

The most commonly identifiable form of expectation setting once the primaries are over is generally found in the days and weeks leading up to a presidential debate. During this time, campaign operatives praise the opponent's debating skills in hopes that the public will perceive that their candidate did well in comparison, and television analysts discuss what a given candidate must do to "win" the debate (generally driven by his standings in polls). This is where possible effects can emerge.

Numerous examples of pre-debate setting of expectations for presidential nominees appear throughout this study, but one of the best recent examples actually involves vice presidential candidates. On the day of the 2008 vice presidential debate, CBS's coverage spent its time preparing viewers on how to grade the performances of Republican nominee Sarah Palin and Democratic nominee Joe Biden, almost completely ignoring issues in favor of poll numbers and theater criticism. For example, consider this report from Dean Reynolds, introduced by anchor Katie Couric:

COURIC: Dean, with critics of Governor Palin, both Democratic and Republican, questioning her qualifications, the McCain campaign has a lot riding on this debate.

REYNOLDS: That's right. Good evening, Katie. With the economic downturn already having shaken his campaign, John McCain will be watching tonight's vice presidential debate knowing that it could render a critical verdict on his judgment.

Senator JOHN McCAIN (Republican Presidential Nominee): Governor Sarah Palin is going to have a little debate tonight.

REYNOLDS: The signs are not encouraging. Our new CBS News poll shows a sharp drop in support for running mate Sarah Palin, 12 points in less than a month among voters with a favorable opinion of her.

(Graphic on screen)
 CBS News Poll
 Among Registered Voters
 Favorable Views of Sarah Palin
 44% 40% 37% 32%
 9/8 9/17 9/25 Now
 (down arrow) 12 pts.
 Margin of Error 3 Pts

Prepared to be Vice president
 D R
 Sen. Joe 70% Gov. Sarah 38%
 Biden Palin
 Margin of Error 3 pts

REYNOLDS: And compared with the 70 percent who see Democratic vice presidential hopeful Joe Biden as prepared for the job, only 38 percent see Palin that way. Ominously, Palin's ratings have declined sharply among women, as she has been methodically unveiled to the public in a series of high stakes interviews.

(Graphic on screen)
CBS News Poll
Among Women Voters
Favorable Views of Sarah Palin
47% 36% 34% 30%
9/8 9/17 9/25 Now
(down arrow) 12 pts.
Margin of Error 4 Pts

Governor SARAH PALIN (to Katie Couric in earlier interview): I'll try to find you some and I'll bring them to you.

REYNOLDS: Still, McCain has dismissed criticism, including some from conservative quarters, of the Palin pick.

Sen. McCAIN: I fundamentally disagree. Now if there's a Georgetown cocktail party person who, quote, calls himself a "conservative" and doesn't like her, good luck.

REYNOLDS: But now comes word that the McCain campaign has begun re-focusing its resources for the last lap, today pulling its ads and staff from Michigan, lately a Democratic state which McCain had once hoped to turn Republican; but apparently no more. Dean Reynolds, CBS News, Denver.³⁸

Clearly, while the word "expectations" isn't mentioned, viewers are told that because Palin's poll numbers aren't good, she'll need to make a strong impression during the debate (as opposed to letting viewers judge her debate performance on its own merits).

In the story about Biden that immediately follows, CBS reporter Chip Reid goes a step further and invokes expectations, couching the discussion in theater criticism rather than policy:

REID: This is Chip Reid in Lansing, Michigan, where Barack Obama will watch the debate tonight in his hotel room. Obama's team says the secret for Joe Biden is to keep the debate focused on the big picture, Obama and Biden's vision of change, and to do it in Biden's plain-spoken way while avoiding any perception that he's talking down to Palin. Obama aides admit Biden also has to avoid the kinds of gaffes and exaggerations that have caused him so much trouble in the past.

Senator JOE BIDEN: (From file footage) You cannot go to a 7/11 or a Dunkin' Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent.

REID: Today the McCain campaign put this ad on the Internet, using Biden's past statements to suggest he's likely to say something embarrassing tonight.

Even so, expectations for Biden are high. The new CBS News poll shows 50 percent of voters expect him to win the debate, nearly double the percentage for Palin.

(Graphic on screen)
CBS News Poll
Among Registered Voters
Who Do You Expect to Win the Debate
D R
Sen. Joe 50% Gov. Sarah 26%
Biden Palin
Margin of Error 3 Pts

REID: Late today, Obama's campaign manager tried to adjust those expectations.

Mr. DAVID PLOUFFE (Senator Obama's Campaign Manager): You know, Governor Palin is one of the best debaters in American politics.

REID: Now, that may be an overstatement, but the Obama campaign understands that this is a debate that could go either way tonight.³⁹

This is a more straightforward example of a reporter specifically telling viewers what they should expect out of a candidate, in a story completely void of discussion of the issues that might come up in the debate or the positions that the given candidate might take on those issues.

Still, this isn't the most blatant example within this newscast of telling viewers that the performance aspects of the coming debate matter more than substance. In the story immediately after the Palin and Biden stories, veteran CBS commentator Bob Schieffer talks with Couric about what the candidates need to do to "win" the debate:

COURIC: So, Bob, what does Sarah Palin need to do tonight?

SCHIEFFER: I think she needs to reassure voters that she has a basic grasp of the important issues. You know, she made a very good first impression at the Republican convention. But since then, in a series of interviews—many of them with you, Katie—as she's had such great difficulty expressing herself that it is beginning to show in the polls. And her popularity and her ability to be ready, most voters say, it's shrinking in their minds. So she's just got to show that she knows what she's talking about here.

COURIC: Because polls show she's declining in her ability to understand complex issues, as well.

SCHIEFFER: Yes.

COURIC: Meanwhile, what does Joe Biden need not do tonight?

SCHIEFFER: I think the main thing Joe Biden needs to do is just not come off as some sort of blabbermouth who is condescending, who acts like he's some know it all. Joe Biden's a very smart guy. I think if he sticks to the issues and goes after McCain, not Palin, I think it'll be a good night for him.

COURIC: And apparently he's going to be very respectful, call her Governor Palin, and refer to John McCain as John. So it'll be interesting to watch the dynamics.

SCHIEFFER: Absolutely.

COURIC: Bob Schieffer. Bob, thank you so much.⁴⁰