

# WHY IS DONALD TRUMP SO INSULTING IN THE DEBATES?

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This is a guest post by Robert Mather, Ph.D. Dr. Mather is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, where he directs the *Interpersonal Processes and Social Cognition Lab* and is the chair of the Institutional Review Board. He is a recognized expert in empirical social cognition research on automaticity and cognitive control, attitudes and persuasion, bias correction, stereotypes and discrimination, and leadership. This research has applications in management, consumer behavior, marketing, and forensic science. He has authored three books and over thirty articles.

## Why is Donald Trump so Insulting in the Debates?



This year's election for President of the United States has been rather unique. Businessman Donald Trump has developed into the Republican front-runner as the possible nominee, and the voters have seen a different brand of rhetoric, particularly on the Republican debate stage. Here I suggest a few social cognitive phenomena that Donald Trump has working to his advantage in the debates. But first, let's define a few terms.

**Working memory capacity** is the size of our consciousness—it is that spotlight of attention, and it grows and shrinks with our physiological arousal. That is, when we get worked up, excited, or sprint up a flight of stairs, it decreases and gives us less to work with in processing information.

**Emotional contagion** happens when one person's emotion gets transferred to another person. Perhaps I empathize with your sadness, and now the emotion has moved from me to you.

**Behavioral confirmation** happens when one person's expectations brings about that behavior in another person. I think you are mad at me, and I ask you if you are mad at me until you finally yell "NO!" in frustration. An interesting thing about behavioral confirmation is that it is the interpersonal mechanism that makes all of the little things we think about AND our nonverbal behaviors very important. This mechanism can escalate small things into big things between two individuals. But it is adaptive as a behavioral mechanism because it makes the world more predictable to us. If I think you are a jerk and it turns out that you are one to me, then I knew how to handle you from the start—even if you wouldn't have been one if not for my expectation of you!

The **Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion** tells us that we have two routes to persuasion. First, we have a central route where we are persuaded by strong, high quality arguments. We like to think we are in that critical-thinking route most of the time. But the other route is the peripheral route to persuasion, where we are persuaded by the bells and whistles and shiny objects. When we aren't highly involved with an issue, are tired, or just don't care much about thinking, this is our route. We use it much more than we would like to think.

So, here is what works for Donald Trump in the debates. First, he **insults a rival**. It can't just be a "your policy sucks" type of insult. It needs to be one that hurts, like "Little Marco" and "Liar Ted" type insults. They also need to be cast at the rival during the rival's turn to speak. How insulting, right? But it does the trick. It infuriates the rival, which does two things. First, it decreases the working memory capacity of the rival. The rival is now left with a substantially diminished capacity to process information, not to mention the fact that different associative networks of knowledge have been activated by the change in mood. Second, the infuriated rival now has nonverbal cues to their upset emotion leaking all over the place in their facial expressions, posture, and body movements. These cues make the emotion contagious to the crowd. As Donald Trump, if I insult your candidate, **I insult you**. And if you insult me back, you have offended my people. Now none of you are thinking clearly and the stage is set for a barrage of broad statements that lack substance—perfect for the peripheral route of persuasion. But the audience only moves into that diminished capacity if the rival truly gets upset, so it must be a legitimate, provoking insult.

So the strategy is simple: Insult a rival, decrease working memory capacity, put the debate on your terms. Because of behavioral confirmation, that predictably dynamic old friend, you can count on everyone playing their roles exactly as they should. The debate rival and audience are the recipients of the emotional contagion (anger), working memory capacity predictably decreases, and everyone is in a peripheral route to persuasion. All you have to do now is to supply the broad, boastful message, and everything works perfectly. In fact, if you are really good at it, you create such a shift in the associative networks of memory that everything in the debate is encoded far away from the central route stuff, so that the amateur fact checkers won't even know what happened the next day because they are back to issues and policy. Congratulations, you just tricked an entire group of people, including the people who support you.

If you notice in all of the Republican debates so far, this strategy plays out and the cycles within the debate get shorter and shorter during the debate, then level off and decrease in the last half of the debate.

But Donald Trump may not be aware of this at all. If I was a political advisor to him, and if I were to ignore all ethical tendencies that I have (full disclosure, I am the Chair of our research ethics board at my university, so dropping my ethics is not negotiable to me, Mr. Trump), I would tell him to use this to his advantage. Take the debate, make it predictable, and persuade people on your terms. Get back to policy and issues the next morning. However, there is a very good chance that Donald Trump does not consciously do this. As a businessman, he may have found that this strategy works for him and just does it naturally because it is effective. Or he could have been naturally good at it and that made him good in business negotiations. But watch what happens when he gets visibly upset while under attack. He is the fastest to recover from it, and gets back to clear thinking, which gives him a TREMENDOUS advantage in getting back to his peripheral route message and controlling the debate.

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