

# SPIN (AND PITCH) DOCTORS: Campaign Strategies in Televised Political Debates

Michael I. Norton and George R. Goethals

Political campaigns frequently set low expectations (using a “low pitch”) in televised political debates to make the later claim that their candidates have done better than expected. The limited credibility of campaign aides, coupled with the fact that perception often confirms expectations, makes this strategy psychologically problematic. In Study 1, when no post-debate information was provided, lowering expectations for a candidate led to lower ratings of performance. In Study 2, when positive feedback (a post-debate “spin”) was provided after a low pitch, participants did rate performance positively, but only when the spin was supplied by a credible media source. The same strategy when used by campaign strategists adversely impacted candidates, leading to lower ratings of debate performance and network coverage.

**Key words:** televised political debates; expectations; credibility; media effects; political campaigns.

“We will die in this debate if we’re not there first with our answers. . . .”

-Clinton campaign aide discussing post-debate strategy (The War Room, 1995)

Though maligned in recent years as little more than carefully choreographed performances, televised political debates remain the most visible, public test of aspirant political candidates. Viewers claim to watch debates to learn about issues and to decide for whom they will vote (Sears and Chaffee, 1979), and debates remain among the most watched programs on television (Hellweg et al., 1992): Some 46.6 million people watched the first debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000 (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). Evaluations of debate winners and losers are highly correlated with

Michael I. Norton, Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139 (minorton@media.mit.edu). George R. Goethals, Williams College.

actual voting behavior (Schrott, 1990), evidence suggests that debates are a major source for voters to gather information (e.g., Holbrook, 1999), and debates can provide sound bites that encapsulate whole campaigns (as with Lloyd Bentsen's "you're no Jack Kennedy" barb at Dan Quayle's expense). In at least two major elections in the second half of the 20th century, debate performance was seen as a key factor in election outcomes: John Kennedy's victory in 1960 (White, 1961), and John Turner's campaign for Prime Minister of Canada in 1988 (Johnston et al., 1992). Given the importance of debates, it is not surprising that campaign strategists work hard to shape viewers' perceptions of debates, as the quote that opens this paper demonstrates. Fortunately for the handler of a poor debater, viewer evaluations of performance can be influenced: News media verdicts of debate winners and losers can be as important as debate performance in determining debate winners (Lemert et al., 1991). Polls taken immediately after the 1976 Carter/Ford debate, for example, indicated that Ford had won, but after several days of media attention highlighting Ford's implication that Eastern Europe was not controlled by the Soviet Union, polls showed that Carter was seen as victorious (Ranney, 1983).

Before a political debate, therefore, campaigns typically offer the public a "pitch" for their candidates, providing an expectation for each candidate's performance. Strategists for Dan Quayle, for example, deliberately lowered expectations (a "low pitch") before his vice-presidential debate with Al Gore by claiming that Gore's Ivy League background gave him an unfair advantage. After that debate, Quayle's handlers claimed that he'd done better than expected since he held his own against a superior opponent; strategists often provide such post-debate "spins" of performance, in an effort to provide viewers with a definitive declaration of debate winners and losers. Perhaps the best example of a successful use of this strategy in recent memory is the second Bush-Gore debate from the 2000 presidential election where many analysts perceived Bush to have beaten Gore after Bush was low-pitched by both the campaign and the press. Campaigns use these strategies in an attempt to influence the viewer in favor of their candidate, but campaigns are not alone in providing viewers with pitches and spins: Political analysts can also influence viewers' expectations and evaluations. Just as major newspapers openly endorse political candidates, television networks, in providing the debate viewer with both expectations for and analyses of performance, can (intentionally or otherwise) do the same. The present research experimentally manipulates different combinations of pitches and spins from both media and campaign sources in an effort to better understand how viewer perceptions of debate performance can be influenced.

## Pitches

Individuals interpret new information based on their pre-existing knowledge and expectations (Olson et al., 1996), and it is thus not surprising that prior expectations for politicians are predictive of ratings of debate performance (Fazio and Williams, 1986; Sigelman and Sigelman, 1984). When a person's expectations and new information are sufficiently similar, assimilation effects predominate and information is evaluated in line with that original position (e.g., Sherif and Hovland, 1961). The concept that people generally include new information representations of targets is one of the core principles of Schwarz and his colleagues' inclusion–exclusion model (Schwarz and Bless, 1992a), which suggests that the default is for new information to be assimilated. Campaign strategists *can* simply hope that viewers already have a positive expectation for their candidate's performance, but a more prudent (and common) strategy involves setting that positive expectation using a high pitch. While this is an attractive option for the campaign strategist, there are clearly potential risks. First, high pitches can backfire if positive information sets an expectation that a candidate cannot meet. When an event delivers less than advertised, memories of initial evaluations become more negative (Conway and Ross, 1984). Even more troubling for the campaign strategist, people can change an initial view to make it consistent with a new evaluation (Goethals and Reckman, 1973). When a viewer sees a candidate perform poorly whom he has been led to believe will perform well, he may rate that performance negatively and readjust his initial positive opinion.

A high pitch, then, is not a risk-free venture, but setting a low expectation intuitively seems even riskier. Why would a campaign strategist gamble with a low pitch, as Quayle's aides did in 1996, as Bush's aides did in 2000, and as so many campaigns have done in plotting debate strategy? The strategy has its psychological basis in contrast. If an initial position and new information are sufficiently different, contrast effects can occur, and final judgments can be in the opposite direction of the initial expectation (Hovland et al., 1957; Jones and Goethals, 1971). People make more positive attributions when negative information is followed by more positive information, both in evaluating themselves (Aronson and Linder, 1965; Parducci, 1995) and others (Walster et al., 1966). Evaluations of political figures, for example, are more positive after thinking about political scandals (Schwarz and Bless, 1992b). A low pitch, while risky, can be a worthwhile gamble.

The low pitch strategy in debates may have been imported from its successful use in primary elections. Primary contests, unlike debates, provide a very clear measure of each candidate's performance: Percentage of the total vote. George McGovern's surprisingly strong showing in the 1972 New Hampshire primary, for example, garnered him greater media attention than the actual winner, Edmund Muskie. Because McGovern did far better than

expected, he was seen more positively. Low pitches in primaries, therefore, make victories possible even in defeat. When the same strategy is applied to political debates, however, complications arise. In primaries, percentage of the popular vote provides a clear, unambiguous measure of performance. Judging whether a candidate has exceeded expectations in a primary is quite simple: If the actual vote total is higher than predicted, then performance exceeds expectations. There is no corollary formula to apply to debates, so the use of a low pitch is more complicated. Without a clear measure of performance, there is often no clear measure of whether a candidate has exceeded expectations for that performance, and assimilation effects may predominate. Campaign strategists, therefore, may be dooming their candidates to failure through use of a low pitch, dragging performance ratings down by setting a low expectation. The present research examines the effectiveness of this common low pitch strategy, exploring when it might be effective, and when it might be harmful.

### Spins

As the quote that we opened with illustrates, campaign strategists frequently attempt to provide the necessary post-debate positive information by offering a post-debate spin of their candidate's performance. Spins constitute the campaign manager's best opportunity to recreate the simple comparison possible in primaries. A spin, ideally, provides the unambiguous positive standard (akin to vote totals in primary elections) that viewers might utilize for contrast with the earlier expectation. The present research includes pitch and spin combinations to demonstrate that for a low pitch to work, the viewer must contrast a positive post-debate spin with that low expectation. The discrepancy between the low pitch and the high performance evaluation provided by the high spin should lead to higher post-debate evaluations than if only a low pitch had been provided.

There are, of course, dangers for the campaign manager who utilizes both pitches and spins, centering on issues of credibility. Frequently, when a debate is over, networks turn both to their own analysts and to "spin doctors" explicitly affiliated with one candidate for their unbiased and biased opinions, respectively. While the information these two sources provide might be similar, their perceived underlying motivation is quite different. While the media is perhaps not the paragon of objectivity we might hope, campaign aides are undermined by their obvious partiality. People are viewed with suspicion if they have a vested interest (Millar and Millar, 1997; Walster et al., 1966) or ulterior motives (Fein and Hilton, 1994; Fein et al., 1997). Campaign aides, as employees of a candidate, are susceptible to both of these criticisms. How might the credibility of positive post-debate spins—the only kind provided by campaigns, of course—interact with high

and low pitches? We expect that there is an overall tendency for positive spins from the media to be more credible than those from campaigns. In addition, the combination of a low pitch followed by a high spin from the campaign might be particularly unpersuasive, in part because it might appear as blatantly manipulative. In addition, a positive spin from the campaign may constitute a highly discrepant evaluation in light of the poor performance expected as the result of a low pitch. Highly discrepant messages from high credibility sources remain persuasive, but highly discrepant messages from sources low in credibility do not (Aronson et al., 1963; Bochner and Insko, 1966; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). For the campaign, a positive spin following a low expectation should fall outside the realm of believability, leading to lower performance ratings. For the media—a more credible source—positive post-debate spins should be persuasive, causing contrast with the expectation created by a low pitch, resulting in more positive ratings of debate performance. In short, while assimilation effects tend to predominate due to the inclusion of new information in judgments (Mussweiler, 2003), when information is excluded from judgment (as the case may be when issues of credibility are paramount), contrast effects are more likely (Schwarz and Bless, 1992a).

## OVERVIEW

Mirroring actual televised debate coverage, participants viewed portions of a taped debate with overdubbed pre-debate pitches (Studies 1 and 2) and post-debate spins (Study 2). In an attempt to isolate the impact of pitch and spin combinations, pitches and spins were provided for only one candidate. In an earlier investigation of the 1996 vice-presidential debate, which used bogus newspaper articles to instantiate pre-debate expectations, we found that a high pitch for one candidate led to higher expectations for that candidate, as predicted, but simultaneously lowered expectations for the other candidate (Norton and Goethals, unpublished manuscript). We thus expect that pitch manipulations for one candidate will lead to implicit expectations for the other.

In Study 1, we examine the impact of pre-debate pitches without post-debate spins, to show that post-debate ratings assimilate to expectations in the absence of clear post-debate evaluations of performance. In Study 2, we include positive post-debate spins of performance. When a low pitch is followed by a high spin from a credible media source, contrast should occur, and post-debate ratings of that candidate should be more positive. When that same information comes from a less credible campaign source, however, participants should see through this transparent strategy, and ratings of the candidate should be lower. We assess participants' dislike of this transparent strategy by obtaining ratings of network coverage.

## Political Ideology

In addition to examining the overall impact of our manipulations on participants' perceptions of debate performance, we also wanted to explore how their preexisting political views impacted perceptions of debate performance. While some theorists have speculated that partisanship does not bias perception to as large an extent as previously thought (e.g., Gerber and Green, 1999), the majority of research, from the seminal *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) to more recent analyses (e.g., Bartels, 2002), suggest that partisanship does impact both attitudes (e.g., perception of candidates) and behavior (e.g., voting). Our experimental design allows us to assess how ideology impacts perceptions of several different strategies. In both studies, therefore, we assess participants' political ideology, and control for it in our analyses.<sup>1</sup>

## Debate

We selected a debate between Republican Governor William Weld and Democratic Senator John Kerry from the Massachusetts Senate election in 1996. Twelve undergraduates viewed a portion of the debate which included the candidate's opening statements, one half of the debate, and the candidate's closing statements: 33% picked Kerry as the winner, 17% picked Weld, and 50% felt that neither candidate was the clear winner. We selected this debate for two reasons. First, we used a local debate rather than a national debate in order to avoid the strong pre-debate expectations for national candidates that our previous research had revealed (Norton and Goethals, Unpublished manuscript). Second, the majority of the participant population was not from Massachusetts, and thus not overly familiar with the candidates. For those in the pretest and Studies 1 and 2, only 12% were from Massachusetts (25% from New York, 8% each from Connecticut and New Jersey). In all, participants were from 29 states and six countries. Given that participants were attending school in Massachusetts, these candidates were locally relevant, while not overly familiar.

## METHOD: STUDY 1

### Design

The design for Study 1 was a 2 (*source*: campaign/press)  $\times$  2 (*pitch*: low/high)  $\times$  2 (*ratings*: pre/post)  $\times$  2 (*candidate*: Kerry/Weld), with repeated measures on the last two factors.

### Participants

Fifty-six undergraduates (28 males; 27 females; one participant did not report gender) participated in Study 1 for payment, in groups ranging in size from three to seven.

## Materials

The present study attempted to recreate, as closely as possible, an actual televised broadcast of a political debate. We therefore added overdubs (recorded by a local radio broadcaster) to a 1996 William Weld/John Kerry debate recorded during their Senate campaign in Massachusetts. The pitch manipulations were dubbed in before the start of the actual debate, as they would have been in an actual broadcast. Participants therefore viewed what appeared to be a continuous tape of the original broadcast. For plausibility reasons, the first overdub created was that of the opening credits. New theme music was used, and our bogus commentator (identified as Jack Harper, an area reporter) introduced himself and stated, "We are seconds away from the final debate between Governor William Weld and Senator John Kerry." This opening statement was timed so that the final sentence led directly to two original on-screen commentators, making our bogus commentator part of a seamless introduction.

After the transition to the on-screen commentators, the tape continued through the actual pre-debate commentary, and as the actual moderator listed the debate sponsors, Jack Harper, purportedly "back in the studio," began his second voice-over, providing the pitch manipulations (see Appendix A). In the low pitch condition, Harper told viewers that Kerry had little time to prepare for the debate, and acknowledged Kerry as the clear underdog. In the high pitch condition, Harper stated that Kerry was well prepared and declared Kerry the clear favorite. Our source manipulations were also instantiated here; in the press condition, Harper identified the source of his information as members of the media while in the campaign condition his purported source was Kerry's aides. Pitch manipulations were followed by a 30-min segment of the debate, after which the tape cut directly to the original broadcast's on-the-scene reporters.

## Procedure

We needed participants to view this opening segment of the tape to instantiate our pitch manipulations and to enable us to assess their expectations before they had seen any statements by the candidates. When participants arrived, therefore, they were informed that in an earlier session of the study, a pre-debate questionnaire had been administered before any tape was seen which participants were unable to answer it due to their lack of familiarity with the candidates. The experimenter handed out a "fact sheet" (which briefly summarized each candidate's educational background and political experience) and told participants that they would watch the opening segment of the debate in order to see the candidates before rating them, at which point the tape would be stopped and a questionnaire administered. This cover story

provided the experimenter with an opportunity to reinforce the press/campaign aide manipulations. The experimenter told participants that they could use the reporters in addition to their fact sheets to familiarize themselves with the candidates, and then provided brief descriptions of each reporter. In the press condition, participants were told that Jack Harper traveled with the press corps and that his information came from reporters, while in the campaign condition, participants were told that Harper traveled with and received his information from campaign aides. Participants then viewed the opening segment of the debate (including the pitch manipulations) and completed the pre-debate questionnaire. They were cautioned to keep their reactions during the debate to a minimum, and they then viewed the debate and completed the post-debate questionnaire.

### **Pre-Debate Questionnaire**

Participants completed a questionnaire after viewing the opening segment of the debate, which contained a series of filler questions about the two candidates (see Appendix B for question wording). We assessed participants' political ideology on an 11-point scale (0: *very conservative* to 10: *very liberal*). Participants then rated how well they thought each candidate would perform on an 11-point scale (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*).

### **Post-Debate Questionnaire**

Following the conclusion of the tape, participants completed the post-debate questionnaire, rating how well each candidate performed on an 11-point scale (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*) and the quality of news coverage, also on an 11-point scale (0: *very poor* to 10: *very good*).

### **Predictions**

We expected Kerry to outperform Weld, as in the pretest, but predicted that his positive performance would not be enough to induce contrast, since performance fails to provide the necessary unequivocal positive standard for participants. We therefore predicted that high pitches for Kerry would lead to a greater perceived victory over Weld than low pitches. Because campaigns provided only pitches in Study 1, we did not expect issues of credibility to be salient; indeed, when the campaign provides only a low pitch, they may gain some credibility since they are speaking against their own interest (Eagly et al., 1978). We therefore expected no main effect of source or interactions of source with other factors.



Finally, we expected no differential ratings of network coverage since information from both sources would be seen similarly.

## RESULTS

For ease of explication, we broke our analyses down by pre- and post-debate ratings, and conducted 2 (*source*: campaign/press)  $\times$  2 (*pitch*: low/high)  $\times$  2 (*candidate*: Kerry/Weld) ANOVAs.

For pre-debate ratings, we observed a main effect for pitch,  $F(1, 52) = 8.02, p < .01$ , such that pre-debate ratings were higher overall after a low pitch than a high pitch. This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction of candidate and pitch,  $F(1, 52) = 71.75, p < .001$ , demonstrating the effectiveness of our pitch manipulations (see Table 1 for means). Expectations were higher for Kerry after he received a high pitch ( $M = 6.59$ ) than a low pitch ( $M = 5.41$ ),  $t(54) = 3.73, p < .01$ , while Weld's ratings were correspondingly lower after a high pitch for Kerry ( $M = 4.61$ ) than a low pitch ( $M = 7.21$ ),  $t(54) = -7.52, p < .01$ . This pattern was more pronounced for Weld's ratings than Kerry's, demonstrating the power of implicit pitches. There was no main effect for source, nor did source interact with any factors.

As with pre-debate ratings, there was no main effect for source and no interaction of source with pitch on post-debate ratings. We observed a main effect for candidate,  $F(1, 52) = 53.16, p < .001$ , reflecting Kerry's overall higher post-debate ratings. This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between candidate and pitch, though the interaction was only marginally significant,  $F(1, 52) = 2.28, p < .14$  (see Table 1).

We subtracted Weld's post-debate ratings from Kerry's (simplifying the repeated measures analysis) to assess the most important debate measure to strategists and pundits, margin of victory, which allows for a direct assessment of debate winners (and losers). Simply put, Kerry won by more when he was high pitched ( $M = 2.11$ ) than when he was lowpitched

**TABLE 1. Pre- and Post-Debate Ratings as a Function of Candidate and Pitch (Study 1)**

	Low Pitch		High Pitch	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Kerry	5.41	7.66	6.59	7.56
Weld	7.21	6.28	4.61	5.44
Margin of victory		1.38		2.11

*Note:*  $N = 56$ , cell  $ns$  range from 13 to 15. Pre- and post-debate ratings are on a 11-point scale (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*). Margin of victory scores were calculated by subtracting Weld's post-debate ratings from Kerry's post-debate ratings.

( $M = 1.38$ ), though this effect was only marginally significant,  $t(54) = 1.55$ ,  $p < .07$ , *one-tailed*. The positive impact of a high pitch is evident, and there is no evidence that a low pitch is an effective strategy for boosting debate ratings for one's candidate.

### Political Ideology and Gender

We also conducted the above analyses including political ideology as a covariate. In all analyses, political ideology did not emerge as a significant covariate. For pre-debate ratings, results were unchanged when political ideology was included as a covariate. For post-debate ratings, a previously not significant main effect for pitch did reach statistical significance (such that ratings were higher overall after a low pitch); most importantly, however, the key interaction of candidate and pitch was not affected. In addition, participant gender was not a significant covariate in and did not impact any of the above analyses.

### Coverage

We also asked participants to rate the quality of the network coverage. As predicted (since source was not a significant predictor of pre- or post-debate ratings), there were no main effects or an interaction on this variable (all  $ps > .20$ ); participants rated the network coverage similarly in all conditions.

## DISCUSSION

First, we note that our pitch manipulations were highly effective, as we were able to alter participants' expectations successfully. As expected, explicit pitches for Kerry served as implicit pitches for Weld, leading to complementary expectations for the two candidates. Though we selected a portion of a debate in which Kerry outperformed Weld, and though Kerry's post-debate ratings were higher than Weld's in every condition, a low pitch cut into Kerry's margin of victory. As we expected, then, even a relatively clear victory for Kerry failed to provide the unambiguous positive standard needed for contrast, and he was better served by sources simply stating that they expected a good performance. In Study 2, we provide a clearer standard of comparison by providing participants with positive post-debate spins of performance. For a low pitch to work, participants must contrast a positive post-debate spin of performance with their low expectations.

In Study 1, as predicted, we observed no main effects for source on any of our measures, and no interaction between source and any other factors. Campaign sources did start out with some credibility, and participants did accept their pitches as equally valid as those coming from the media. Indeed,

our ratings of network coverage were similar in all cells, providing further evidence that our participants were not reacting differently to information from the two sources. Though participants were willing to accept information from the campaign at face value in Study 1, providing a positive post-debate spin (as we do in Study 2) raises the stakes. This is the paradox for the campaign strategist: A positive post-debate spin of performance is needed in order for a low pitch to work, but it is just this kind of blatant strategy that might cause debate viewers to denigrate the source of that information. Contrast effects, then, should be obtained only when positive post-debate information is provided by a credible media source. When the campaign tries to impose a positive post-debate standard on participants, however, issues of credibility should be paramount, leading to lower ratings for the explicitly pitched candidate.

## METHOD: STUDY 2

### Design

The design for Study 2 was a 2 (*source*: campaign/press)  $\times$  3 (*pitch*: low/none/high)  $\times$  2 (*ratings*: pre/post)  $\times$  2 (*candidate*: Kerry/Weld), with repeated measures on the last two factors.

### Participants

Eighty-eight undergraduates (35 males; 47 females; 6 participants did not report gender) participated in Study 2 for payment, in groups ranging in size from four to nine.

### Materials

We used the same procedure and pitch manipulations as in Study 1 (we added a “no pitch” control condition in which Harper’s second voice-over was deleted). Following the closing statements, Harper provided a third voice-over, a post-debate spin of performance in all conditions (see Appendix A). He stated that after talking to his sources (campaign or media) during the closing statements it was clear that Kerry had performed well. To make spins consistent with pitches, the remainder of the spin varied by condition. In the no pitch conditions, Harper added that his sources had told him that they felt Kerry had won the debate; in the low pitch conditions, Harper prefaced this sentence by stating that Kerry’s performance was better than expected, while in the high pitch conditions he stated that Kerry had performed as expected. The tape then cut to the two on-the-scene reporters who wrapped up the network coverage.

The pre-debate and post-debate questionnaires were identical to those used in Study 1 (see Appendix B).

### Predictions

Because positive post-debate spins raise questions about campaigns' credibility (particularly after a low expectation has been set), source should become a major factor in Study 2. We predicted that source and pitch would interact, with the interaction being driven by the low pitch cells, reflecting the differential effectiveness of the low pitch, high spin strategy coming from the campaign or press. In the low pitch cells, we predicted that Kerry would receive his smallest margin of victory in the campaign condition and higher ratings in the press condition. We expected no source differences in the no pitch, high spin cells, since Study 1 demonstrated that one communication from both sources led to similar post-debate ratings. In the high pitch cells, we thought that positive post-debate information from the media might lead to even higher post-debate ratings. In short, we expected pre-debate ratings to be driven primarily by pitches (interacting with candidate since pitches have complementary effects on both candidates), while we expected post-debate ratings to be driven by the interaction of source and pitch (again interacting with candidate). We also expected participants' dissatisfaction with the campaign low pitch, high spin strategy to be reflected in negative ratings of the news coverage.

### RESULTS

We again broke our analyses down by pre- and post-debate ratings, and conducted 2 (*source*: campaign/press)  $\times$  3 (*pitch*: low/none/high)  $\times$  2 (*candidate*: Kerry/Weld) ANOVAs.

We observed a main effect for pitch on pre-debate ratings,  $F(2, 82) = 5.58, p < .01$ , such that ratings were higher overall after a low pitch (an effect driven by Weld's ratings), which was qualified by the predicted interaction of candidate and pitch,  $F(2, 82) = 16.28, p < .001$ . A low pitch for Kerry caused participants to expect less from Kerry and more from Weld, a high pitch led participants to expect more from Kerry and less from Weld, and no pitch led to similar expectations for the two candidates (see Table 2). As in Study 1, this pattern was driven more by Weld's ratings than Kerry's, again showing the impact of implicit pitches. As predicted, we observed no main effect for source and no interaction of source with other factors. Again, campaigns did start out with similar credibility as the press. The crucial test of this limited credibility is whether source does have an impact on post-debate ratings, after the campaign has overspent its credibility by using a transparent strategy.

**TABLE 2. Pre- and Post-Debate Ratings as a Function of Candidate, Pitch, and Source (Study 2)**

		Low Pitch		No Pitch		High Pitch	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Kerry	Press	5.67	8.47	6.40	8.00	6.03	6.81
	Campaign	5.87	7.00	5.67	7.83	6.27	7.93
Weld	Press	7.60	6.80	6.23	6.43	5.13	5.56
	Campaign	6.87	6.80	6.00	5.92	4.60	6.53

Note:  $N = 88$ , cell  $n$ s range from 13 to 16. Pre- and post-debate ratings are on a 11-point scale (0: very poorly to 10: very well).

**TABLE 3. Margin of Victory as a Function of Pitch and Source (Study 2)**

	Low Pitch	No Pitch	High Pitch
Press	1.67	1.57	1.25
Campaign	.20	1.91	1.40

Note: Margin of victory scores were calculated by subtracting Weld's post-debate ratings from Kerry's post-debate ratings.

To test this, we conducted the same ANOVA on post-debate ratings. We observed a main effect for candidate,  $F(2, 82) = 56.88$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that Kerry's post-debate ratings were higher overall than Weld's, a marginal main effect for pitch,  $F(2, 82) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .08$ , such that ratings were higher after a low pitch than a high pitch or no pitch, and an interaction of source and pitch,  $F(2, 82) = 7.63$ ,  $p < .04$ . These findings were all qualified, however, by the predicted interaction between candidate, source and pitch,  $F(2, 82) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .075$ , an interaction which was significant for Kerry's post-debate scores,  $F(2, 82) = 9.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , but only marginally significant for Weld's,  $F(2, 82) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .11$  (see Table 2).

To simplify interpretation of the above analyses, we again calculated margin of victory scores by subtracting Weld's post-debate ratings from Kerry's. In all conditions, Kerry beat Weld: Pitches and spins only did so much to counteract actual performance. In general, as is clear in Table 3, Kerry's stronger performance dominated his margin of victory. There was, however, a large disparity between the low pitch, high spin conditions depending on source. The low pitch, high spin strategy from the press provided Kerry with a comfortable margin of victory ( $M = 1.67$ ), but the same strategy—indeed, the same words—coming from a campaign source caused the two to end in a virtual tie ( $M = .20$ ). This difference in margin of victory between the press and the campaign low pitch, high spin cells was significant,  $t(28) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .02$ .

Interestingly, high pitches followed by high spins for Kerry did not increase his margin of victory compared to the no pitch cells. A contrast pitting the key condition—campaign low pitch, high spin—against the other five cells was significant,  $t(82) = 2.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , residual  $t(82) = .52$ , *ns*, demonstrating how markedly different Kerry's outcome was in this condition compared with all of the other conditions.

### Political Ideology and Gender

We again conducted the above analyses including political ideology as a covariate, and it again was not significant in any of the analyses. For pre-debate ratings, including political ideology as a covariate did not impact the main effect for pitch or the interaction. For post-debate ratings, controlling for political ideology eliminated the main effect for candidate, but did not affect the main effect for pitch, the interaction of source and pitch, or, most importantly, the three-way interaction. As in Study 1, participant gender was not a significant covariate in and did not impact any of the above analyses.

### Coverage

We again asked participants to rate the quality of the network coverage, expecting their dissatisfaction with the campaign low pitch, high spin technique to show up here, since the network (in the guise of Jack Harper) implicitly agreed to broadcast this information. We observed a main effect for source,  $F(1, 82) = 4.12$ ,  $p < .05$ , such that participants rated the network coverage more positively when the information they received came from a media source ( $M = 5.39$ ) compared to a campaign source ( $M = 4.48$ ), providing some evidence that participants do prefer information from the media rather than the campaign, a measure of participants' overall—and somewhat negative—view of campaign sources. This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between source and pitch,  $F(2, 82) = 5.34$ ,  $p < .01$ , and the interaction was driven by the difference between the press ( $M = 6.20$ ) and the campaign ( $M = 3.40$ ) low pitch cells,  $t(28) = 4.43$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

It is clear from these results that the low pitch strategy can be effective only when a positive post-debate spin was provided by a credible source. The low pitch, high spin combination used by a less credible campaign source eliminated Kerry's margin of victory, which was substantial in all other conditions. The fact that participants still rated Kerry's performance more highly than Weld's is encouraging, as debate content does appear to carry some evaluative weight. Even when we were very successful at shaping expectations, partici-

pants were capable of making performance-based judgments. Indeed, the only way for campaigns to hurt their candidate (when the candidate was a winner) was to use a transparent strategy, which led participants to lower ratings. The results for the positive effects of the low pitch/high spin strategy from the credible media source were mixed: Though Kerry did receive his highest post-debate rating in this condition, his margin of victory was not higher than in the high pitch or no pitch conditions.

Of course, campaigns often use the low pitch strategy (or are forced to resort to it) when they actually expect their candidate to perform poorly; the low pitch, high spin strategy, in other words, might work better for debate losers. But notice that our participants picked up on the low pitch, high spin strategy (and decreased Kerry's margin of victory) even when the positive post-debate spin was accurate (when Kerry did perform well). If a campaign were to try to apply a positive spin to a poor performance the ruse might be even more transparent. If a candidate performs badly, campaigns may establish greater credibility by admitting that they expect a loss, but returning post-debate and claiming a victory would quickly undermine that credibility. Though the low pitch is a common strategy among campaign strategists, we have shown that it is a losing strategy for debate winners; worse still, it is even difficult to think of a case where a campaign might help a debate loser with this strategy.

A high pitch followed by a high spin did not boost Kerry's ratings in Study 2, regardless of the source of that information—though unlike with the low pitch/high spin combination, campaigns were not penalized for trying. It could be argued that participants should have reacted to the high pitch, high spin combination from the campaign just as strongly as they reacted to the low pitch, high spin from the campaign. On the surface, the two are very similar; in each case, the participant heard two statements from a source of questionable credibility attempting to convince the participant that one candidate was better. We suspect that Kerry's margin of victory was especially affected in the campaign low pitch, high spin condition because participants reacted not against the campaign providing biased information but rather against the campaign using a transparent strategy clearly designed to manipulate participants' reactions. We may not have observed a similar effect in the campaign high pitch, high spin cell because there was no blatant attempt at manipulation, but simply a par for the course "employees praising their employer." Interestingly, both Kerry and Weld received their lowest post-debate ratings in the press high pitch, high spin cell; perhaps the media, in implying that the debate would be a good one, set participants' general expectations so high that both candidates were seen as failing to live up to the event's billing.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The central aim of the present research was to examine whether a low pitch—a common strategy used by campaigns to improve evaluations of candidate performance—can work to a candidate's benefit, and if so what combinations of spins and sources make it most effective. In Study 1, pitches from both campaign and media sources caused performance to be evaluated as consistent with expectations, whether positive or negative. Without a clear measure of post-debate performance, participants assimilated performance to their expectations, including this relevant information in their impressions of the candidates (Schwarz and Bless, 1992a). In addition, we found no evidence for source effects, demonstrating that at least at the start of a debate, campaign strategists are given the benefit of the doubt, and thus have some credibility. Study 2 demonstrated the limits of that credibility; when campaign sources deliberately tried to manipulate participant's expectations and evaluations by using a low pitch followed by a high spin, Kerry won by his smallest margin. Thus, as predicted, the contrast effects that the low pitch strategy requires do not occur when the positive post-debate standard is set by a source low in credibility, mirroring general effects for sources with low credibility (Aronson et al., 1963; Fein and Hilton, 1994). These issues of credibility apparently were enough to draw participants' attention too closely to the source of the communication, leading them to exclude this information from their judgments (Schwarz and Bless, 1992a). Our results also suggest, however, that positive information from credible media sources can work against a candidate, if that source creates an expectation that the candidate cannot meet. In Study 2, no pitch actually led to a greater margin of victory for Kerry than a high pitch; perhaps a high pitch followed by a high spin for a debate winner is overkill, causing participants to rate Kerry more negatively simply because he failed to meet these lofty standards. This research, then, demonstrates both the upper and lower bounds for campaign strategists. Even credible sources have their drawbacks, and the acute strategist must determine which combination of pitches, spins, and sources work best for her candidate.

This debate featured a lopsided outcome, as Kerry won in our pretest and in every condition in both studies. We therefore provided explicit pitches and spins only for a debate winner, and it is possible that an explicit low pitch might work very differently when used by an eventual debate loser. In Study 1, implicit pitches for Weld led to assimilation, as an implicit high pitch led to higher ratings, and an implicit low pitch led to lower ratings. Poor performance, then, may simply lead to assimilation of a low pitch. At least in theory, however, if a strategist set a low enough expectation, even the most lamentable debater might benefit, provided, of course, that the positive spin came from a credible media source.



### Political Ideology

In both Studies 1 and 2, political ideology did not emerge as a significant covariate in any of our analyses, and did not impact any of our predicted interactions. One conclusion would be that ideology does not impact perceptions of debate performance, as some recent analyses suggest (e.g., Gerber and Green, 1999). We are hesitant to endorse this claim based on our data, both because other analyses suggest that partisanship does impact political perception (e.g., Bartels, 2002), and due to several limitations of our sample. Both the liberal population from which our participants were drawn ( $M = 6.42$  on an 11-point scale, where higher numbers indicate greater liberalism) and the fact that we selected a debate that featured a liberal Republican work against finding significant effects of ideology. Indeed, a separate group of 16 participants who viewed the opening segment of the debate after being informed of the candidates' political ideology had very similar expectations for Kerry ( $M = 6.38$ ) and Weld ( $M = 6.56$ ), which we might not expect if the candidates were more ideologically disparate. In addition, we measured political ideology, rather than partisan inclinations, which may be more likely to impact political behavior (see Fiorina, 2002 for a review); as we mentioned in Footnote 1, our sample simply did not have a large enough number of Republicans to conduct these analyses. It is certainly probable, and our own previous research suggests, that manipulating expectations for and evaluations of nationally known figures—who often come to embody liberalism or conservatism—might interact more strongly with participants' own partisan inclinations. Finally, the nature of our sample (college-aged undergraduates) is cause for concern (see Sears, 1986): Though our participants were of voting age, it is clearly important to replicate these studies using participants of a wider age range.

### Effects of Campaigns

Some recent analyses of the effects that campaigns have on election outcomes have emphasized the often negligible effect of campaigns (e.g., Bartels, 1992; Finkel, 1993), in part because any effort put forth by one campaign is matched by the opposing campaign. In our studies, we manipulated pitches and spins for only one candidate, while in the real-world pitching and spinning occurs for both candidates. Our results tend to show that if campaigns have an effect, it is a negative one, as use of the common low pitch/high spin actually harmed the candidate, but our claims are tempered by the fact that we do not include opposing pitches and spins that might cancel each other out. Given that the evidence suggests that debates (at least presidential debates) do have a lasting impact on impressions of candidates (e.g., Shaw, 1999), more research is needed to explore how campaigns can impact perceptions of debate

performance. One limitation in the bulk of existing research on debates is that there is a small sample size of debates, making it difficult to draw strong conclusions: To conclude that low pitches work in presidential debates, for example, would be based on only a handful of actual debates, which vary in contextual factors—including, most importantly, the debaters themselves. Using experimental designs, and relatively unknown candidates, as in the present investigation, allows for control of such extraneous factors to allow for a more precise estimation of the effects of different strategies.

This research also begins to outline a potentially important distinction between implicit and explicit expectations that may be overlooked by campaign strategists trying to shape perceptions of campaign events. When an explicit expectation is set for one candidate, an implicit standard is set for the other. When a campaign strategist chooses to high pitch her candidate, she is implicitly low pitching her opponent, and the reverse (perhaps more ominously) is also true. We manipulated pitches and spins for only one candidate, making an examination of interactions between explicit pitches for different candidates impossible. It would clearly be of interest to include explicit, controlled pitches and spins for both candidates; this would more accurately simulate a real televised debate and allow for analysis of interactions between pitches, spins, and candidates.

*Acknowledgments.* The authors thank Kevin Carlsmith, Joel Cooper, Robyn LeBoeuf, Benoît Monin, Leif Nelson, and Sam Sommers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, Benoît Monin for his statistical advice, and Bruce Wheat for his help in preparing materials.

## APPENDIX A: SCRIPTS OF MANIPULATIONS

### Pitches

#### *Low Pitch, Campaign/Press*

Let me remind you that Senator Kerry has just returned from a hectic trip to New York and *his aides/members of the media* say that the trip, coupled with the Senator's recent bout with the flu, left him little time to prepare. They say that Kerry will try to hold his own but that he is the clear underdog.

#### *High Pitch, Campaign/Press*

Let me remind you that Senator Kerry has just returned home from a productive trip to New York and *his aides/members of the media* say that the Senator is well-rested and raring to go in tonight's debate. They say they respect Governor Weld, but they're pleased that Kerry is the clear favorite.

## Spins

### *Low Pitch, Campaign/Press*

During the closing statements I talked to *the Kerry people/members of the press* and they felt that the Senator was very effective tonight in getting his message across and that he performed far better than expected and gained a clear victory.

### *No Pitch, Campaign/Press*

During the closing statements I talked to *the Kerry people/members of the press* and they felt that the Senator was very effective tonight in getting his message across and that he outperformed Governor Weld and gained a clear victory.

### *High Pitch, Campaign/Press*

During the closing statements I talked to *the Kerry people/members of the press* and they felt that the Senator was very effective tonight in getting his message across and that as expected he outperformed Governor Weld and gained a clear victory.

## APPENDIX B: QUESTION WORDING FOR STUDIES 1 AND 2

### Pre-Debate Questionnaire

Please rate your political beliefs on the following scale (0: *very conservative* to 10: *very liberal*)

Overall, how well do you expect John Kerry to perform in the upcoming debate? (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*)

Overall, how well do you expect William Weld to perform in the upcoming debate? (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*)

### Post-Debate Questionnaire

Overall, how well did Senator John Kerry perform in this debate? (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*)

Overall, how well did Governor William Weld perform in this debate? (0: *very poorly* to 10: *very well*)

Please rate Channel 5's debate coverage (0: *very poor*, 5: *average*, 10: *very good*).

## NOTES

1. We assessed our participants' political affiliations in both studies. Reflecting the overall liberal orientation of our participant pool, very few participants reported being Republican. In Study

1 ( $N = 56$ ), 35 participants identified as Democrats, 15 as independents, 3 as Republicans, and 3 as “other,” similar to Study 2 ( $N = 88$ ), in which 44 participants identified as Democrats, 28 as independents, 12 as Republican, and 4 as “other.” The lack of Republicans in our sample unfortunately precludes us from conducting analyses specifically exploring the impact of partisanship.

## REFERENCES

- Aronson, Elliot, and Linder, Darwyn (1965). Gain and loss of esteem as determinants of interpersonal attractiveness. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 1: 156–172.
- Aronson, Elliot, Turner, Judith A., and Carlsmith, J. Merrill (1963). Communicator credibility and communication discrepancy as determinants of opinion change. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67: 31–36.
- Bartels, Larry M. (2002). Beyond the running tally: partisan bias in political perceptions. *Political Behavior* 24: 117–150.
- Bochner, Stephen, and Insko, Chester A. (1966). Communicator discrepancy, source credibility, and opinion change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4: 614–621.
- Campbell, Angus, Converse, Philip, Stokes, Donald, and Miller, Warren (1960). *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Conway, Michael, and Ross, Michael (1984). Getting what you want by revising what you had. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47: 738–748.
- Eagly, Alice H., Wood, Wendy, and Chaiken, Shelly (1978). Causal inferences about communicators and their effect on opinion change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36: 424–435.
- Fazio, Russell H., and Williams, Carol J. (1986). Attitude accessibility as a moderator of the attitude-perception and attitude-behavior relations: an investigation of the 1984 presidential election. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51: 505–514.
- Fein, Steven, and Hilton, James L. (1994). Judging others in the shadow of suspicion. *Motivation and Emotion* 18: 167–198.
- Fein, Steven, Morgan, Seth J., Norton, Michael I., and Sommers, Samuel R. (1997). Hype and suspicion: the effects of pretrial publicity, race, and suspicion on jurors' verdicts. *Journal of Social Issues* 53: 487–502.
- Finkel, Steven E. (1993). Reexamining the “minimal effects” model in recent presidential campaigns. *Journal of Politics* 55: 1–21.
- Fiorina, Morris P. (2002). Parties and partisanship: a 40-year retrospective. *Political Behavior* 24: 93–115.
- Gerber, Alan and Green, Donald (1999). Misperceptions about perceptual bias. *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 189–210.
- Goethals, George R., and Reckman, Richard F. (1973). The perception of consistency in attitudes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 9: 491–501.
- Hegedus, Chris, and Pennebaker, D.A. (Directors). (1995). *The War Room* [Film]. (Available from Vidmark/Trimark).
- Hellweg, Susan A., Pfau, Michael, and Brydon, Steven R. (1992). *Televised Presidential Debates: Advocacy in Contemporary America*. New York: Praeger.
- Holbrook, Thomas M. (1999). Political learning from presidential debates. *Political Behavior* 21: 67–89.

- Hovland, Carl I., Harvey, O.J., and Sherif, Muzafer (1957). Assimilation and contrast effects in reactions to communication and attitude change. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 55: 244–252.
- Johnston, Richard, Blais, André, Brady, Henry E., and Crête, Jean (1988). *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jones, Edward E., and Goethals, George R. (1971). Order effects in impression formation: attribution context and the nature of the entity. In Edward E. Jones, David E. Kanouse, Harold H. Kelley, Richard E. Nisbett, Stuart Valins, and Bernard Weiner (eds.) *Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior*, pp. 27–46. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Lemert, James B., Elliott, William R., Bernstein, James M., Rosenberg, William L., and Nestvold, Karl J. (1991). *News Verdicts, the Debates, and Presidential Campaigns*. New York: Praeger.
- Millar, Murray G., and Millar, Karen (1997). Effects of situational variables on judgments about deception and detection accuracy. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 19: 401–410.
- Mussweiler, Thomas. (2003). Comparison processes in social judgment: mechanisms and consequences. *Psychological Review* 110: 472–489.
- Nielsen Media Research (2000, October 16). Largest presidential debate audiences. *USA Today*.
- Olson, James M., Roese, Neal J., and Zanna, Mark P. (1996). Expectancies. In E. Tory Higgins and Arie W. Kruglanski (eds.) *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, pp. 211 – 238. New York: Guilford.
- Parducci, Allen (1995). *Happiness, Pleasure, and Judgment: The Contextual Theory and its Applications*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Mahwah, NJ.
- Petty, Richard E., and Cacioppo, John T. (1986). *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Ramney, Austin (1983). *Channels of Power*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schrott, Peter R. (1990). Electoral consequences of “winning” televised campaign debates. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54: 567–585.
- Schwarz, Norbert, and Bless, Herbert (1992a). Constructing reality and its alternatives: An inclusion/exclusion model of assimilation and contrast effects in social judgment. In Leonard Martin and Abraham Tesser (eds.) *The Construction of Social Judgment*, pp. 217–245. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Schwarz, Norbert, and Bless, Herbert (1992b). Scandals and the public’s trust in politicians: assimilation and contrast effects. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18: 574–579.
- Sears, David O. (1986). College sophomores in the laboratory: influences of a narrow data base on social psychology’s view of human nature. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51: 515–530.
- Sears, David O., and Chaffee, Steven H. (1979). Uses and effects of the 1976 debates: An overview of empirical studies. In Sidney Kraus (ed.) *The Great Debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976*, pp. 223–261. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Shaw, Daron R. (1999). A study of presidential campaign event effects from 1952 to 1992. *The Journal of Politics* 61: 387–422.
- Sherif, Muzafer, and Hovland, Carl I. (1961). *Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Communication and Attitude Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sigelman, Lee, and Sigelman, Carol K. (1984). Judgments of the Carter-Reagan debate: the eyes of the beholders. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48: 624–628.

- Walster, Elaine, Aronson, Elliot, and Abrahams, Darcy (1966). On increasing the persuasiveness of a low prestige communicator. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2: 325-342.
- Walster, Elaine, Walster, Bill, Abrahams, Darcy, and Brown, Zita (1966). The effect on liking of underrating or overrating another. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2: 70-84.
- White, Theodore H. (1961). *The Making of the President*. New York: Atheneum House.