

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Gwen Ifill: Moderator Or Opponent In The 2008 Vice-Presidential Debate?



The October 2008 Vice-Presidential debate between Senator Joe Biden of Delaware and Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska drew over 70 million US viewers to their television sets. It was the second most watched political debate in the modern era of televised debates, surpassed only by the 80 million viewers for the Carter-Reagan debate in October of 1980. The Biden-Palin debate had a higher viewership than the first McCain-Obama debate or the George HW Bush-Geraldine Ferraro debate of 1984 which had previously held the record for the most viewed Vice-Presidential debate in American political history (Bauder).

By late September 2008 there was widespread speculation in the mainstream press that Sarah Palin was not prepared to participate in a Vice-Presidential debate. In the period leading up to the debate, she had very few unscripted public events. And, her performance in mainstream media interviews heightened the concern that Governor Palin was not prepared for high office. Against this backdrop, an important element of the McCain campaign's pre-debate preparation was an orchestrated effort to place the moderator, Gwen Ifill, into an adversarial role. In making this move, Governor Palin was provided a rhetorical location from which she could successfully dismiss many of the inquiries made by Ms. Ifill during the debate.

In this instance, traditional debate theory can be used to unpack the relationship between the moderator, a designated member of the press, and the political candidate. Gwen Ifill was transformed from a debate moderator into an opponent for many who observed the debate. The McCain team nurtured the expectation that Ifill would join with Joe Biden to question Governor Palin's fitness for office. In many respects this was the same rhetorical transformation of a journalist's role found in the 1988 Vice-Presidential debate between Dan Quayle and Lloyd Bensen

(Weiler). This instance differs from the 1988 Bensen/Quayle debate, in that the characterization of the debate as the Republican candidate versus the media and the Democratic candidate was an orchestrated element of the pre-debate preparation by the McCain campaign.

In the 2008 Vice-Presidential debate, Republican partisans attacked the moderator's objectivity. This line of argument created a situation in which the moderator was perceived as favoring Biden and opposed to Palin and hence Ms Ifill could not press Governor Palin for evidence of her claims or contest her non-factual statements. The result was that Governor Palin delivered answers that were not responsive to questions and she spoke directly to the television audience unmediated by the debate context, which resulted in turn in a more favorable showing by Palin than the content of her answers might have warranted.

This particular case study hints at a recurrent tension that surfaces each time a moderator is selected for a general election debate. In the last four election cycles, the vast majority of these debates have been single moderator debates (Schroeder). The moderator is asked to participate in an event that is planned and structured by the two major parties. Those parties must approve the moderator and that person may feel a need to satisfy the parties to receive consideration in future iterations of these high profile events. Yet, the moderator is usually a noted journalist who is also expected to serve the interests of the viewing public. The moderator must satisfy the hosts while serving the public interest.

The political parties take a risk when selecting a moderator. For example, the most noteworthy moment in the 1988 election cycle was when CNN newsman and debate moderator Bernard Shaw asked Michael Dukakis how he would have reacted if his wife were raped. The answer Dukakis provided to this rather personal question led some to question his sense of human warmth. While this particular essay does not provide a theory of the argumentative role that a moderator should play in a debate, it does highlight the impact that a compromised moderator can have on the development argumentation in a political debate.

By framing the debate as a 2 on 1 exchange, Sarah Palin was free to redefine the 2008 Vice-Presidential debate as an opportunity to speak directly to the American public rather than as an argument on a defined set of topics with Joe Biden. In response to an early question in the debate about medical care, Governor Palin

revealed this strategy for the viewership: “And I may not answer the questions that either the moderator or you want to hear, but I’m going to talk straight to the American people and let them know my track record also” (Commission on Presidential Debates, p. 7). Palin signaled early on in the debate that she would not answer some questions and Ifill did little to facilitate an argumentative clash between the two contestants.

A review of the transcript, using some elements of the theoretical frameworks constructed by Rowland (1986) and Riley and Hollihan (1981), provides insight on the types of arguments Palin used in the debate. In reviewing the debate for complete, partial, and non answers to questions, this study finds that Governor Palin did not answer one-third of the questions asked in the debate. Additionally, when one looks at the types of arguments used by Palin in the debate, there are few if any instances in which she uses evidence to buttress her claims.

Given that a number of recent Vice Presidents have assumed the Presidency, one might assume that the ability to construct arguments under pressure is a skill we would look for in our candidates. Unfortunately, we do not always look at the Vice-Presidential debates as a moment to validate the choices of running mate by a Presidential nominee or on the argumentative capacity of the Vice-Presidential contender. In many instances, Vice Presidential debates are both political and academic afterthoughts. This analysis is one of only a handful of studies that look at the argumentation in Vice-Presidential debate and in particular the Biden-Palin debate of 2008 (Benoit & Henson).

The remainder of this paper will be divided into three sections. The first traces Governor Palin’s’ ascendancy to the national political stage. The second section describes the evolution of the pre-debate strategy to define Gwen Ifill as an opponent rather than a moderator for the debate. The third section reports on Ifill’s performance in the debate and the argumentation strategies deployed by Palin in response to Ifill’s questions.

1. Governor Palin’s Entry to the National Political Stage

There are a number of explanations for the number of viewers who tuned into the Biden-Palin debate in 2008. At that time, a widely held position was that the slotting of the first presidential debate into Friday night, a night of limited television viewership, explained the low numbers for the McCain-Obama debate. The assertion was that the outsized viewership tuned into the Biden-Palin debate

because it was the second debate in the series and it was broadcast on a Thursday night, a night that regularly produced large numbers of television viewers. Given the state of the US economy in September of 2008, and the McCain decision to suspend his campaign days before the first debate, one would have expected very high viewership for the McCain-Obama debate.

People did not watch the Biden-Palin debate simply because of the placement of the first Presidential debate on a Friday night. Sarah Palin was, and is, one of the most charismatic politicians in American public life. Despite her position as the failed Vice-Presidential candidate for a ticket that lost in what many consider a rout, Sarah Palin remains popular today. For example, a review of her Facebook page in June of 2010 found 1,672,554 friends. In contrast, Mitt Romney, a politician who some believe may be the early favorite for the Republican nomination in 2012, has 382,612 friends on his page. She remains a powerful political force in the United States. In a Newsweek article entitled "Saint Sarah" Lisa Miller (2010) lays out a compelling case that Sarah Palin is revitalizing the Evangelical Right in American politics by remaking that movement in her own image. While there is disagreement over her influence in politics, no one would contest the claim that she is a presence on the American political scene in 2010.

Looking back from our current vantage point, it is quite clear the reason for the high ratings of the debate was the curiosity about and interest in Sarah Palin. She was selected to serve as the Republican Vice-Presidential nominee the day after the Democratic Convention in August of 2008. This was an effective tactical move by the Republicans to tap down the media attention on the newly minted Obama/Biden ticket. She quickly became a national phenomenon. Palin's public and personal life in Alaska were scrutinized by the media. We learned that that her son left high school and joined the military and that her high school aged daughter was expecting a child. A widely read political blog, The Daily Kos, went so far to claim that Sarah Palin was the grandmother rather than the mother of her newborn child Trig.

Governor Palin was favored by many conservative Republicans because of her opposition to abortion, support of tax cuts, and commitment to the use of Alaskan oil to resolve the energy crisis in the United States. Her selection to serve as the Vice-Presidential nominee for the Republican Party in 2008 was an effort, by the McCain campaign, to mobilize the conservative base of the party. Palin was a strong pro-life advocate with a Down Syndrome infant child who energized the

base of the Republican Party. In the first twenty-four hours she was on the ticket, the McCain web site saw a seven fold increase in traffic and it collected \$7 million dollars in on-line contributions (Baltz & Johnson). In the first few weeks after her selection, Sarah Palin was able to breathe life into the sagging McCain campaign. In early September, some polls showed the two campaigns in a statistical dead heat.

Her media interviews in mid-September did little to enhance her reputation with political moderates and her popularity waned. Her initial national television interview was with Charles Gibson of ABC News. While Palin was the celebrity de jour, Gibson avoided questions that would have highlighted that status. He focused on her knowledge of international and national issues. When the interview was over, the focus of the media and public's attention was on her understanding of the Bush Doctrine and not the questioning technique of Gibson. Additionally, she uttered the sentence that some people in Alaska could actually see Russia and that monitoring Russian activity was a part of the foreign policy agenda for a Governor of Alaska.

Palin's second national television interview was with Katie Couric of the CBS Evening News. In this interview, the governor was unable to identify a United States Supreme Court case, other than *Roe v Wade*, which she disagreed with. Palin was also unable to identify any vote that John McCain cast in a twenty-six year career that called for additional banking regulations. This was a problem for the campaign due to the state of the US economy in October 2008. Governor Palin declined to identify a newspaper she read on a regular basis when questioned by Couric about her reading habits. Finally, she once again articulated the oft ridiculed argument that Alaska's proximity to Russia established a foreign policy expertise for a Governor of that state. Voters from across the political spectrum expressed serious concern over Palin's performance in the multi-day Couric interview. Moderates and some conservatives worried that Palin was not prepared to hold national political office. Following the Couric interview, a noted Republican commentator, Kathleen Parker (2008), called for Palin to step down from the Republican ticket.

The interview was followed by a spoof done by the comedian Tina Fey on Saturday Night Live (SNL), a weekly US television comedy show. The Fey impersonation was widely circulated on the internet and led to a spate of Fey guest appearances on SNL where she played the role of Palin. One reason the Fey

impersonation was so successful was that she used Palin's language verbatim to answer the questions about the state of the economy. Such answers were supplemented by clearly absurd statement, including a hope that the numbers of foreigners working at the United Nations could be reduced.

The poor performances in the Gibson and Couric interviews, combined with Tina Fey's remarkable impersonation seriously eroded Palin's approval with many in the voting public. In the period immediately following her selection, Governor Palin's approval ratings topped out in early September at around 50%. Her positive ratings exceeded both those of John McCain and Barack Obama. Her meteoric rise in national politics in August and September was followed by a near total collapse in her popularity. While most conservatives continued to support Governor Palin, she found herself with little political support outside of the Republican base.

2. Framing the Debate for the American Public

The harsh light of the national media attention had undermined Palin's public standing and there were reports that it impacted her debate preparation. After joining the campaign, Palin began preparation by construction and studying a stack of index cards. The picture of someone studying groups of index cards should be a familiar one for people who engaged in intercollegiate debate before the emerging era of paperless debate. These cards had a varied set of facts and names that the Governor studied regularly. A sympathetic member of the McCain team reported that the memorization of facts for the debate was indeed undermining her confidence and preparation. The Governor was being schooled in facts with little attention paid to the method of delivering an argument (Baltz and Johnson p, 358).

In late September, the McCain debate preparation team decided to take control of the sessions from Palin's handlers and moved them to the McCain ranch in Arizona. While in Arizona, the number of people with access to the Governor was restricted. The McCain campaign was aware of the damage created by the suspect interviews and they adapted the preparation in the week leading up to the Vice-Presidential debate. According to the Wall Street Journal, the McCain team worked to eliminate the communication patterns that had eroded her rhetorical effectiveness in public interviews (Langley).

The team had about a week to prepare Palin for a debate that was governed by a

set of rules that differed from those agreed upon for the Presidential debates. The Vice-Presidential debate format was negotiated between Democrats and Republicans only after each party had selected a nominee. Throughout the fall, the McCain team pressed for a format that limited the time that a candidate would have to answer a question. In the end, individual answers were limited to ninety seconds with a two minute follow-up period in the debate. This compares to two minute answers with a five minute follow-up for the Presidential debates.

This more restricted format was helpful when preparing Palin for the debate. Her initial answers could be brief and a two minute follow-up meant she would not be required to articulate heavily evidenced answers to questions. The preparation team could provide Palin with a number of arguments on topics she excelled at, and in many cases, she could simply redefine a question to provide answers that played to her strength.

A potential vulnerability associated with this format was that a moderator could elect to ask a set of questions that while not identical, would solicit a repetitive set of answers from the candidate. This was the situation that Dan Quayle confronted in 1988 when the journalists asked him a set of overlapping questions about his fitness for high office. In this instance the focus of the debate turned to Quayle's qualifications for office and he was left to repeat the same answer over and over again. With each set of repetitive answers, his credibility was further eroded. Under these conditions, narrowing the debate to that one controlling proposition undermined the contestant.

Interestingly, while the format for the Vice-Presidential debate was negotiated after each candidate was selected by the respective campaigns; the moderator was announced in mid-August when the details of the Presidential debates were unveiled. Included in the memorandum of agreement was the designation of moderators for the three Presidential debates, Bill Moyers, Tom Brokaw and Bob Schieffer, and the moderator for the Vice-Presidential debate, Gwen Ifill.

Gwen Ifill was the host of the Public Broadcasting System's weekly television panel discussion of national politics, "Washington Week" and a senior correspondent on the national television political commentary program, "News Hour." She was a protégé of the late Tim Russert of NBC News and a frequent participant on a staple weekly program of American political commentary television, Meet the Press. Additionally, Ifill had served as the moderation of the

2004 Vice-Presidential debate between Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards. While some Republicans complained about her treatment of Cheney in that debate, most pundits believed she performed effectively in the 2004 Vice-Presidential debate. Gwen Ifill remains an anomaly in the world of politics. She is an African American woman with a successful track record as a journalist in both the print and mass media. The political commentator, Howard Kurtz (2008), believed that it was her personal identity that allowed her to ask important public policy questions of Cheney and Edwards in 2004 that others might have ignored. Her question about HIV/AIDS in the African American population led the audience to understand that neither candidate had considered this public health crisis.

In the days leading up to the debate, Ifill's contract for a book on the 2008 campaign cycle became the subject of controversy in some political circles. *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*, was scheduled for release on January 20, 2009. It was described as a review of the modern African-American politician and included chapters on Barack Obama, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick and Cory Booker the Mayor of Newark New Jersey. The contract was reported as early as May 8, 2008 in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* interview with Ms. Ifill (Schaffer). A cursory internet search in the summer of 2008 would have found the *Inquirer* article or the pre-sale for the book on Amazon.com.

The popular conservative web page World Net Daily released a story entitled "VP Moderator Ifill releasing pro-Obama book" on September 30, 2008. This headline was quickly picked up by the Drudge Report and the story spread into the blogosphere. The McCain campaign and its surrogates affirmed Ifill's journalistic professionalism and her capacity to moderate the debate. But, the campaign's statements were constructed in a fashion to authenticate the suspicions of Republican partisans. John McCain's commented that he believed that Ifill would be objective but reiterated that the disclosure of the book contract wasn't helpful (Rutenberg). His comments were circulated on Fox News, the media outlet that was running a number of stories about the Ifill controversy in the days before the debate. Sarah Palin told Sean Hannity, a conservative talk show personality, that the Ifill controversy would simply encourage Republicans to try even harder to get their message out to the public. Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a regular surrogate speaker for the McCain campaign, stated that that Ifill could be fair in moderating the debate. He did, however, raise doubt by about Ifill by

suggesting that a moderator who wrote a book in support of McCain might be forced from the post. Giuliani was explicitly tying this controversy to the larger political narrative that the mainstream media in the US attacks political conservatives and protects political liberals. While it is likely that some Republican partisans may have deployed the media bias argument against another journalist holding the moderator post, Ifill's financial motive added a great degree of force to the claim. To borrow from the language of academic debate, in this particular instance there was a strong link to the widely circulated impact of the left leaning media in American politics. The comments of McCain, Palin and Giuliani that commentators on cable television networks and in the blogosphere would lay bare the interests that undermined Ifill's position as moderator (ABC News).

This controversy provided Fox News with a couple days of programming. Megyn Kelly and Bill Hemmer fleshed out the financial investment that Ifill had in the outcome of the election (Fox News, America's Newsroom). An Obama win would certainly lead to greater sales of the book and financially benefit Ms. Ifill. Bill O'Reilly, host of the O'Reilly Factor, complained the Gwen Ifill refused to take his call for an interview and called for her to step aside (Fox News, O'Reilly Factor). Greta Van Susteren provided a coherent case against Ifill's selection to moderate the Vice-Presidential debate. Her rationale was that while the book's existence may have been in the public domain, Ifill had an obligation to disclose the potential conflict before accepting the moderator's post. Van Susteren suggested that journalists should be expected to follow the ethical code prescribed for lawyers in the US (Fox News, On the Record). The call for Ifill to withdraw was a constant refrain on the FOX Network in the days leading up to the debate.

Ifill's treatment by media personalities on Fox News seemed tame when compared to the comments on talk radio and blogs. Rush Limbaugh, the most successful radio personality in the US, began a segment of his show by reporting to the audience that Ifill was "totally in the tank" for Obama. Later in his monologue Limbaugh asserted that Ifill was on the front line of the feminist assault on Sarah Palin (Limbaugh). The phrase "in the tank" osculated in the blogosphere. The political blogger, Michelle Malkin (2008), published a piece titled "Debate, Tanked." In the post she wrote: "But there is nothing moderate about where Ifill stands on Barack Obama. She's so far in the tank for the Democratic presidential candidate; her oxygen delivery line is running out". She

proceeded to outline what she believed was an orchestrated effort by Ifill to financial benefit herself with a book about Obama. For Malkin, it was a financial motive that caused Ifill to withhold the status of her book deal, when offered the opportunity to moderate the debate.

Ms. Ifill was transformed from a journalist into an Obama apologist with a financial interest in his success. Andrew McCarthy (2008) summarized this position in an on-line essay: "Ifill has shed whatever patina of objectivity she had to become Obama's amanuensis. In the process, she has shrewdly designed a commercial transaction that gives her a hefty stake in the outcome of the election - if Obama wins and the inauguration book roll-out goes as planned, she'll make a bundle".

An effect of the line of attack on the moderator, in the three days leading up to the event, was summed up by a liberal blogger, Cenk Uygur (2008), in a Huffington Post entry: "These attacks against Gwen Ifill are so transparent. I don't know why we're even having a legitimate discussion about their validity. The McCain campaign is desperate to have the moderator of the VP debate go easy on Palin. So, they are working her over, ahead of time". The strategy of redefining Ifill as an opponent rather than a moderator may have effected Ifill's approach when dealing with the inevitable Palin misstatements in the nationally televised debate. Furthermore, Palin was provided license to ignore the question of a moderator whose impartiality had been compromised in the firestorm leading up to the debate.

3. Debate and Argumentation in the Vice-Presidential Debate

While Palin's arguments may not have differed significantly with another moderator, the Ifill controversy provided her with political cover following the debate. She had a plausible reason to avoid Ifill's questions. Ifill was both a member of the left leaning press and someone with a vested interest in an Obama victory. There were a conflicting set of reports on Ifill's performance in the debate. Many in the mainstream media suggested Ifill did a commendable job under trying circumstances. And, interestingly many of the voices who complained about Ifill before the debate were silent on the question in post-debate commentary. Perhaps, their silence reflected that the pre-debate tactic was successful. There were some commentators who suggested that the tactic had succeeded and Ifill had failed to serve as an effective moderator. Lenny Steinhorn, a political communication professor at American University, alleged

that Ifill had abdicated her responsibility by failing to ask probing questions. His position was that a debate was more than a joint press conference, and it was not a communicative exchange in which the moderator pushed the candidates to test their fitness for high office (Gough).

Interestingly, Ifill's own comments following the debate hint that she had abdicated the responsibilities of a moderator. On Meet the Press she stated that the role of the moderator was to control the debate. However, she then went on to point out that the decision to avoid or answer questions resided with Palin and Biden in the debate. While Ifill defended her performance in the debate, her comments point to her constraints that night in St. Louis. To avoid sparking a post debate controversy, she was forced to restrict the role that a moderator often plays in a debate. Ifill seemed to have defined control of the debate as nothing more than regulating the length time each candidate would get to speak. Ifill was fully aware that she had ceded, to Palin, control over the content of answers to questions in the debate. In response to a query from Tom Brokaw about Palin ignoring questions in the debate, Ifill was quick to confirm that "she blew me off" (NBC News).

In reviewing the transcript of the debate, there are few, if any, instances in which Ifill probed the candidates. The most obvious use of a follow up took place when Ifill waited more than 30 minutes before asking a second set of questions about the Office of Vice President. In that particular instance Ifill did not highlight the fact that Palin could not accurately describe the constitutional obligations of a Vice President.

Joe Biden found himself alone in pointing out the factual inaccuracies of Governor Palin in the debate. When answering the question about the role of the Vice President, Biden reminded the audience that the Vice President does not preside over the Senate as Palin had suggested. And, rather than targeting Palin, Biden then redirected the answer to assail the job Dick Cheney had done as Vice President in the Bush Administration. Biden had made the factual correction without victimizing Sarah Palin.

In answering another question, Biden implied that Ifill wasn't fact checking the Alaska Governor. When Palin delivered an answer on Afghanistan that bore little resemblance to the reality of the situation, Biden implored Ifill to check Palin's answers. Biden began a foreign policy answer with the statement "With

Afghanistan, facts matter, Gwen (Commission, p.24).” The moderator was reduced to a time keeper and Governor Palin was free to either ignore a question she was not prepared for or she could simply produce an answer with very little evidence.

Ifill bore little resemblance to what we might consider a moderator or judge in a debate. Absent a moderator focusing the debate on questions of public policy with an expectation that answers would contain both warrants and evidence, Palin was free to respond in a less traditional fashion. A review of the transcript of the debate provided additional support for the conclusion that the appeals used by Plain were not regularly found in a political debate.

Dating back to the 1960, argument scholars, debate coaches and political debate scholars have undertaken a variety of analyses of the debates. This essay utilizes elements of the approaches used by Rowland in his essay on the Carter-Reagan debate and the work of Riley and Hollihan who reviewed the same debate to assess the quality of Palin’s argumentation. When looking at the 1980 transcript, Rowland identified full answers, partial answers, and non-answers to questions. His essay called into question a widely held position that Jimmy Carter was a more substantive debater than Ronald Reagan. Before and after that 1980 debate, the media reported on the debate as a clash between Carter’s substance and Reagan’s style. Rowland’s conclusion was that Ronald Reagan, and not Jimmy Carter, won the 1980 debate when one employed the standard of complete, partial, and non answers.

A review of the 2008 Vice-Presidential debate using an independent critic was employed to assess Palin’s argumentation. The evaluator read some samples of answers from previous debate that met the criteria of complete, partial and full answers before assessing the debate transcript. I then followed up that assessment by reviewing the debate to provide a second glimpse at the answers to Ifill’s questions. The finding in this case was that Sarah Palin answered a total of 29 questions for Gwen Ifill. Six of the answers were determined to be full answers. Thirteen of the answers were determined to be partial answers. Finally, ten of the answers were determined to be non answers.

In this particular debate, the widely held expectation that Palin would not answer the questions with the specificity exhibited by Joe Biden was validated. Joe Biden answered 28 questions for Gwen Ifill. Fourteen of his answers were identified as

complete answers. Nine of his answers were determined to be partial answers. And, there were five instances in which Biden did not directly answer Ifill's question. Early on in the debate, Palin suggested that she might not answer the moderators question and she intended to speak directly to the American people. This analysis confirms that she elected to follow that path on numerous occasions during the debate.

Beyond looking at whether Governor Palin answered particular questions, there are some interesting results when one looks at the types of support she uses when addressing questions. Riley and Hollihan produced a content analysis of the arguments in Presidential debates which they applied to a number of debates including the Carter-Reagan debate. Their system was based, in part, on the work of a political scientist, John Ellsworth (1965), who looked for "rational" arguments in the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960. The argument types coded in the Riley and Hollihan essay were clustered into three categories: Analysis: Any statement of a position supported by reasoning and/or discussion of consequences is classified as analysis. Declarative/Declaration: Any statement which neither reasons nor offers a discussion of the consequences nor offers evidence for support of the statement is classified as declaration. Evidence: Any statement that utilizes evidence in a non-analytic fashion to support a position either specially espoused or assumed to be espoused by the candidate is classified as evidence.

The Biden-Palin debate was reviewed to see what types of statements Governor Palin made when responding to the moderator's questions. In the debate, there were 20 instances in which Governor Palin used statements of declaration when addressing Gwen Ifill's questions. There were four instances in which she used analysis to support her statements. The reviewer found no instances in which evidence was deployed by Governor Palin. My review of the transcript found two instances in which Palin used evidence to craft an argument. Joe Biden's argumentation patterned differed significantly from that of the Alaska Governor. The reviewer found one instance of declarative argument, two instances of analysis used to buttress the argument and ten cases in which Biden deployed evidence in support of his claim.

The substantive analysis of this debate resulted in two interesting findings. First, Governor Palin did not answer one-third of the questions asked by the moderator in the debate. Without the moderator controversy that preceded the debate, this might have been the focus of the post-debate commentary. Fortunately for

Governor Palin, Ifill was viewed by many as an opponent rather than a moderator. And, for those of us who have judged more than a few debates, the Vice-Presidential debate looked like a cross-examination period in many intercollegiate debates. Often debaters do their best to avoid answering opposition questions and they are only forced to do so because of the presence of a moderator. For many viewers, the Vice-Presidential debate did not have a moderator, just a series of contestants. So, questions simply went unanswered. Second, in most cases, Governor Palin did not deploy evidence to answer questions. In place of evidence, Governor Palin deployed conclusions without warrants and folksy stories drawn from stump speeches to directly address the American voters.

While this study highlights some shortcoming in Palin's argumentation, it does not presume to declare Biden the winner of the debate. Many voters were probably tuning into the debate for something other than recitation of a substantive set of policy arguments. With the failed mainstream media interviews and the Tina Fey impersonation serving as the backdrop to this event, the expectations for Governor Palin were extraordinarily low and even a marginal performance could have been described as effective. Viewers monitoring the debate in the hopes of watching Palin implode on national television left disappointed. And, given that was the expectation for many of the 70 million viewers, the night was a relative success for Governor Palin.

The debate served as a moment in which Governor Palin elected to remind the audience that she was a mother who was committed to improving the lives of middle class Americans. In this instance, the political handlers let Sarah be Sarah. Rather than defended the policies of Republicans and the Bush Administration, Palin told the voters that she was a soccer mother who polled other soccer mothers about pocketbook issues and she even had a "shout out" for a third grade class assigned to watch the debate. This rhetorical approach allowed Governor Palin to present little if any real evidence for her positions in the debate.

This rhetorical technique served, and continues to serve, Sarah Palin well with the conservative base of the Republican Party. However, the use of personal anecdotes as a replacement for evidence when discussing the economy did little to assure moderate voters that she was capable of leading the country. Her folksy charm was not effective when discussing issues that included Middle East policy and nuclear doctrine (Calellos).

The commentators were quick to point out what Palin herself suggested and this study affirmed; Governor Palin did not engage the moderator's questions. In reviewing the debate the *Los Angeles Times* Media Critic Mary McNamara wrote: "Indeed, with her "bless his/her hearts" and knowing laughs, Palin may have invented an entirely new rhetorical style: random folksiness. Each bit of lighthearted "Sarahness" was followed by a Serious Face as she got down to the issues. Or at least the issues she was comfortable with. . .Palin pronounced early on that she wasn't necessarily going to answer questions but would instead address the American people directly" (McNamara, 2008, p. A16).

Further, this paper hints at an innovative strategy that can be deployed when a candidate with a low national profile and limited experience is pushed onto the national stage. A campaign can succeed when it further exacerbate the asymmetry between debate contestants. By redefining the debate to be a 2 on 1 exchange, the McCain campaign afforded Governor Palin with the ability to effectively ignore questions. In this debate, the moderator was disempowered and elected not to ask follow up questions or press Governor Palin to clarify factual inaccuracies. Perhaps, most importantly for Governor Palin, conservatives viewing the debate were inoculated against the liberal media and its representative, Gwen Ifill, by the controversy in the pre-debate public dialogue.

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