administration and…the previous president was an oil man” (“October 16, 2012 Debate”). Again, Obama attempted to directly combat a factual claim that Romney had used and threw in a one-liner about how the former president was associated with oil. In order to persuade the public that his plan was the correct plan on the economy, Obama worked to quickly rebut many of the claims that Romney made, especially during the second of the two debates analyzed in this study.

Romney also used the same strategy in the debate, though not to the same extent as Obama did. Often his rebuttals were not as direct and were more focused simply on defining himself as a candidate. This observation is logically consistent with the idea that the challenging candidate would spend more of the debate on offense instead of defense. After Obama had attacked his tax plan, Romney responded with the following:

I'd like to clear up the record and go through it piece by piece. First of all, I don't have a $5 trillion tax cut. I don't have a tax cut of a scale that you're talking about. My view is that we ought to provide tax relief to people in the middle class. But I'm not going to reduce the share of taxes paid by high-income people. High-income people are doing just fine in this economy. They'll do fine whether you're president or I am. The people who are having the hard time right now are middle-income Americans. Under the president's policies, middle-income Americans have been buried. They're just being crushed. Middle-income Americans have seen their income come down by $4,300. This is a -- this is a tax in and of itself. I'll call it the economy tax. It's been crushing. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”).
Romney used the rebuttal opportunity as a chance to define himself. By directly tying his plans to the hardships of the American people, he was able to make a stronger argument that his policy was best for the country. Romney also made the argument that upper income individuals were doing fine and did not need extra support, a policy that is more often associated with liberal instead of conservative candidates. This argument highlights another strategy that was prevalent in the debates: appealing to both the liberal and conservative presumptions.

**Appealing to Liberal and Conservative Presumptions**

Both candidates used the strategy of appealing to liberal and conservative presumptions in order to influence the public, especially those with moderate beliefs or those who were undecided at the time of the debate. The strategy is based upon the idea that people’s real world political beliefs are likely to hold “elements of both liberal and conservative world-views” (Zarefsky “Strategic Maneuvering” 323). Few people in the country are likely to hold beliefs and values that can be labeled as 100% liberal or 100% conservative. Instead, the vast majority of people in the country are a mixture of both. By appealing to both at the same time, candidates can gain a strategic advantage, as it is more likely that individuals from both sides of the aisle will find the argument persuasive. For instance, presidents often propose a large federal program not as a means to expand the powers of government, but as a way to provide resources to people so that they can be independent. By arguing for the policy in this way, politicians can appeal to the assumed policy positions of both conservatism (self-reliance) and liberalism (government programs). Both candidates this used the strategy during the debates.

Romney used this strategy when he discussed his tax plan, arguing that it would benefit middle class Americans instead of just the upper class (“October 3, 2012 Debate”). He also used
it to describe his view on the country’s health care system, saying that while he supported Medicare and wanted to strengthen it, he would also prefer a private plan (“October 3, 2012 Debate”). By appealing to conservative presumptions in addition to liberal ones, he was able to emphasize that he was running for president of the entire country and not just one side or the other.

Obama also used this strategy within the debates. During the second debate, while discussing health care for women he argued that contraceptive coverage was not just a women’s health issue, which was the typical “liberal” argument, but also an economic issue, which would be the issue surrounding a typical “conservative” argument. He stated that, “this is not just a -- a health issue, it's an economic issue for women. It makes a difference. This is money out of that family's pocket” (“October 16, 2012 Debate”). Utilizing this strategy allowed for Obama to reach out to a moderate and conservative audience which heard something they did not expect from him. This argument was more likely to be persuasive, and gave him a better chance of shifting public perception on his economic policies, while maintaining the support he had on other issues.

**Impact of Debate Strategies**

In my rhetorical analysis I used a generic application to analyze the rhetorical themes and strategies that the candidates employed throughout the first two presidential debates in 2012 in order to determine what they did to attempt to shift public opinion on issues on which they were viewed negatively. Based upon my analysis, I identified four specific strategies: issue framing, appeals to authority, the use of a rebuttal, and appeals to liberal and conservative presumptions. A question that emerges from this type of analysis is whether or not these strategies matter. Do they make a difference? Are the strategies that are used by the candidates effective at influencing
public perceptions? In order to help answer this question, I conducted an experiment to determine the effectiveness of these strategies. My hypothesis is that the strategies used by the candidates will increase the favorability of their issues while decreasing the favorability of their opponents’ issues.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Understanding the strategies that were used by the candidates is simply one part of the equation. To determine whether those strategies were effective, further study must be done. To this end I conducted an experiment examining the impact of the strategies used by the candidates on public perceptions of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney’s economic and health care plans. Due to time limitations for this study, only one type of strategy, that of emphasis framing, was tested. Emphasis framing was chosen for this part of the quantitative analysis as it recurred several times during the debates and was used by both candidates. Barack Obama used the strategy in order to attempt to shift opinion on his economic policies, while Mitt Romney used it in an attempt to gain support for his health care policies.

In order to test how effective this type of strategy was at influencing public perceptions of the policies, I created an online experiment to be distributed to a random sample of current students at The College of Wooster. The experiment consisted of four separate conditions to which the participants were randomly assigned: an experimental condition that looked at one of Obama’s statements on the economy, a control condition on the economy, an experimental condition that looked at one of Romney’s statements on health care, and a control condition that looked at health care.
Individuals who were randomly assigned to the economic condition were all given the following statement to read from CNN.com on the condition of the economy before the presidential debates:

Economic recovery continues to be an important issue to voters – and jobs and unemployment are at the core of recovery. Job growth has slowed over the past months, leaving the unemployment rate stagnant at 8.2%. And in some communities, the unemployment rate is worse – for instance, the African American unemployment rate hovers above 14.4%, and unemployment for Hispanics is about 11%. However, since President Obama took office, the economy has shifted from shedding jobs to adding jobs, posting 21 consecutive months of positive job growth. However, with continued cuts in local, state and federal spending, much of those cuts have been government jobs. Gov. Romney says his private sector experience gives him the qualifications to create jobs, which he believes will come with less government interference with the private sector. Obama believes that the government plays an important role in job creation, including using stimulus spending to create more government and private sector jobs. ("2012 Election Issues)

This statement was provided in order to create a baseline for participants to view and use in their evaluations and to give background information to participants who were not necessarily familiar with the election or issues. This statement was all that was provided in the control economic condition.

Those individuals who were assigned to the economic experimental condition were given the following statement by Barack Obama--from the second presidential debate on October 16, in addition to the CNN statement: "I think what grows the economy is when you get that tax credit that we put in place for your kids going to college. I think that grows the economy. I think what grows the economy is when we make sure small businesses are getting a tax credit for hiring veterans who fought for our country. That grows our economy” (“October 16, 2012 Debate”). This was one of the examples that I identified in my rhetorical analysis of Obama’s
use of emphasis framing. Next those who received either of the two economic conditions were
asked to fill out the economic questionnaire, again located in Appendix A.

Individuals who were randomly assigned to the health care condition went through a
similar process and were given the following statement to read from CNN.com on the issue of
health care before the presidential debates:

The Supreme Court’s ruling in June that the individual mandate in President Obama’s
health care reform law could not be upheld under the Constitution’s Commerce Clause,
but could be upheld as a tax has Democrats and Republicans once again at odds.
Republicans are pushing for a repeal of much of the reform signed into law in Spring
2010. Democrats are telling Republicans to move on, that the Supreme Court has spoken.
But with a majority of Americans who oppose the individual mandate and a slim majority
that oppose ‘Obamacare’ altogether, Republicans aren’t backing down. And headed into
the election, the debate remains – is health care reform a tax or a penalty? The way that
both sides frame that issue could prove pivotal to both campaigns. (”2012 Election
Issues)

Again, this statement was provided in order to create a baseline and to give background
information. This was the only statement that was given in the health care control condition.

Those individuals who were assigned to the health care experimental condition were also given
the following statement by Mitt Romney--from the first presidential debate on October 3, in
addition to the CNN statement:

The key task we have in healthcare is to get the cost down so it's more affordable for
families. And then he has as a model for doing that: a board of people at the government,
an unelected board, appointed board, who are going to decide what kind of treatment you
ought to have. In my opinion, the government is not effective in -- in bringing down the
cost of almost anything. As a matter of fact, free people and free enterprises trying to find
ways to do things better are able to be more effective in bringing down the cost than the
government will ever be. The example of the Cleveland Clinic is my case in point, along
with several others I could describe. This is the private market. These are small -- these
are enterprises competing with each other, learning how to do better and better jobs. I
used to consult to businesses -- excuse me, to hospitals and to health care providers. I was
astonished at the creativity and innovation that exists in the American people. In order to
bring the cost of health care down, we don't need to have a board of 15 people telling us
what kinds of treatments we should have. We instead need to put insurance plans,
providers, hospitals, doctors on target such that they have an incentive, as you say, performance pay, for doing an excellent job, for keeping costs down, and that's happening. (“October 3, 2012 Debate”)

This was one of the examples that I had previously identified in my rhetorical analysis of Romney’s use of emphasis framing. Both conditions also had to fill out the survey located in Appendix B.

One hundred thirty-nine participants completed the entire experiment. Of those, thirty-eight filled out the economic control condition, thirty-two filled out the economic experimental condition, thirty-eight filled out the health care control condition and thirty-one filled out the health care experimental condition.

Impact of Emphasis Framing

In order to determine the impact of the rhetorical strategy of emphasis framing, I used a variety of different statistical tests to determine its effectiveness. My hypothesis is that Obama’s strategy on the economy will increase support for his economic policy and reduce support for Romney’s and that Romney’s strategy on health care will increase support for his health care policy and reduce support for Obama’s.

Economy

First I tested whether there is a difference in the level of support for either Barack Obama’s or Mitt Romney’s economic policies based upon the rhetorical strategy used by Barack Obama on the economy. To do this, I compared the mean level of support for the candidates’ economic policies across the economic control and experimental groups to see if the addition of Obama’s strategy in the experimental group influenced perceptions of the candidates’ policy positions. If my hypothesis was true, then the level of support for Obama’s policy would be
higher in the experimental group than in the control, while the level of support for Romney’s policy would be lower in the experimental group when exposed to the strategy that Obama used.

Looking first at the impact on Barack Obama’s support, it can be seen that there was movement in the direction that I would expect based upon my hypothesis (mean Obama economy control 3.32, mean Obama economy experimental 3.56, t= -1.059, p=.1465) between the level of support for Obama’s economic plan among those in the control and those in the experimental group (Table 5.1). However, because of the high p-value, this relationship is not significant. Because of this, I cannot conclude that the null hypothesis, that there is no relationship between the variables, is not true. However, there was a significant relationship (mean Romney economy control 2.68, mean Romney economy experimental 2.25, t= 1.709, p=.046) between those who were exposed to Obama’s rhetorical strategy and the level of support for Romney’s economic plan. According to this data, my hypothesis that Obama’s strategy would decrease support for Romney’s plan was correct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate and Condition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obama Economic Control</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-1.059</td>
<td>.1465</td>
<td>-.247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama Economic Experimental</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.56</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romney Economic Control</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.709</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romney Economic Experimental</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.25</td>
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Because the result was significant for the impact on perceptions of Romney’s policy, I wanted to see if this would still hold true while controlling for ideology. While the random assignment used in this study should have removed any kind of ideological variable from the groups, further analysis should still give a more accurate picture to whether or not the result was significant. I ran an OLS regression (Table 5.2) to see if even outside of ideology, opinions of Romney’s economic plan would be impacted. The data shows that controlling for ideology, there is an even lower p-value, showing that there is an even more significant relationship between a decreased level of support for Romney’s economic policies when exposed to Obama’s rhetorical strategy.

Table 5.2: OLS Regression for Support for Romney Economic Policy

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Romney Economic Policy</td>
<td>-.389 (.168)</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.585 (.062)</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.975 (.214)</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to examine whether there is evidence of individuals shifting their policy preference based upon the rhetorical strategy used by Obama, I examined whether the proportion of respondents supporting the economic policy of Obama or Romney based upon the results of the forced choice question in my survey, where respondents had to answer whether they preferred Obama or Romney’s economic policies instead of just rating the policies independently.
To do this I computed a z-statistic which is compared to a standard z-table and reported the p-values (Table 5.3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion preferring Obama’s Policy in:</th>
<th>Z-Statistic</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.78947</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td>.84375</td>
<td>-.58172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.56075</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, like in my t-test looking at support for Obama’s economic policy, there is movement in the direction that would confirm my hypothesis (79% preferred Obama’s policy in the control group v. 84% in the experimental group), but it is not statistically significant and I cannot rule out the null-hypothesis.

**Health Care**

I also looked at the impact of Romney’s rhetorical strategy on public support for his and Obama’s health care plans. I tested (Table 5.4) whether there is a difference in level of support for either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney’s health care policies based upon the rhetorical strategy used by Mitt Romney on the economy. To do this, I ran a difference of means test to see if there is a difference between the mean between the levels of support for either of the candidates health care plans based upon being exposed to the health care experimental condition.

Looking first at the impact on Barack Obama it can be seen that there was difference in the level of support for Obama’s health care plan between those in the control and those in the experimental group in the direction opposite of what I would expect in my hypothesis, that
Romney’s strategy would negatively impact perceptions of Obama’s health are policy (mean Obama health care control 3.35, mean Obama health care experimental 3.71, t= 1.269, p=.1045).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate and Condition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obama Health Care Control</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.269</td>
<td>.1045</td>
<td>.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama Health Care Experimental</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.3585</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romney Health Care Control</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romney Health Care Experimental</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, because of the high p-value, the mean difference is not significant. Because of this, I cannot prove that the null hypothesis, that the difference of means is equal to 0, is not true. Looking at perceptions of Romney’s plan, there was a very slight increase in support for Romney’s health care plan when exposed to his rhetorical strategy (mean Romney health care control 2.59, mean Romney health care experimental 2.68, t= 3.64, p=.3585) between those who were exposed to his rhetorical strategy and the level of support for his health care plan. This fits with my hypothesis that his rhetorical strategy would benefit perceptions of his health care plan. However, because of the very high p-value, this relationship is not significant. Because of this, I cannot prove that the null hypothesis, that there is no relationship between the variables, is not true.
In order to examine whether there is evidence of individuals shifting their vote based upon the rhetorical strategy used by Romney, I examined the proportion of respondents supporting the health care policy of either Obama or Romney based upon the results of the forced choice question in my survey. To do this I computed a z-statistic which is compared to a standard z-table and reported the p-values.

Table 5.5: Proportion of Respondents Supporting Obama’s Health Care Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion preferring Obama’s Policy in:</th>
<th>Z-Statistic</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.70968</td>
<td>.18354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td>.72973</td>
<td>.85438</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, there is very slight difference in the opposite direction that I would expect, with 71% of respondents in the control group support Obama’s health care plan and 73% of respondents supporting it after being exposed to Romney’s rhetorical strategy. However, the p-value is very high and I cannot rule out that there is no significant relationship between the variables.

Conclusion

Barack Obama and Mitt Romney traveled to Denver, Colorado and Hempstead, NY on October 3rd and 16th 2012 respectively in order to take part in the 2012 presidential debates. The candidates used the opportunity to attempt to shift public opinion on issue stances on which they were viewed negatively. Both candidates used the strategies of issue framing, appeals to authority, the use of a rebuttal, and appeals to liberal and conservative presumptions in order to
make their case about why their policies were best for the country. Obama attempted to use the strategy to influence public perceptions of his economic policy, which was the issue on which he was perceived as weakest. Romney used the strategy to influence the public’s perception of his health care policy. Based upon these findings, I conducted an experiment to see if the strategies that I uncovered were effective in a controlled setting. Based upon time constraints, I decided to only test the strategy of issue framing, testing the influence of one of Obama’s statements on the economy and Romney’s on health care. Most of my results were inconclusive with the only statistically significant category being that Obama’s statement on the economy caused public support for Romney’s economic policy to drop by a significant margin.

In this chapter I determined that in the first two presidential debates of the 2012 election, the presidential candidates utilized the strategies of issue framing, appeals to authority, the use of a rebuttal, and appeals to liberal and conservative presumptions. Through the use of these strategies, the candidates attempted to persuade public perceptions on issues that they were unpopular.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Barack Obama and Mitt Romney attempted to persuade the public that each of them were, respectively, the right person to become the next president of the United States during the 2012 presidential debates. They used a variety of rhetorical strategies in order to persuade the public on issue stances on which they were viewed unfavorably. By gaining public support for these unpopular issue stances, they would be able to shore up policy weaknesses and gain the support of the public. In the following chapter I will discuss my study’s major findings, implications, and limitations, as well as recommendations for future research and final thoughts on my study.

Major Conclusions

Obama and Romney went into the debates with the goal of shifting public opinion, and based upon my analysis, they implemented at least four distinct types of strategies to do so: (1) issues framing, (2) appeals to authority, (3) the use of a direct rebuttal and (4) appeals to liberal and conservative presumptions. The candidates used the strategies in slightly different ways, with Obama taking advantage of issue framing and a rebuttal more often, and Romney using appeals to authority and appeals to liberal and conservative presumptions. This difference may be a result of their respective statuses as incumbent president and challenger. However, both of the candidates used each of the four strategies multiple times throughout the two debates analyzed in this study, confirming the idea that the genre of presidential debates imposes certain restrictions on the candidates and forces them to conform and respond in certain ways.

My experiment, which tested an example of issue framing used by each of the two candidates, showed that that Obama’s use of the strategy was able to negatively influence
participants’ evaluations of Romney’s economic policies. However, Romney’s use of the strategy in relation to health care had no conclusive results. Even more so, all of the variables and conditions I examined on the economic side, looking at Obama’s strategy, showed an impact in the manner in which my hypothesis predicted, even if they were not all statistically significant. My hypothesis that the strategies used by the candidates would improve public approval of their policies while lowering the public’s approval of their opponents has been partially shown to be correct (in regards to Obama’s impact on Romney) and inconclusive on the rest.

**Implications**

This study has several implications. The first implication is that presidential debaters spend a significant amount of time and focus on issues for which the public does not necessarily agree with them. Time and again both Obama and Romney used a variety of strategies to make an argument on the economy or health care, connecting many other issues to those two categories. For instance, education was almost always discussed in an economic context. While I did not calculate this as a part of my study, I would estimate that roughly three-fourths of the first two debates were spent discussing the economy or health care to the exclusion of all other domestic policy issues.

The second implication is that presidential debaters who enter the debates attempting to influence public perceptions of their or their opponent’s policies may be able to do so. The scholarly community has yet to come to a conclusion on the exact possibilities or impact of the presidential debates, with some believing them to be irrelevant, overblown, media spectacles and others believing them to be an important public service. Based upon my results here, which show that at least one rhetorical strategy lowers the public’s perception of the other side’s policy, I
would tend to agree with the side that believes that debates have a real, influential impact and can help to sway elections. Further study is required to gain a greater understanding of the effects.

Third, based upon this second implication, the debates deserve the amount of attention that they receive. If the debates have the ability to shift public opinion, then they are certainly deserving of both scholarly and public examination. The media should continue to focus on them, and the campaigns should continue, as did the Obama and Romney campaigns, to spend a significant amount of time leading up to the events preparing, practicing, and staging the events so that the candidates are the most prepared that they can possibly be.

Limitations

While this study should help to improve the scholarly literature, several limitations existed for this study. The first is that while the study looked thoroughly at the first two debates of the 2012 presidential elections, its findings are not necessarily generalizable to all debates as a whole. The 2012 election is a strong case study by which to examine debate strategies, but the findings here are not necessarily transferable to other debates. The presidential debates have changed across the decades, since first appearing on television in 1960 (Benoit, Henson, and Sudbrock 97; Samovar 211). As such, strategies and ways that those strategies are applied in debates have changed as well. Not all of the findings of this study would necessarily apply to, for instance, the 1980 presidential debate or the 2024 presidential debates. The rhetorical strategies that were used during the debates are not necessarily the same strategies that have been used in the past or should be used by others in the future. The strategies used here were used by those candidates in their own particular circumstances. Many of those strategies were crafted to meet
the needs of the individual rhetor in the individual situation. While the genre of presidential debates certainly exists, and strategies can and should be examined in order to understand the situation and genre as a whole, the strategies identified here should not necessarily be taken as the only strategies that can be used within debates.

A second limitation of this study is that it examined only the transcript of the debates instead of the video or audio of the event. This means that things such as tone, facial expressions, body language, audience reactions (only occasionally mentioned in transcripts), and pre and post analysis that would have been present watching the debate on television, were not evaluated. Instead, the study was conducted completely based on the written word of the debates. The transcripts provide a comprehensive understanding of the words of the debates, but there are many other factors that influence how a certain person is impacted by a piece of rhetoric (Fein, Goethals, and Kugler 187).

A third limitation of this study is related to the elements that composed my experiment. The experiment attempts to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the debates. However, it was conducted by selecting a single instance of a single strategy used during the debates and tested whether participants were influenced by it. While there is certainly information that can be obtained from this study, it was simply too narrow to draw larger conclusions. The complexity and intricacies of debates make them very difficult to study in this manner. As Zarefsky notes in his analysis of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, during political debates “arguments [are] not determined in advance or formulated precisely. They emerge from an interplay between the debates and other discourse and events in the campaigns; there are allusions to information which is taken for granted. Only over the course of the campaign and only in the context of the
preceding five years can one identify fully developed arguments” (“Lincoln-Douglas” 165). My conclusions were determined by only giving participants a paragraph of background information and then exposing them to a single paragraph of the debates. In the real world, the impact of the debates is based upon a wide variety of factors that could not be accounted for here, such as the back and forth process of the debates, which involves strategies being used by both sides within a small amount of time, media accounts of the debate, which some studies have shown are the major influence on political perceptions following debates, and other real world constraints.

A fourth limitation of the study was that I was only able to test the effectiveness of one of the strategies that I uncovered due to time limitations. If I had a longer time to complete this study and a greater pool of potential respondents, I would have examined all four of the strategies that I uncovered in my rhetorical analysis. This examination could have revealed whether some strategies are more effective than others, resulting in a more accurate picture of the influence of rhetorical strategies during debates.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Debates and public opinion are incredibly intricate and complex issues. Future research must focus on a variety of areas such as political learning, political psychology and debate strategy in order to gain a greater understanding of how the issues interact. First, future research should continue to determine what kind of rhetorical strategies that candidates use during debates. This research can be done by examining past debates, going back as far as Nixon-Kennedy and by examining, in the future, the debates that have yet to occur.

Second, future research should examine debates as more than strategies used on one side or the other, but through an examination of how these strategies collide or intersect. A study
could be done where participants are shown the vast majority of a debate except for when a particular strategy was used by one candidate or the other. This would allow for an examination of how that strategy, in the context of the whole debate, influences perceptions of the issue.

Finally, research should examine how the knowledge that people have before watching the debates impacts their perceptions of the debates and of candidate policies and proposals. Political knowledge and perceptions are developed over years and are impacted by a wide range of cultural variables. Not everyone who watches the debates views them from the same perspective. Each has their own knowledge base to draw upon and then will react to different rhetorical strategies in different ways. The understanding of how different pieces of knowledge influences the ability to react to and understand political argument is a developing field where further study should take place.

**Final Thoughts**

The presidential debates are a fascinating duel between two opposing sides, each with the goal of persuading the same audience that they are worthy of their vote. The power of the debates is in the central focus that they receive from the candidates, the media and the public. Any way that the candidates could potentially shift the scales in their favor during the debates should be investigated, for the possibility that it could have enormous influence. If strategies that are effective in the all-important debates can be uncovered, they can help to determine who the next president of the United States is. Based upon my analysis and research it is extremely difficult to discover what strategies may be able to influence opinion in this way. Rhetoric and how people perceive it is incredibly complicated making the exact impact of its use is extremely unpredictable. However, rhetoric has the potential to change the world.
Rhetoric is a powerful art form that creates a window between people, allowing for a connection to develop and for information to be sent and received between them. This connection can be used to inform, to deceive, and even to manipulate. It is my hope that a greater understanding of presidential debate rhetoric can lead to healthier political discourse in this country; a future where both sides aim to inform the populace of their proposed policies and the implications and ramifications of those policies; a future where great minds work together to not just duel for a vote, but to duel for the right to work for a better tomorrow.


Iyengar, Shanto. "What Does Information Technology Imply for Media Effects Research?"


_Mittromneycentral.com._ Web. 3 November 2013.


APPENDIX A: ECONOMIC CONDITION SURVEY

1. President Obama's economic policy

1
Strongly
Oppose
2
3
Neither Oppose nor Support
4
Support
5
Strongly
Support

2. Governor Romney's Economic Policy

1
Strongly
Oppose
2
3
Neither Oppose nor Support
4
Support
5
Strongly
Support

3. Which of the two candidates' economic policies do you agree with more?

1
2
Obama Romney

4. What best describes your political views?

1
Extremely Liberal
2
Slightly Liberal
3
Liberal
4
Moderate
5
Slightly Conservative
6
Conservative
7
Extremely Conservative

5. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

1
Strong Republican
2
Republican
3
Democrat
4
Strong
5
Independent
6
Other

6. Assuming you had been eligible to vote in the 2012 election who would you have voted for?

1
2
3
Obama Romney Someone Else
APPENDIX B: HEALTH CARE CONDITION SURVEY

1. President Obama's health care policy

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Oppose Neither Oppose nor Support Support Strongly Support
Oppose

2. Governor Romney's health care policy

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Oppose Neither Oppose nor Support Support Strongly Support
Oppose

3. Which of the two candidates' economic policies do you agree with more?

1 2
Obama Romney

4. What best describes your political views?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Extremely Slightly Liberal Moderate Slightly Conservative Extremely Liberal Liberal Conservative Conservative
Liberal

5. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

1 2 3 4 5 6
Strong Republican Democrat Strong Independent Other Republican Democrat

6. Assuming you had been eligible to vote in the 2012 election who would you have voted for?

1 2 3
Obama Romney Someone Else