

No, presidential candidates don't usually dodge tough questions: Study analyzed 14 presidential debates

May 16 2016, by Jeff Grabmeier

Nearly everybody thinks that presidential candidates routinely dodge hard-hitting questions, providing evasive answers to simple questions.

But a new study that analyzed the full transcripts of 14 U.S. presidential debates from 1996 to 2012 provides some surprising insights that might temper that belief—and help explain why people believe politicians are evasive.

The research found that [presidential candidates](#) accused their rivals of evasion quite often—54 times in the 14 debates analyzed.

But rivals were actually guilty of some form of evasion no more than 35 percent of the time that they were accused, the study found.

"The candidates aren't really good at accurately identifying when their opponent was evading a question," said David Clementson, author of the study and doctoral student in communication at The Ohio State University.

"In fact, candidates often accuse their opponent of evasion when they themselves are avoiding the question they were asked."

The study appears in the June 2016 issue of the [Journal of Language and Social Psychology](#).

Accusing candidates of evasion is a timeless tactic in political debates, right up to today, Clementson said.

"You have yet to answer a single serious question," Sen. Marco Rubio told Donald Trump during a Republican presidential primary debate on March 3.

Journalists, too, often see candidates as evasive. "Senator, you didn't answer the question," NBC reporter Lester Holt told U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders during the Democratic debate on Jan. 17.

To learn more about presidential candidate evasion, Clementson did a content analysis of 810 question-answer sequences during the 14 presidential debates from 1996 to 2012. He looked specifically for cases where one candidate accused the other of not answering the question asked, dodging the question, or refusing to answer the question.

Accusations of evasion were bipartisan—Democrats made 26 such allegations while Republicans lodged 25.

When Clementson analyzed the answers of candidates when they were accused of evasion, he found that 35 percent of the time they did discuss an off-topic issue during the answer, which indicates evasion. Still, in every case in which they were accused of evasion, the candidates at least briefly mentioned the topic of the question.

"There wasn't any case where the candidate didn't at least make some effort to talk about the question at hand," he said.

But if candidates aren't constantly evading the [questions](#)—at least in debates - why do so many Americans think they are?

Clementson said it may be because of humans' psychological tendency to

believe what they are told, especially by members of their own in-groups - such as members of the same political party.

"When Americans continually hear the [political candidates](#) they support saying that their opponents are dodging the question, they probably have a tendency to believe them," he said.

Many of the accusations of evasion in the debates came when candidates tried to answer questions about controversial issues that come close to evenly dividing the nation, such as gun control.

"We like politicians to take firm stands on controversial issues, but if they do that they won't be successful as politicians and won't often get elected and re-elected," Clementson said.

"It's not surprising that candidates try to straddle the fence to some degree."

Another common situation that provoked accusations of evasion was when the candidates were asked complex questions.

"Analyzing the transcripts, there were times when I laughed out loud, because the candidates were asked amazingly complex questions and given very little time to respond. It is very easy in situations like this to be accused of not answering the question, when they simply don't have the time," Clementson said.

Even if accusations of evasion are often overblown, Clementson said it is understandable why candidates make them about their opponents.

The human desire to be seen as honest and trustworthy may make accusations of evasiveness particularly troublesome to [candidates](#).

"Candidates may have incentives to preemptively accuse their opponents of dodging questions as a way of keeping themselves from being accused," he said.

"And the public's propensity to believe these politicians only serves to make the problem of evasiveness seem worse than it really is."

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: No, presidential candidates don't usually dodge tough questions: Study analyzed 14 presidential debates (2016, May 16) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-presidential-candidates-dont-dodge-tough.html>

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