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**Nonverbal Expectancy Violations and Political Appropriateness
With Regard to Memorable Moments in Televised Politics**

Introduction

In today's digital, media driven environment, everything from sports and leisure to politics and world news is driven by visual elements. In addition to having access to endless commentary, viewers at home can watch and re-watch a memorable moment from multiple angles and avenues. In politics, "much of what the public knows about a candidate comes from television appearances in which visual information is prominent,"¹ and, in turn, televised episodes are normally more prominent than modest sound bites.

In the political realm, the nature of visual primacy means a memorable moment can change the entire landscape of a political race. As the media have become more central to public affairs, such as presidential elections, political battles are waged largely through the brief excerpts that make their way into the news cycle². Political candidates are given ample opportunities to create these moments in the media through televised speeches at events, luncheons and, in some cases, even their own advertising. Even after a period of time, moments like Bob Dole's fall from the stage in California, and the Howard Dean yell at the Iowa Caucus leave a lasting impression on minds of viewers and voters alike. These moments are made memorable by their conspicuous nature and their "departure from established norms or local interactional conventions," and, as a result, quickly become the

¹ Patterson, Miles L., Mary E. Churchill, Gary K. Burger, and Jack L. Powell (1992). Verbal and Nonverbal Modality Effects on Impressions of Political Candidates: Analysis From the 1984 Presidential Debates. *Communication Monographs*, 59, 231-242.

² Clayman, Steve E. (1995). Defining Moments, Presidential Debates, and the Dynamics of Quotability. *Journal of Communication* 45(3), 118-146.

primary focus of media scrutiny³. Gresham's law of news, that negative information always drives out the positive, applies to politics nicely. "Politicians who behave as law abiding citizens attract little attention," writes Iyengar, however, "the few who break the law elicit volumes of attention"⁴.

Although none of the episodes reviewed in this study involve an incident of the law being broken, the same rule can be applied to politicians who break expectations visually and verbally, both in a positive and negative manner.

The nature of memorable moments in politics is that they are candidate and event specific and can occur in a variety of ways. Two prominent themes which occur among memorable episodes, for the purpose of this study, are violations of nonverbal expectations and deviations from political appropriateness. In order to gather detailed and open-ended information regarding these two themes a focus group was gathered and shown five short clips of politicians in a variety of memorable moments. The information gathered from this focus group reveals that politicians are met with a higher standard that, when not met, breaks the audience's expectations. Furthermore, group sentiment revealed a stark cynicism regarding politics that may be indicative of how the current generation feels about partisan politics today.

Nonverbal Expectancy Violations & Political Appropriateness

³ Clayman, 226.

⁴ Iyengar, Shanto, 2011. Media Politics: A Citizens Guide, Second Edition. P. 65.

For the purposes of this study, two prominent themes were identified from the focus group discussion. These themes, nonverbal expectancy violations and instances of political appropriateness, were manifest and often meshed together throughout the group discussion, dominating the insights of the participants.

Expectancy violations, for the purposes of this paper, will be explored in a nonverbal context that incorporates the theme of political appropriateness.

“Nonverbal expectancy violations theory holds that positive violations produce more favorable communication outcomes than conformity to expectations, while negative violations produce less favorable ones, and that reward characteristics of the communicator mediate the interpretation and evaluation of violations”⁵. In other words, the communicator reward valence is simply a thoughtful evaluation of whether the violation of an event or situation by a person was intrinsically attractive or aversive. Research regarding these nonverbal cues has “indicated that the majority of the social meaning of a message may be conveyed nonverbally; that when the verbal and the nonverbal components of a message contradict, the nonverbal is more credible and that feelings of emotion are more accurately expressed nonverbally”⁶.

Emotion is one of the keys to understanding the framework of expectancy violations and its role in nonverbal communication. “Leader displays,” writes Bucy, “may evoke episodic emotions in viewers, influence global affective assessments of

⁵ Burgoon, J.K., & Hale, J.L. (1998). Nonverbal Expectancy Violations: Model Elaboration and Application to Immediacy Behaviors. *Communication Monographs*, 55(1), 58.

⁶ Baglan, T., & Nelson, D.J. (1982) A comparison of the effects of sex and status on the perceived appropriateness of nonverbal behaviors. *Womens Studies in Communication*, 5(1), 29.

political figures, invite evaluations of their emotional appropriateness, and, if they constitute a violation of nonverbal expectations, influence subsequent information processing⁷.” The reason for the prominence of negative emotion, in the context of appropriateness, is that they are “elicited by circumstances that demand action in the face of survival threats”⁸. Negative emotional expressions tend to be more prominent in memorable moments because of their arousing nature. The degree of valence in an episode (positive or negative) is a determining factor in whether or not it will generate feelings of excitement and alertness. “Some researchers argue that arousal is the only important dimension of emotion,”⁹ and because negative emotion tends to have this effect it garners more attention than the positive. A politician’s emotional expression, be it verbal or nonverbal, influences the “perceptions of a candidates personality,” which “has been shown to be an important component of audience reaction”¹⁰ and can translate into lasting feelings and attitudes regarding the appropriateness of the candidate.

The appropriateness of a political episode is a significant element of this research. “Effective leadership in the television era hinges on the appropriateness of nonverbal behavior”¹¹ to the context in which it is seen by the viewer.

“Appropriateness can be regarded as a situational communicative trait manifest in

⁷ Bucy, E.P. (2000). Emotional and Evaluative Consequences of Inappropriate Leader Displays. *Communication Research*, 27(2), 196.

⁸ Bucy(2000), p. 200.

⁹ Bucy (2000), p. 202.

¹⁰ Shields, S.A., & Mcdowell, K.A. (1987). “Appropriate” emotion in politics: Judgements of a televised debate. *Journal of Communication*, 37(4), 79.

¹¹ Bucy, E.P., & Newhagen, J.E. (1999). The emotional appropriateness heuristic: Processing televised presidential reactions in the news. *Journal of Communication*, 49(4), 61.

the verbal and nonverbal communication of political leaders¹² and is often the hallmark of a memorable moment in political discourse. "Situational traits such as appropriateness are event focused and surface in specific contexts such as conversations or, in the case of politics, debates, speeches, or press conferences"¹³, much like the instances reviewed in this study. The occurrences of appropriateness, or rather more memorable episodes of inappropriateness, often come through the expression of emotion, which as previously discussed can be a major factor in a political context. "An observers inference of appropriate or inappropriate displays of emotion...should not be random but should be consistent with the value he or she places on the events and actors in a given situation"¹⁴. In an environment such as a televised presidential debate the value placed on affective displays is rather high due to the dramatic nature of the event, the prominence of the actors and the high standard in which the candidates are normally held.

Furthermore, considerations about a candidate's behavior can be a significant indication of how a candidate would perform if elected to office and can influence a voters standing decision in regards to partisanship¹⁵. Although many Americans vote along partisan lines and "develop an attachment toward a political

¹² Bucy, 2000.

¹³ **Cupach, W.R., & Spitzberg, B.H. (1983). Trait versus state: A comparation of dispositional and situational measures of interpersonal communication competence. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 47, 364-379.

¹⁴ Shields, 80.

¹⁵ George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman & Michael MacKuen. *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgement* (Chicago, IL; University of Chicago Press 2000).

party that incorporates their 'standing decision',"¹⁶ instances of appropriateness or inappropriateness can influence opinions about whether a candidate is fit for office.

Methodology & Overview

For this paper, a group of four respondents was gathered. All four of the participants and the mediator (myself) were well acquainted with one another through both work and school. The atmosphere in which the focus group was conducted was highly casual and relaxed and took place in the basement of one respondent's home. The ages of the participants ranged between 21 and 23 years old and all participants identified as Caucasian/White. Three of the participants were male and only one was female. The entire group had at least some college education; a current law student, a political science graduate, a restaurant and hospitality management student, and an advertising student. The group as a whole identified mostly as conservative. However, one participant specified a liberal standing in the Republican Party and one participant identified as a libertarian.

The group rated themselves as having a moderate to high interest in political issues and most participants followed the 2008 elections with interest. Surprisingly for this demographic, local television news was the most prominent source of political information, cable news outlets and national network news coverage followed, yielding lower ratings by the respondents. The two lowest rated outlets for political news were newspapers and talk radio, which is an unsurprising statistic

¹⁶ Marcus, 109.

given the ages of the participants. Internet use varied among the group members, two of the four respondents stated that they only use the internet to research political matters once a week at the most while the other two respondents indicated three and six days, respectively.

Overall the group agreed that the news over simplifies politics. They stated coverage doesn't give them a comprehensive view of the issues and that news coverage was generally unfair. The group also agreed that the news tends to focus more on the character of political candidates rather than their ideas or policies. Accuracy of political coverage in the media rated from low to moderate within the group and all participants felt that the media had a liberal bias to some degree.

After filling out questionnaires and going over the basic guidelines of the focus group the participants were shown five short video clips of politicians in a variety of memorable moments. The clips were shown once to gather general first impressions from participants and then screened a second time so that participants could further articulate their impressions and feelings about what they saw. The first episode shown was a clip of John Kerry and George W. Bush debating during the 2004 presidential election that highlighted George Bush's nonverbal reactions to John Kerry's talking points. The second clip screened was a scene from a debate between Barak Obama and Mitt Romney in which Romney stated that he was a son of Detroit. The third clip featured Hillary Clinton speaking to a group of women at a luncheon and highlighted an emotional episode in which she appeared to almost lose her composure. The fourth clip was from the first presidential debate in 2012 in which Barak Obama was looking down and taking notes while Mitt Romney went on

the offensive. The fifth and final clip featured Michael Dukakis as he was questioned about whether he would change his position on the death penalty if his wife were raped and murdered.

The clips that garnered the most responses were, as expected, the more recent episodes of familiar politicians such as Barak Obama, Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton. The episode involving Hillary Clinton's emotional appeal at the ladies luncheon generated a lot of negative feedback, in part because all of the participants disliked Clinton to a degree but also because they felt that wasn't "genuine" and seemed to be going on a "poor me soapbox" rant for a while. The group understood that Clinton was trying to appeal to her immediate audience but couldn't understand why she would behave in the manner that she did in front of a camera. In the clip from the first presidential debate in 2012 the groups reactions to President Obama's body language were quiet surprising and divergent from what previous class discussion had centered on. Most of the participants noted that although he was looking downward whilst being attacked by Mitt Romney he was taking notes and respectfully waiting his turn to speak. This is in contrast to the feeling that many outside of this focus group had, that Obama was wilting under Romney's arguments. A few of the participants compared the body language that the president displayed in this clip to his body language in the second clip stating that they "liked Obama's body language in this clip better than I did in the last." When asked to be specific, they noted that the president's sarcastic smile and general demeanor in the first Romney/Obama clip was less favorable and that his patience and thoughtfulness in the second clip was more appealing. The clip that generated

the most chatter unrelated to the politician was the episode of Michael Dukakis answering a question about his position on the death penalty in the hypothetical scenario that his wife was raped and murdered. The group seemed to be initially shocked that the moderator would pose such a bold question and felt that the candidate was put on the spot, garnering some sympathy after the first screening. The second time through, however, the group felt that Dukakis didn't seem credible, that he was weak and detached from family values. Participants also noted when Dukakis changed the subject from the death penalty to the war on drugs and tried to shift focus to George H.W. Bush instead of elaborating on his answer to the question.

Discussion

Following the focus group and after analyzing the transcript for thematic elements, the most prominent theme that arose was that of political appropriateness. This theme manifest itself most deeply in the two clips that featured Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush. Not surprisingly, the group members tended to go along with their political affiliations in these instances and were more critical of Clinton than they were of George Bush. In the case of Hillary Clinton the group felt that her expression of emotion was staged and inappropriate. For example, one participant stated that "she was just trying to get that emotional appeal that would play to the people she was speaking to" and "it seemed to me to be really fake." This sentiment was felt across all members of the group and can be rationalized through the subtheme of expectancy violations, in regards to appropriateness. "At such critical moments," writes Bucy, "inappropriate displays

convey the wrong emotional tone and, instead of promoting curiosity or other harmless cognitions, invite uncertainty and negative evaluations”¹⁷. The emotion that was displayed by Clinton may have been acceptable in her immediate environment, however, when this scene is viewed out of context and as a short excerpt it appears to be unprofessional and inappropriate. The group also called into question how genuine Clinton was being and noted that she seemed to know exactly when to pull back from an emotional climax. This occurrence constitutes a nonverbal expectancy violation; Clinton was expected by the focus group to demonstrate a strong constitution in a fashion that is typical of political figures but instead took an emotional route to try and appeal to her live audience. Pfau et al. write that negative violations, like the one in this case, “inhibit, and may retard, persuasive effectiveness” because they diverge from normative expectations of appropriate communication¹⁸. Although her genuineness was called into question, this isn’t to say that her behavior wasn’t appropriate in the moment for her immediate audience. Only that out of the proper context and in a visual manner it didn’t play well to the group.

The George W. Bush and John Kerry debate episode focused on appropriateness in regard to nonverbal communication by Bush. Surprisingly, as the discussion went along the group felt that the nature of George Bush’s nonverbal communication was appropriate because of the attack that John Kerry was putting

¹⁷ Bucy, E.P. (2003). Emotion, presidential communication, and traumatic news: Processing the World Trade Center attacks. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 8(4), 79.

¹⁸ Pfau, M., Parrott, R., & Lundquist, B. (1992). An expectancy theory of the effectiveness of political attack television spots: A case study. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 20, 242.

on. Although participants noted that Bush's body language did not come off well and "seemed very uncomfortable" or even "annoyed and disinterested," they felt that "if he acted neutral or nodded his head" it would look much worse than his dismissive demeanor. This sentiment could of course be attributed to the personal feelings of support across all participants about George Bush and therefore extracting a genuine reaction is difficult. In 2004, when the debate occurred, the sentiment held by this group may have been different. Bucy writes that anxious citizens, like those following a presidential election, "are generally more attentive to unfolding events and less reliant on prior dispositions"¹⁹ to develop conceptualizations about what they're seeing. This incident also further reinforces the idea articulated by Marcus et al. that "standing decisions" regarding party affiliation is a strong indicator about a viewers likelihood to support a candidate that is aligned with their chosen party²⁰.

The discussion driven by the two clips of Mitt Romney and Barak Obama generated good insights among the group about the nonverbal communication of both men, especially President Obama. As expected, participants disliked the interruptions by both candidates in a debate setting but political affiliation certainly played a role, as Obama was the center of critical attention. Shields and McDowell write, "to be emotional is to be out of control; to be reasonable is to remain unswayed by mere emotional urges"²¹. This concept seemed to manifest itself in the group regarding the president's body language in the two clips. In the first clip Obama came off as "irritating," "disrespectful" and even "smug" due to his defensive

¹⁹ Bucy (2003), 81.

²⁰ Marcus, 109.

²¹ Shields, 79.

reactions and one particular instance where he smiled sarcastically at Mitt Romney. However, and to my surprise, in the second clip, when the president was looking downward while being attacked by Romney, the participants felt that he was being respectful and waiting his turn to speak. One participant, who had to that point identified most strongly with the conservative side, stated that “the president even appeared to be more receptive and less dismissive” and “in terms of leadership quality I don’t have a problem” with him. This is no doubt a product of the context of the clips shown within the group, which allowed for a comparison of two starkly different Obama’s. However, the idea that “the observer’s attitudes will thus influence how the speaker is understood and evaluated: where one observer might see a diatribe, another might see righteous and justifiable moral indignation”²² holds true as favor within the group remained with Romney. Had half of the participants been more liberal it would be expected that they would identify with the president’s inclination to interrupt.

Conclusion

Although this data obtained from this study was rather limited by the size and scope of the focus group, some quality insights were gained from the commentary and a better understanding of what constitutes a violation of political appropriateness and nonverbal communication can be had.

²² Shields, 80.

The overall results of this focus group's discussion revealed that nonverbal expectancy violations were more understandable and easier to overcome than violations of political appropriateness. For example, the group members showed a high level of disapproval regarding Hillary Clinton's semi-emotional episode but responses were highly empathetic regarding Barak Obama's note taking during the first presidential debate of 2012. Similarly, participants disliked aggressive attacks in the course of debate, as was expressed during both the Bush vs. Kerry 2004 debate and the second Obama vs. Romney debate in 2012. Had group members not already had personal feelings for George W. Bush their responses regarding his nonverbal may have been different. However, in both of these cases the attacking politician was the focus of scrutiny among the group members while subtle nonverbal violations left feelings mostly unchanged.

One recurring theme that was manifest in the group discussion, however not elaborated upon in this study, was the disdain and apathy that was had for politics in general. On a few occasions throughout the discussion, group members expressed that they were exasperated with the bickering and fighting between the two major parties. This is perhaps indicative of the state of politics in the eyes of the millennial generation; that the current state of politics is just a dramatic character war that never seems to end. This may serve as a topic for research in future focus groups with younger demographics that follow politics to a moderate degree. The implications of such a study could help politicians to better understand how to reach a generation that can see and do anything through a screen.

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