Framing the Great Divide: How the Candidates and Media Framed
Class and Inequality During the 2012 Presidential Debates

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Chapter I

Introduction

America’s Identity Crisis

A defining cultural belief has been that in America, although there are recognized economic differences, opportunity is available equally to all, and that anyone can reach great heights of wealth and power. At one time, most Americans would have insisted that access to power, success, and the hope of upward mobility would not hinge upon class distinctions and limitations. However, that thinking has been unraveling since even before the Great Recession. Today, journalists, scholars, and social activists discuss an increasing gap in resources and opportunity between the 1 percent and the 99 percent, concluding that America is an increasingly divided society comprised of the hyper-rich few and everyone else. America is undergoing an identity crisis. Unlike other countries with historical understandings of class structure, America’s denial of the limiting nature of class makes space for the framing and re-framing of class by those with the power and inclination to do so. Therefore, a study of the framing of class as a political tool is valuable because it encourages better objectivity and more critical reporting of this type of political communication.

In 2005, a team of reporters from the New York Times conducted a yearlong investigation into class in America. The study culminated in an 11-part series dissecting the impact of class standing on the lives, hopes, and opportunities available to Americans. In 2005, Americans appeared to accept easily the reality that class distinctions did exist, but the decreasing likelihood of upward mobility was not, at this time, on the public’s radar. The New York Times reporters, Janny Scott and David Leonhardt (2005), asserted that a decrease of mobility was a fact regardless of whether or not it had come to our collective attention. Also of note is that the
reporters suggested that, at that time, class standing was replacing race and ethnicity as the determinant of unequal access to opportunity. A reduction of the possibility for class fluidity and the rise of the importance of class standing were shadowy realities threatening America’s historic identity as a classless society and the land of equal opportunity.

In the election year of 2012, the Pew Research Center published two reports that revealed more of the shifting realities and perceptions of class in America. In the first report Pew confirmed an increasing “stickiness at the ends” of the economic spectrum (Pew Charitable Trust, 2012, p. 2). That stickiness meant that the rich and the poor were more likely to stay in the same class than ever before. Additionally, the overall distribution of wealth in America, and the most dramatic increases in wealth from parent to child, had happened primarily at the very top of the economic ladder (Pew Charitable Trust, 2012; Monheit, 2012). The gap between the very wealthy and all other classes had expanded into a greater divide than ever before. In the second report Pew stated that there also was more awareness of “class conflict” according to respondents from all demographic levels in America, and that the tensions between the have and the have nots had indeed overtaken all other social divisions in intensity, including that of race and ethnicity (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2012, para. 3).

Economic inequality is a natural outcome of capitalism (Mohandesi, 2013). However, severe inequality jeopardizes America’s overall economic health as well as its standing amidst an increasing number of competitive economies worldwide. Max Weber wrote that tough economic times will produce intensified class awareness and conflict (Weber, 1946). This was true for the public in 2012. According to Pew findings, indeed there was heightened awareness of class divisions, particularly between the extremely wealthy and all others. Would, however, the sober realities of reduced available wealth, opportunity, and mobility as reported by Pew, and the
disproportionate percentage of resources controlled by a very small group atop the economic ladder, appear in the words of the candidates, their campaigns, or specifically within the rhetoric of the debates?

During the presidential debates that year, President Barack Obama and Former Governor Mitt Romney grounded their arguments for economic prosperity firmly in their partisan ideologies. The rhetoric centered on the post-recession state of the iconic American middle class. This research will show that the American middle class is more of an idea than a true class of people linked together by any shared experience or values (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2008). The group called the middle class by the candidates, its function in the economy, its post-recession plight, and its economic responsibilities stood center stage as the country prepared to vote on whose ideology might bring about lasting economic recovery for America.

The Emerging Class Struggle

The 2012 presidential debates were unique in many ways. The election would determine who would preside over the most diverse populace in American history (Frey, 2012). In addition, the 2012 debates were the first to be conducted after the Great Recession, the birth of the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon, and the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark Citizens United decision. Beginning in late 2007, the Great Recession fell hardest on the middle, working, and poor classes, producing record unemployment rates and business failures while the wealthy held steady or even increased their wealth (Monheit, 2012). The gap in resources between the top and lower rungs of the economic ladder broadened (Pew Charitable Trust, 2012). Occupy Wall Street emerged in New York City’s Zuccotti Park, directing its protest against the wealthy 1 percent and Wall Street, declaring that rather than facing just a fiscal crisis, America was facing
a greater, underlying crisis of inequality (Gitlin, 2012). Although Occupy, in its original form, faded from news coverage, it nonetheless contributed to the national discussion regarding economic class (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2012). Finally, in the summer of 2010 the Supreme Court, in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee*, rendered a landmark decision that eliminated any cap on money donated to or spent by Political Action Committees, or PACs (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee*, 2010), and allowed anonymity for PAC donors. As a result, the wealthiest stakeholders were permitted to pour more money into this election than any other time in history, financing a flood of ugly and aggressive television ads for which the candidates had no accountability. The privilege of anonymity provided to the donors of large sums and the elevation of a corporation to the status of personhood contributed to the cultural context surrounding the issue of economic class in 2012.

**The Elite Speaker**

The media, government officials, and elected politicians are considered elite speakers in a cultural discourse or conversation. These elite speakers engage in a mostly one-way conversation with the public, exploiting their power to selectively frame events or ideas in order to further their political agenda (Entman, 2004). They are positioned to frame how issues will be perceived, processed, and acted upon in our culture (Entman, 2004). Consequently, the frames of the powerful can become the frames of the public at large. Because political frames serve the purposes of power, or the search for power, much can be learned from observing what is communicated within these frames, and what is not.

This research explores the framing of class by yet another set of elite speakers. A great diversity of news sources exists for average citizens to access analysis and commentary on political issues (Moy, Bimber, Rojecki, Xenos & Iyengar, 2012). This “balkanization of the
media landscape” intensifies the competition for viewership and the economic necessities of retaining advertisers (Moy et al., 2012, p. 252). As a consequence, a news source may focus more on conflict, drama, or partisan rhetoric than they might on substance (Cook, 1998; Entman, 2004; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Some blame the competitive media marketplace for contributing to an increasing partisanship of the media and the viewing public as well (Iyengar, 2005). A news source may choose to cater to a narrow ideology, and their loyal viewership may never sample opposing ideas, firmly entrenching into a particular political party’s viewpoint (Moy et al., 2012). An increase in media partisanship is another cultural context in which the 2012 debates occurred (Hertzberg, 2012), since the vast majority of people rely on the media to explain and make clear what has been said during a debate (Cook, 1998; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003).

Although the Internet, as a news source, surged dramatically in popularity, cable stations remain the most popular source for news for the majority of viewers (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2012). According to the Pew study, cable news topped the list of television sources of campaign news by 24 percent—the largest grouping—of Americans. Therefore, this research examines selected cable media coverage immediately following each debate, specifically as it relates to interpreting or reframing the idea of class.

The Great Divide

Humans create groups, or classes, of themselves and others in order to make sense of the world and to identify their place in it. This process naturally brings about an *us* and *them*, which must involve the inclusion of some, and exclusion of all others. Categorizing by class provides a shortcut to an understanding or perception of the other by referring to whatever characteristics were utilized in creating the class in the first place. It is possible then to make time-effective
distinctions and assumptions and thereby draw conclusions about them. The potency of classing can be used to enhance and enrich life. However, it may also do great harm especially when those conclusions and exclusions result in reduced opportunity, increased risks, and diminished quality of life (Beck, 2013). The Great Divide in America between the 1% and the 99% is one such result of the functions of class. This research was intended to examine the framing of class from elite communicators in a culture whose mythology had previously encouraged a denial of class hierarchy, yet in 2012, possessed inequality of opportunity and personal efficacy that surpassed that of other advanced democracies.

My research goal was to consider the presidential debate texts and a random sample of media texts, as an archive that could be mined for symbols and signifiers of meaning for American cultural understandings of class and inequality at this point in history (McKee, 2003). I hope to add to what has been done in this important area of communication research and in some way encourage what will come after.
Chapter II

Literature Review

Presidential Debate as Genre

The American presidential debate is the most distilled of all political campaign events; a unique rhetorical and political engagement in which the two candidates meet face-to-face, are broadcast live, frame their vision for the country and counter-frame each other (Minow, 2012; Schroeder, 2012). Few voters will ever see a presidential candidate in person, therefore television, and the debate event in particular, serves as a primary source of information about the candidates (Hertzberg, 2012). Despite the intensive preparation, scripting, and carefully negotiated rules and protocols, the candidates at least appear vulnerable and accessible to the voters. These reasons alone make the debates important to the spirit of the democratic process (Schroeder, 2012).

Candidates participate in live debates at some risk to themselves and their parties. A bad debate moment can, and has, cost candidates a race (Fallows, 2012). President Carter and President Ford were ridiculed for comments made during a debate. Likewise, former Vice President Walter Mondale believed that he lost the race the very moment that he fell prey to Reagan’s superior wit and timing (Gordon, 2012). For this reason, the presidential debate has undergone a refining process since the first televised debate was broadcast in 1960. Although debates have always been highly structured and rehearsed political events, in 2008 Senators Barack Obama and John McCain engaged in a new debate format that experts believed was designed to allow for greater argumentation and substance for the benefit of the viewer (Jarman, 2010; Minow, 2012).
Some political scientists view debates as more of an interaction between a campaign’s messages and the viewer’s established biases. These viewer biases are rooted more in personal experience rather than thought-out opinion (Cho & Ha, 2012), and it is in the realm of feelings and personal experiences where frames will resonate and most political decisions will be made (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). However, the actual effect of any presidential debate is the subject of much study, including whether or not the debate itself will in any way influence voting decisions (Jarman, 2010; Jomini Stroud, Stephens, & Pye, 2011). Communications researchers, who study the effects of framing upon the viewer, regard debate viewers as having filtered information through an internal value structure that can be triggered by how a message is stated, or how an idea is framed (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). This internal network of feelings and attitudes in the audience is the target of the candidates and their campaign messages (Entman, 2004; Reese, 2007). Scholars suggest that the viewer filters the carefully crafted arguments expressed in a debate through a “partisan lens” that they possess long before the candidates say anything (Cho & Ha, 2012, p. 185).

This thesis specifically studied the debate texts as a point of origin for the frames of class and inequality that circulated during the 2012 debates. In keeping with the practices of textual analysis, it was taken into consideration that the presidential debate is a genre with rules and functions that are different from other genres of communication (McKee, 2003). First, it is public communication designed to influence at a particular time in a particular place. It is political in that it is shrewdly constructed in order to exert influence (Politic [Def. 2], n.d.). Additionally, it is a genre of “high modality,” in that it is of great importance to the lives of the audience (McKee, 2003, p. 97). The debate is a dramatic narrative in which two candidates spar and the stakes are the American presidency and the future of the country. The debate is a perfect
opportunity for political elites to begin the circulation of their chosen communications frames. Most importantly, the debate may, in effect, be the platform for the greater conversation which ensues after the debate is over, through news analysis and reporting as well as the conversation in the public square (K. E. Kendall, 1997; Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012).

**Media as Political Actor**

The media coverage that follows a debate can have a measurable effect on the interaction between the frames constructed by the politicians and the viewer’s internal frames by changing or solidifying opinion (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Pingree et al., 2012). Notably, the term *actor* is used to describe those who play a role in politics. Politics exists as a form of storytelling, the portrayal of a convincing drama that has plot, a problem to be solved, a villain who is responsible, and a hero who will save the day (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Media participate as another set of actors on the stage along with the candidates and their campaigns (Cook, 1998; Gotlieb, Nah, & McLeod, 2007; K. E. Kendall, 1997). Scholars studying media analysis immediately following debates support the characterization of the press as political actor. They conclude that viewing post-debate coverage interrupts the process of reflection and consideration that facilitates informed decision-making, especially if that coverage is partisan or appeals to ideology rather than parsing policies (Entman, 2004; Minow, 2012; Pingree et al., 2012).

Accompanying a lack of reflection on the part of the average citizen is the increasing partisan polarization of news outlets that results from increased competition for readers/viewers. Economic need can drive a news source to specialize in a particular bias in order to attract an audience. The news outlet successfully generating a profitable biased niche for itself will continue down that road having no economic reason to do otherwise thus creating a limit to the
political opinion available to the public (Gerth & Siegert, 2012; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This condition is problematic for a democracy that prizes freedom of opinion and speech, yet needs consensus in order to solve problems (Moy et al., 2012). A polarized opinion, repeatedly enforced by viewing ideologically biased news analysis, may actually suppress the possibility of compromise within an audience member.

The media function as our culture’s political communication bloodstream (D’Angelo, 2012), moving the framing of issues, ideas, and ideology through the system in the form of news stories, analysis, and commentary. William Schudson, a professor of Journalism at Columbia University, wrote in his book The Sociology of News that the role of news media is that of “cultural actors . . . as producers and messengers of meaning, symbols, and messages” (Schudson, 2011, p. 17). Schudson refuted the pre-cable news, pre-Internet belief that media indoctrinates its audience, and he redefined the role of media as a context for, as well as a speaker in our cultural conversation. His view encapsulates both the shifting strata in public discourse brought about by the Internet, as well as the unique power that media possess as speaker. News media transmit information to a large audience, with an “aura of legitimacy” along with a frame, or bias (Schudson, 2011, p. 19).

Therein lies the rationale for including media frames of class in this study, and the extent to which power is examined. For although the average individual possesses more power than ever in the cultural conversation today, thanks to social media, she is still eclipsed by the elites who dominate access to a wide audience (Chalaby, 2000). It is worthwhile to examine power, to heighten awareness of its reach, and to be critical of the bias that may be found in media (Entman, 2004; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Rather than explaining and informing the public for the good of all and to support the free flow of ideas, the media might engage in producing
news as an exercise of its own power and, because of its position as Schudson’s cultural speaker and context, simply advance the agenda of elites (Kumar, 2001). The unfortunate result is that the issues of economic inequality inherent in issues of class receive short shrift in coverage, and the interests of the powerless are abandoned (Entman, 2004; Kumar, 2001). The real danger exists that the media’s role in democracy is undermined when it presents information and frames driven by partisanship or advertising (Chalaby, 2000). Therefore the mediation of political framing and media framing must factor into my exploration of class in 2012 (Iyengar, 2005).

Frame Analysis

The first conceptualization of the frame is credited to Erving Goffman who wrote *Frame Analysis* from a socio/psychological perspective in 1974. The question at hand was, what is reality anyway? He traced the roots of the conceptualization of the frame to William James and Gregory Bateson, who used the metaphors *brackets of perception*, and *frames* respectively, to explain how we cope with life and shape the chaos it offers (Goffman, 1974). Goffman’s sociological study of frames as internal mental mechanisms easily transfers over into the study of mass communication because of the “overlapping conceptions” of frames as mechanisms for understanding life, or understanding what is communicated (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 57). The frame is a selection, an exclusion of some data and the inclusion of other data in order to shape a message and create meaning for purposes of political influence, or simply to facilitate ease of transmission, as in a short news story (Reese, 2007). The communication frame serves to streamline information, excluding nonessentials and including whatever is salient to the speaker’s purpose. Therefore, the communication frame transmits meaning (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007b; D’Angelo, 2012), in an easily understandable and adoptable package. Frame analysis is the process of studying how that is done, identifying the
parts and functions, or even measuring the effects of a frame (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). The field of frame analysis crosses the disciplinary borders of sociology and communications and can also be found in science, anthropology, psychology, and other fields (Reese, 2007). Some argue that this pliability presents a problem for the field, that frame analysis needs a common construct and methods of measuring in order to mature as a discipline (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Others believe the diversity to be the very strength of the field, and suggest that framing be declared a program, or project, rather than place upon it the expectations of a paradigm (D’Angelo, 2012; Entman, 1993; Reese, 2007).

Either way, the idea of a message being framed or placed into a particular context is something easily understood by anyone, which contributes to the popular use of frame analysis in a variety of fields. The pliability of frame analysis, or its universality, provides a niche into which this research on the issue of class fits. Significant quantitative research of political discourse has been conducted using frame analysis to study how media frames effect viewers. This research focuses on the point of origin of the frames utilized by elites in the presidential debate cycle and additionally, on a concept that is little visited in communications research—that of the framing of economic class.

Some studies tend to view frames as themes, and quantify the number of appearances of a particular theme in the mediated frames produced during a specific political event. For example, the December 2012 issue of American Behavioral Scientist dedicated itself to five such empirical studies that shared data from one direct democratic vote in Switzerland (D’Angelo, 2012). The studies hoped to reveal the entire flow of framing from the elite, to the media, to the public (Matthes, 2012). Scholars in the Swiss study labeled these frames as the “rule of law” frame, the “people’s final say” frame, and the “mass naturalization” frame (Gerth & Siegert, 2012). The
identification of the frame as theme facilitated quantitative research, but also focused on the
theme as the entire meaning being communicated. This is a linguistic and constructionist
conceptualization of the frame that looks at how the frame is formed by word choices and the
placement of words within a phrase (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Reese, 2007). However, there can be
far more meaning to be found within a frame than its theme alone.

For example, other scholars add to the conceptualization of the frame by viewing it as an
extension of the speaker’s power (Entman, 2004; D. Kendall, 2005). In this conceptualization,
the elite speaker has the ability to create an issue with framing, to create an identity or bring
cultural attention to an idea or issue. Effectively the speaker places the frame within a certain
context and makes it a cultural reality (Schudson, 2011). This conceptualization of creating
issues and directing focus and action on the part of an elite is at the heart of a presidential debate,
and possibly at the heart of the news source coverage of said debate if indeed “market pressure”
has polarized that source (Gerth & Siegert, 2012, p. 280). The power-based active
conceptualization of framing, whether media or politician creates the frame, takes into
consideration frame features such as place, person, position, and purpose (Carragee & Roefs,
2004; Entman, 2004). Governor Mitt Romney’s secretly recorded statement about the 47 percent
of Americans who receive help from the U.S. government demonstrates this power
conceptualization, and serves as an example how something unplanned by an elite can become a
powerful frame and be infused into public discourse.

Extremely wealthy businessperson Mitt Romney (person) as Republican presidential
candidate (position) was framing class for a group of millionaires at private political fundraiser
(place, purpose) five months before the election. It was secretly recorded and released to the
public by David Corn of Mother Jones to discredit candidate Romney (purpose). I have included the question that Romney was answering when the 47 percent frame was born for context.

**Audience member:** For the last three years, all everybody’s been told is, “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of you.” How are you going to do it, in two months before the elections, to convince everybody you’ve got to take care of yourself?

**Romney:** There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it. That, that’s an entitlement, and the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what. And I mean, the president starts off with 48, 49, 48—he starts off with a huge number. These are people who pay no income tax. Forty-seven percent of Americans pay no income tax. So our message of low taxes doesn’t connect. And he’ll be out there talking about tax cuts for the rich. I mean that’s what they sell every four years. And so my job is not to worry about those people—I’ll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives. What I have to do is convince the 5 to 10 percent in the center that are independents that are thoughtful, that look at voting one way or the other depending upon in some cases emotion, whether they like the guy or not, what it looks like. (Corn, 2012, p. 10)

In this now iconic election event, Romney claimed that he could do nothing with 47 percent of the population—the *takers* according to his running mate Paul Ryan—in America who would look to the government for a handout, and contribute nothing in return. Thusly framed,
Romney asserted that this 47 percent would vote for President Obama by default, in order to keep the handouts coming (Corn, 2012). When released to the public at large, the frame communicated that Romney was disconnected from, and was scornful of nearly half of America.

This example illustrates that the frame can be far more complex than a mere statement of theme. The many facets of this frame demonstrate how the person, their position, power, purpose, and the place can all contribute to the meaning of the frame. This inadvertent—in that Romney never intended it to reach the public as it did—frame produced by the viral broadcasting of the Mother Jones tape may have caused his defeat in the election by solidifying his status as a member of the Occupy movement’s 1 percent and as antagonistic to anyone who received government help in any form. The very words 47 percent became a heuristic (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003) for the press and the public, a shortcut to lasting political meaning composed of only two words. As seen in this powerful example, the frame gives shape to ideas, creates a storyline of sorts, can alter the meaning of facts, or become facts in the mind of the listener (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). The 47 percent frame solidified and magnified the issue of wealth discrepancy among Americans at the time of the 2012 debates and became a persistent part of the political discourse in the election cycle possibly trumping any competing frame of Romney as compassionate and able to understand the lives of everyday people. Because the frame is a selection, a conceptual exclusion and inclusion, done with the intention of exerting influence (Gamson, 1985; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Schudson, 2011), it is important to consider its success in competing with opposing frames for dominance (Chong & Druckman, 2007b).
Frames and Power

I closely followed the work of Robert Entman on the nature, composition, and actions of elite communications frames. In the article “The Media’s Role in America’s Exceptional Politics of Inequality,” Entman examined, alongside lead writer Carole Bell, the media complicity in packaging the Bush tax cuts as beneficial for all Americans when in fact the tax cuts were skewed toward the wealthiest (Bell & Entman, 2011). The article also explored the American voter’s penchant for political or religious ideology over individual interest in the formation of political opinion. Entman’s book *Projections of Power* (2004) explicated his cascade model for examining how frames move down the cascade from elites to the general public. The book, in specific, examines how the Bush administration framed the war on terror. The cascade activation model illustrates how political frames travel through national discourse, and how those frames can be adopted by the public and their meaning embedded in the cultural ethos (Reese, 2007). Any frame is one of an entire library of frames that together constitute a culture, the collective ways in which a people group think and perceive and act (Entman, 1993).

Entman’s work provides academic grounding for my own scholarly concern for the growing economic inequality in America. His thinking is grounded in Goffman’s original conception, that frames are how we make sense of and structure the “social world” in relation to ourselves (Entman, 1993, p. 248). In other words, framing or bracketing is how we stay in control of the chaos and perceived threats that the countless moving parts of the social world present. His writing indicts the unethical use of the frame by those who are powerful. In their hands the frame can create realities of inequality.

Entman’s work supports the establishment of the media as political elite, the assertion that media can be partisan, and also the research design of textual analysis. As seen in the
methodology section, I conducted my analysis of explicit frames according to Entman’s (2004) classifications and functions of frames. Entman presented two categories of frames, the procedural and the substantive. According to Entman, substantive frames function to *diagnose conditions as problematic, identify causes or perpetrators, convey moral judgment, and endorse remedies*. Substantive frames are at the heart of the frame war that is the presidential debate. The candidates will identify problems for the nation, identify the other candidate or his ideology as at fault, proclaim how bad it is, and endorse himself or herself as the one to fix all of it. In contrast, procedural frames are about technique and legitimacy (Entman, 2004). A procedural frame focuses on, for example, which candidate used body language to their best advantage, or displayed the most capacity to understand the lives of regular people, or appeared more presidential in demeanor. Additionally the procedural frame can appear in the media as what is called “horserace” coverage of the debates. This kind of coverage focuses on polling and perceptions of a candidate’s advantage or disadvantage among certain voters (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004). Regardless, the procedural frame can have impact on the viewer despite having no value in generating political thought or knowledge (Entman, 2004).

**Entman’s Cascade Model**

An important function of the political frame is to move the public’s attention along desired lines of thought or belief and to create consensus. Entman conceived of this process as a cascade of resonance, or “activation” (Entman, 2004, p. 6). That which is emphasized within the frame spreads out from its origin with the elite speakers, politicians, and administration officials, through the news media and down the cascade into the consciousness and conversation of the general public, as seen in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Entman’s Cascading Activation Model. Retrieved from R. Entman, 2003, Cascading activation: Contesting the White House’s frames after 9/11, Political Communication, 20, 415-432.

The frame originates at the top of the cascade on the elite levels: the Administration in power, other elites such as Congress and staff, and media sources. Those elite frames cascade down to the public acting as a mechanism that attempts to activate “clusters” (Entman, 2004, p. 7) of ideas and impressions that may be stored in the mind of the voter, especially the undecided voter in the case of the 2012 election. Although the public can send frames back up the cascade through polling and other means as shown in the cascade diagram, the primary direction of the cascade is from the top down. This research focuses on the origin point of the activation, the
very creation of the political frame as spoken by the candidates for president of the United States, and by the media. Once activated, the clusters will attract other ideas and make connections that then inform voter action. Former Governor Romney’s 47 percent comments were reiterated countless times by the media at the upper levels of the cascade. This could, in theory, activate a response in an audience member at the bottom of the cascade regarding the loss of a job, or the dependence they have had on the national safety net for any reason or any period of time, and grow into the conviction that Romney would not understand their circumstances. In this example the order of things becomes key (Entman, 2004). Ideas are activated and the connections are made between them as events unfold. The frame war of an election is all about the stacking of one idea upon another, and the timing is everything.

Frames will be judged effective in their influence by the “cultural resonance” they create and “magnitude” of that resonance as they activate thoughts and feelings in the listeners (Entman, 2004, p. 6). Entman wrote that repetition and prominence are what contribute to frame magnitude and thereby its ability to influence and activate or connect with other ideas. The 47 percent as an event was entirely out of the control of either candidate yet rippled through the election-time discourse with great magnitude and resonance. Simple word combinations such as “middle class,” “poor children,” and “those at the top,” or the selective use of the word “family” are shortcuts to cultural meaning and resonance and also constitute a frame.

Class

Class is a template for economic thinking as well as the structural result of the operations of an economy (Olin-Wright, 1996; Wright, 2005). Economic class is a way of locating and grouping one another in understandable ways related to the means of production and ownership in the marketplace (Aronowitz, 1999; Wacquant, 2013; Weber, 1946; Wright, 2005). That
schema of thinking has ramifications within a culture that result in concrete lived realities that will differ depending on where the individual dwells on the class spectrum (Wright, 2005). Therefore, class determines a person’s chances in life, their status and personal agency, their attitudes and behaviors (Weber, 1946). The terms economic class and social class seem to be used interchangeably by scholars in the literature on class. The two descriptors may simply be looking at the same thing from a different perspective; one perspective views an objective spot on the income ladder (economic); the other the power, or powerlessness, which becomes a lived experience on different places on the spectrum (social; Wright, 2005). That “lived experience” will differ from culture to culture because class is a subjective social construct, somehow agreed upon by the members of a society or culture (Olin-Wright, 1996, p. 695). In other words the groups that we place ourselves into as they affect our lives, or our voting, are interpretations, not an empirical fact (McKee, 2003).

Additionally, class is a process, a grouping that is made from the active relationships between classes to each other and the resources of the market place (Mohandesi, 2013). In other words, class is fluid. As a structure for lived experiences, and as a schema for thinking, it evolves and is shaped by historical forces (Beck, 2013; Mohandesi, 2013). Class is also relational. A class does not exist but in relation to another class (Mohandesi, 2013). It determines how one stands in relation to production and resources but will also inform how one stands in relation to other members of a culture or society, how one may be included or excluded from a class and its features.

Class is a societal, mutually accepted interpretation that can be manipulated by those in power in order to maintain power or effect whatever change they desire (Bourdieu, 1987; Weber, 1946). Pierre Bourdieu wrote that in this respect class is a
Symbolic manipulation of groups [that] finds a paradigmatic form in political strategies whereby, by virtue of their objective position situated half-way between the two poles of the space, standing in a state of unstable equilibrium and wavering between two opposed alliances, the occupants of the intermediate positions of the social field are the object of completely contradictory classification by those who try, in the political struggle, to win them over to their side, [making them, essentially,] servants of capital. (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 12)

Those who occupy the objective space discussed by Bourdieu, between the poles in a state of disequilibrium, sound very like the middle class so frequently referred to in the debates and upon whose votes a win in the election was said to hinge. That economic group remained undefined by any elite speaker, yet was the primary target of the rhetoric, so much so that the state of the middle class could even appear in foreign policy segments of the debates. It may be possible that in the 2012 presidential debates the conceptualizations of class—specifically the middle—may have been used for the purpose described by Bourdieu, positioning the middle class, via framing explicit or implicit, as the servants of capital.

In 1999, Stanley Aronowitz wrote about the divergence of wealth and resources between 2 percent of the American population and the rest. He predicted that the wealth gap would continue to grow. He also believed that, despite the American “denial” of class at the time of his writing, class consciousness and struggle might still loom large as an influence on the country’s future. *Class Denial and Class Renewal in America* was written at the end of the last century, during the years of prosperity before 9/11, the two wars in the Middle East, and a litany of corporate destruction. Aronowitz wrote that in the late 1990s, class division was only of interest to those he called the “corporate capitalist class” (Aronowitz, 1999, p. 207). That the corporate
capitalist class had promulgated, through sponsorship of foundations, organizations, and political parties, “business values . . . as common sense, not as ideology” and had achieved both “moral and intellectual leadership” in America (Aronowitz, 1999, p. 208). Pointedly, Aronowitz asked in 1999,

Will the conditions for class formation in the political and cultural sense emerge in the 21st century . . . when millions have been driven from good jobs and from the land, when the safety net is more full of holes, and when the liberal state no longer mediates between the individual and the vicissitudes of the economic order but rather defends the economic order from its victims [emphasis added]? (p. 208)

The Middle Class

In 2008, the Pew Research Center released a report entitled America’s Four Middle Classes. Respondents that described themselves as middle class in this study fell into four categories: top of class, satisfied middle, anxious middle, and struggling middle. The Pew determined that the middle class is

An amalgam of distinct groups that share different outlooks on life and life experiences, a blend of young and old, black, white and Latino, optimists and pessimists, achievers and dreamers, those who are barely hanging on to the “middle class dream” and those who are living it fully. (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2008, p. 1)

In other words, being a member of the middle class is a self-ascribed, actually preferred economic identity (Curtis, 2013), possibly due to the “stigma that some might associate either with the upper or lower class labels” (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2008, p. 20). Therefore being middle class is open to definitions that are not necessarily attached to particular income levels or shared life experience.
According to the Pew report, the top of class consists of mostly educated males in highly skilled occupations such as doctors or lawyers who have little to no concern over the future of their incomes. This middle has a strong belief that individual effort factors largely in financial success. The top of class represents 19 percent of Americans and 35 percent of this wide-ranging middle class. The anxious middle has all the perks of top of class but remain worried about finances. The satisfied middle are, as the name implies, content with their circumstances. They are primarily older and very young American adults. The smallest constituency of the broad middle is the struggling middle. This group had more in common with what might have been previously called a lower class. It is primarily made up of minorities and women. The anxious and satisfied middles represent 23 percent and 25 percent of the self-ascribed middle respectively, and seem to be more truly middle class than the other two. The struggling middle is only 17 percent of this vast middle (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2008).

In August of 2012, just prior to the debates, the Pew published another report on the middle class following the lost decade, during which the middle shrunk in numbers, lost ground in income and wealth, and “shed some but not all, of its characteristic faith in the future” (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2012, p. 1). Most of this diverse middle blamed Congress and financial institutions for the country’s economic problems, and one-third of the middle were independents that did not believe that any party had their interest in mind. According to the Pew report, on the eve of the debates, both candidates were polling dead even in the opinion of this scattered middle class.
Global Shifts in Class

Some sociologists believe that class can no longer be analyzed as a regional or national concept, but must be considered as a global phenomenon (Beck, 2013; Monheit, 2012; Stiglitz, 2013). Additionally, they introduce the idea of a corporate capitalist class, conceptualized as a global ruling class to whom national boundaries do not matter (Aronowitz, 1999; Beck, 2013; Bourdieu, 1987; Codevilla, 2010; Devine, 1997). It is also interesting to note that the United States, as the nation of the elite speakers that are the focus of this research, has become one of the least egalitarian of the advanced democracies (Monheit, 2012; Stiglitz, 2013). America, in that case, has moved far from its origins as an exceptional nation among all others with regards to equality of opportunity (Aronowitz, 1999). This must be taken into consideration as a facet of any research that looks into the dominant elite framing of class in a country, and a globe, in transition away from previously accepted conceptualizations and understandings of class and opportunity to new conceptualizations that are early in development and not yet thoroughly examined.

In 2012, at the time of the election, if we take in to consideration a ruling class suggested by the sociologists above, America had a struggling economy and troubled middle class, all of which may have been effectively overseen by a class that was, as Former Governor Romney said in the first debate on October 3, 2012, immune to any form of government. “High income people are doing fine in this economy. They’ll do fine whether you’re president or I am” (Obama & Romney, 2012a). These high income people were, oddly, doing fine at a time when the middle class, proclaimed at the heart of the American economy, was at the same time being “crushed” (Biden & Ryan, 2012). This is a stark difference of circumstance that merits exploration. Any discussion of this capitalist class asserted by sociologists, or the growing
inequalities evidenced by the Pew studies, were glaringly absent from the debates, the very absence of which invites more study.

The sociologist Ulrich Beck wrote that the 21st century is proving thus far to be a time of exploding global inequalities. He cautioned that the social sciences must adjust from dependence time-honored “class logic” (Beck, 2013, p. 66). It appears that the field of sociology is in a debate over how class is even to be defined as a result of the growth of inequality in the distribution of resources and risks of exposure to bad things such as pollution and hunger (Beck, 2013, p. 65). Beck declared that this kind of distribution, that includes the assignment of risk and bad outcomes to certain people groups, makes it necessary for sociology to enter the realm of politics and policy (Beck, 2013). In light of this evidence for the scope of the global shifts underway, this thesis attempts to incorporate that thinking in the analysis of the data set.

Research Question

The research question for this study is as follows:

*RQ*: How was class and inequality in America framed within the 2012 presidential debates and within the relevant media coverage? What constitutes those frames and what are some possible interpretations of those frames?
Chapter III

Methodology

The research objective for this study is to discover and describe how the idea of economic class and the accompanying inequality may have been expressed or identified by these two types of elite political actors, the presidential candidates themselves, and select media sources, in 2012. The purpose is to apprehend the meaning behind the political rhetoric and the ensuing news stories, to search for symbols, actions, and interactions that might comprise our economic life and understandings, and perhaps clarify the chaos of words and intentions that is politics in a free country. These data were produced at this specific point in time, in a group of cultural contexts specific to place. My goal is to study this portion of the “external world” in order to describe and explain what it all might represent (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6), and to seek to understand what transformation might be underway regarding economic class. The data set selected for this study consists of a random sample of cable news media transcripts covering the presidential debates, and the presidential debate texts as well. The time period involved begins on October 3, 2012, the day of the first debate, through to the declaration of Barack Obama as President for a second term late in the evening of November 6, 2012. It was within these data that I sought to investigate the framing of class by elite speakers.

I selected a qualitative methodology in order to facilitate the generation of interpretations from the data. A qualitative approach allows for this and for rich description in the reporting of those interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Qualitative methodology also suits the subject matter of class and inequality in the context of globalization and democracy. This methodology allows for me as researcher to exercise my abilities as storyteller as well as passionate observer onto an issue that warrants a “critical conversation” in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).
A post-structuralist perspective facilitates the development of logical interpretations of the data texts and the many surrounding cultural contexts (McKee, 2003). Post-structuralism, as described by McKee, is a position from which culture and cultural activities can be viewed without an assumption that there is a correct or right way to do the viewing, or any correctness built in to the culture or activities being viewed. There is only the “sense-making” that is going on within a certain context, and the researcher’s interpretation of the sense-making. I am attracted to post-structuralist thinking for the additional reason that it allows for culture to be found anywhere, and the particular sense-making practices that go with it. It is possible to view the various economic classes considered within this research to be also considered as separate cultures with unique ways of making sense of the world. There may be vast differences in what is considered to be a responsible use of resources between the culture of the very wealthy and the culture of the very poor. In light of the globalization of class and economics discussed in the literature, I believe that post-structuralism is a sound addition to the methodology for this research for all of those reasons.

The theoretical grounding for this research is frame theory. This allows for identification of the frames related to class and class membership that were created in the debates, as well as an exploration of how the frames were constructed and why. As discussed in the literature review, I used Entman’s classification of frames and his descriptions of their functions as part of the analysis protocol. Entman’s cascade activation model supports the inference of how the population as a whole may be interpreting the meanings of frames.

Methods

The first portion of my data set was the presidential debate texts from all four televised debates. I retained the debates in the form of footage as well as written transcripts. My media
sample consisted of MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN transcripts. The three top cable networks are where most Americans tune for campaign coverage according to the February 2012 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press report, although the Pew found that the Internet, as a news source, has made the largest gains in audience. However, the top three cable sources still held first place for campaign viewership (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2012). In the State of the News Media report in 2013, The Pew Research Center again considered Fox, CNN, and MSNCB as the main news sources on cable television (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2013).

My method was a textual analysis conducted on the data described above. An important part of my method was to engage fully with the data repeatedly, to allow patterns to become clear and, as much as time allowed, to achieve a thorough familiarity with my data set. To that end, I watched the actual debate footage repeatedly as well as studied the written transcripts. The entire media sample from the three news sources—that spanned the days from October 3 to November 6—was read repeatedly during the process of reducing these data to the final sample. The idea was that immersion in these data would enable me to generate plausible and essential descriptions of the frames of class created by the elite speakers. The goal was to “simplify and focus” relevant aspects of these data by “thinking up” from the data, developing clear and understandable abstractions (Richards & Morse, 2013).

Additionally, I relied on the post-structuralist thinking of Alan McKee, whose work encouraged me to ask additional questions of the data in order to “make invisible discourses more visible” (McKee, 2003, p. 106). I found this approach compelling in light of the fact that any discussion of inequality was absent from the rhetoric of the political leaders and therefore would most likely be an invisible discourse. This level of examination looks for those factors
that might be invisible because they are so familiar. A good example of a discourse veiled by a common and familiar construct was the candidates’ selective use of *family* to describe members of the middle class. McKee called this exercise *exnomination*. It is a thinking exercise or “analytical tool” that a researcher can use to challenge meanings that might be accepted as common sense without question (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 84). Another example of this questioning was to ask why the descriptor *class* was only used with regard to the middle or to ask why the wealthy were only referred to as individuals and not families.

McKee’s (2003) *commutation test* is another thought exercise in which an expression or frame found in the texts, when attributed to another speaker, can shed light on assumptions or blind spots. In other words, by looking at a text, an entirely different angle, nuance of meaning can become apparent. While exnomination looks hard at what is apparent but culturally unchallenged, a commutation test looks purposely through a lens that, by distortion, breaks up assumptions. For example, this was used when exploring the oddly political nature of the word *family* when used in regards to the middle class. I attributed the phrase *middle class family* to a news anchor and found that it sounded odd to me. In fact, the use of *middle class family* and *middle class families* did appear in the media data but, with only one exception, was spoken by a campaign representative or the candidates themselves within a video clip from the debates. The single exception to this was Bret Baier of Fox News as he introduced a video clip in which Obama was speaking about raising taxes on “middle class families” (Baier & Shawn, 2012, p. 1).

McKee’s (2003) third exercise, known as *structured absences*, looks carefully for what is not there at all. An example of this would be the absence of any discourse regarding a capitalist class in America or inequality, or the fact that all elite speakers were indeed a part of the wealthy
“class.” The exercise of structured absence, by noticing what is missing, can help to better understand what is there.

In summary, my methods were chosen to facilitate the search for how class and inequality were framed, and to enable the production of a descriptive analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This approach to scholarly inquiry allows creativity in the pursuit of those frames that carry the inclusion and exclusion mechanics of elites, ideology, and politics.

Data

The data for this research were a combination of transcripts of the presidential debates and a random sample of media news, analysis and commentary regarding the debate rhetoric.

Media. The media data consisted of written transcripts from the three news outlets MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News. These data were acquired from the Global Broadcast database, using LexisNexis as search engine. The search terms for the initial pull were Obama, Romney, presidential debate, using the term connector AND. The word LEAD was also inserted before each search term to select transcripts that contained the search terms within the lead. The search calendar parameters were October 3, 2013, to Election Day, November 6, 2013. The number of transcripts generated by the initial search was prohibitive, far exceeding what could be analyzed for a master’s thesis. For this reason a subsample was needed. LexisNexis does not provide the option to randomly create a subsample from a large listing. Therefore that subsample had to be created manually. This “systematic random” selection was conducted by selecting every third transcript from the original LexisNexis listing (Macnamara, 2005, p. 13). The resulting data became the subsample upon which I performed two more steps of refinement in order to have a clean subsample relating to only the candidates’ debate rhetoric on economic class.
Refinement of subsample. The subsample of media transcripts resulting from the method described above was not yet debate specific. It contained all coverage by the media sources on everything related to the search terms of Obama, Romney and presidential debate for the time specified. It had only been made smaller by the systematic randomization. Therefore it still had to be refined to contain only coverage regarding what the candidates in the debates said, not, for example, polling results, or an analysis of the candidate’s body language during the debate. This refinement was done by a thorough reading of the entire systematic subsample, editing out any text not directly related to what was said during the debates. This edit eliminated any speculative media coverage that occurred prior to the first debate on October 3. I also excluded student news broadcasts, coverage duplicates, and debate rebroadcasts. Duplicate coverage was scanned thoroughly in search of whatever might have been unique to that duplication and therefore pertinent to my analysis. Nothing was found.

The final class specific sample was refined further from the debate relevant sample. This final sample must contain only news, commentary, and analysis relevant to the candidates’ debate discourse on the issue of economic class. As a result, although these issues could be perceived as “class” related in some way, I excluded discussions of women, seniors, anything that was not specifically related to economic class. Rebroadcasts were read thoroughly to insure that any additions or alterations could be discovered and retained for the final sample. None were found. The research goal was to develop creative and interpretive abstractions that could compress and communicate the meanings regarding class that might be found to be within that refined, final sample (Richards & Morse, 2013). Table 1 illustrates how the data were reduced and the word counts associated.
Table 1

*Data Refinement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEDIA SOURCE</th>
<th>Original Systematically Randomized sample</th>
<th>Debate Relevant Subsample</th>
<th>Class Specific Subsample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FOX</td>
<td>68,884</td>
<td>38,653</td>
<td>9,063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>308,913</td>
<td>104,094</td>
<td>7,847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>101,540</td>
<td>76,458</td>
<td>27,611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total word count</td>
<td>479,337</td>
<td>209,205</td>
<td>44,521</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Debate.** The debate data came from footage and written transcripts from the four presidential debates:

- **Wednesday, October 3, 2012:** President Obama and Governor Romney at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado, on the topic of domestic policy.
- **Thursday, October 11, 2012:** Vice President Joe Biden and Congressman Paul Ryan at Center College in Danville, Kentucky, on the topics of foreign and domestic policy.
- **October 16, 2012:** President Obama and Governor Romney at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, in a town meeting format on the topics of foreign and domestic policy.
- **October 22, 2012:** President Obama and Governor Romney at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida, on the topic of foreign policy.

The debate data set consisted of full transcripts acquired from the Commission on Presidential Debates website at debates.org. There was no process of reduction needed for the presidential debate transcripts.
Data Management

Due to the quantity of data, I developed a functional, manual management system that, although bulky, allowed me an ease of access to the documents that a small computer screen would not permit. All data were printed out. Each debate event was a single document, as was each class specific transcript of the final news source sample. Small Post-It notes were used to flag sections that were relevant to the interpretations I was developing. Highlighter pens were used to also mark single terms or entire sentences and paragraphs to aid me in referencing those passages. Several computers were utilized in the safe storage of all documents, both media and data sets, as well as all literature. These backups were also stored online in DropBox, and on a portable flash drive.

Coding. The processes of coding and analysis were carried out concurrently. This system was developed organically as I combed the data repeatedly for meaning and interpretation. The data management protocol for debate transcripts was an Excel sheet on which notes could be made concerning any statement that appeared to be relevant. The headings were as follows: Debate date, debate segment (taxes, role of government, etc.), page number within the transcripts, keywords and phrases (trickle-down government, economic patriotism), imagery (middle class crushed, eviscerated, buried, killing jobs, etc.), relevant quotes, my comments, frame functions (diagnose problem, identify cause, moral judgment, suggest remedy), explicit reference to class, and implied references. This chart helped me begin to identify patterns and record impressions, as well as maintain a reference guide to the original transcripts. Pertinent sections of the debate transcripts were also highlighted and marked with Post-It notes on which signifiers could be written. The method for coding the media texts was also done manually using color-coded Post-It notes on
which keywords could be written, such as 47 percent or middle class family. All relevant literature was printed out and manually marked with highlighter and Post-It notes in the same fashion. All documents were marked initially with descriptive codes (Richards & Morse, 2013) indicating where class was mentioned and how it was described in terms, such as wealthy/rich people/those who are doing well. This served to help me navigate through the documents as I continued my analysis.

**Analysis.** I took very seriously the importance of immersion in the data, of time for the coding of frames to develop, and for well thought-out abstractions to emerge. I also spent additional time coming to a better understanding of the contexts surrounding my data. Due to the complexity of the contexts surrounding class and inequality in America, and my unfamiliarity with them, I allowed a substantial amount of time for becoming more familiar with economics, the history of inequality in America, taxation, capitalism, and sociology. This approach was based on the post-structuralist assumption that frames and their interpretations will vary from place to place in the world (McKee, 2003). For instance, because class is integrally connected to inequality, it was important for me to look at how the United States ranks among other developed countries as an egalitarian nation. That particular cultural context is relevant to a full understanding of class and inequality in America. Because the United States ranks poorly in relation to other democracies with regards to equality, that adds meaning to what the candidates may say or not say during the debates. It is therefore an *intertext*, or context for the texts found within the candidate’s debate rhetoric. According to McKee, an intertext is another text that is “explicitly linked” to, or a text one may be studying. The intertext serves to support the search for possible interpretations that is the goal of textual analysis (McKee, 2003, p. 89).
While examining the literature and intertexts, I engaged in a process of “constant comparisons“ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73). Constant comparison is the search for differences and for similarities, in this case between texts, in order to unearth categories and codes that accurately reflect what is in the data. Engaging in comparisons of the texts *constantly* is a best practice for qualitative research. It is a process that deepens the researcher’s understanding of the data and enriches his or her description of what is found (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The entire process as well as what I learned about symbols and meaning in the qualitative literature was absolutely necessary in order for me to achieve any explanation of the immense complexity found in this topic.

I engaged in writing memos and journaling during all phases of the process including the writing of this report (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I actively sought to recognize and set aside personal bias. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) wrote that the qualitative researcher interpretively translates the world into a new creation, as does a filmmaker with images, or a quilter with fabric. This concept of the qualitative researcher was foremost in my mind as I worked on this project, and the resulting report comes from that blending of inquiry and vision.

The findings that follow are informed by this assumption, that the speakers that appear within the data, candidates and cable news personalities on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, are leading political actors or elite speakers in national discourse. This assumption is supported by scholars, specifically by Entman (2004, p. 11) who wrote that “it is not always easy to determine where the line between ‘elite’ and ‘journalist’ should be drawn” within his cascade model. Additionally, the predominance of cable news viewership, as established in the literature review, as a preferred source for political analysis serves to link the political speakers with the media.
speakers as co-actors on the political stage and partners in the shaping of the overarching schema for class (Cook, 1998).

I was compelled at various times to refer to the surreptitiously recorded 47 percent statement from candidate Mitt Romney. This statement did occur several times within the debate rhetoric that is the purview of this research, but was introduced, and its meaning established, two weeks prior to the debates. However, its presence was so pervasive within the media sample that it must be included as a powerful framing of the great divide of economic inequality in America.
Chapter IV

Findings

This research attempted to discover the following: How were class and inequality in America framed within the 2012 presidential debates and within the relevant media coverage? I looked for what made up the frames and for possible interpretations of the frames. The data were elite communication frames constructed to convey meaning about who was right and who was wrong in their economic ideology and action, or in the case of the media sources, to inform the public through reporting and analysis. This research purposely did not examine how candidate frames may have been reframed or used wholesale by media or why. The media sample was too limited to provide enough data. However, the findings do show important contrasts and similarities between candidate and media frames regarding the overarching frame contest to define who was a patriot or traitor, who was a maker and who was a taker.

The overarching frame, Economic Patriotism, gave shape to the class struggle between the 1 percent and the 99 percent and was constructed by the frames of class, inequality, and the framing of who exactly is not playing fairly with resources. Of note is the complete absence of the older five-class model of an upper, an upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and lower classes. Instead a two-class structure was revealed consisting of a wealthy class and a middle class, Occupy Wall Street’s 1 percent and 99 percent. The data showed a brief glimpse of a third class in the poor. However this group appeared very briefly and lacked description.

The findings are organized by the frames of: Broad Middle, Middle as Family, Middle as Victim, Wealthy Individual, Wealthy as Victim, the Invisible Poor and Inequality. These key findings form the individual sections. Within each section, the candidates’ use of the frame is followed by the media use.
Economic Patriotism: Framing the makers and the takers

President Obama presented the “economic patriotism” frame in his opening statement of the first debate (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 2). That word pairing framed his argument that the wealthy should return to pre-Bush tax cut tax rates in order to speed economic recovery. He said, “Are we going to double on top-down economic policies that helped to get us into this mess or do we embrace a new economic patriotism that says America does best when the middle class does best?” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 2). Although only spoken once, and by Obama, the economic patriotism frame was a peek at the veiled class war that ran through the data. It was an alternate way of speaking of the makers and the takers used by Paul Ryan in his presidential campaign stump speech. Makers versus takers was a more obvious framing of a class conflict but did not appear in the debate or media data. Obama’s frame of economic patriotism summed up the conflict, the idea of shared economic space, and the interconnectedness of classes. The contest, however, to see which of the two classes was maker and which was taker was implied, albeit continuously. For example, at the close of that first debate Obama further defined what being economically patriotic and wealthy would look like.

And yet my faith and confidence in the American future is undiminished. And the reason is because of its people, because of the woman I met in North Carolina who decided at 55 to go back to school because she wanted to inspire her daughter and now has a job from that new training that she’s gotten; because a company in Minnesota who was willing to give up salaries and perks for their executives [emphasis added] to make sure that they didn’t lay off workers during a recession. (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 28).

Vice President Biden echoed the economic patriotism frame by flipping the blame embedded in Romney’s 47 percent statement — which was directed at those who do not pay
income taxes — by pointing the finger at Ryan and Romney, who, he said, would rather help the wealthy obtain more tax breaks at the expense of the middle. Biden accused that they were “holding hostage the middle class tax cut because they say we won’t pass—we won’t continue the middle class tax cuts unless you give the tax cut for the super wealthy” (Biden & Ryan, 2012, p. 9). The clear meaning of the economic patriotism frame was that it was honorable for the wealthy of a country to come to its aid by paying more in taxes or taking less perks.

The Romney counter frame for Obama’s economic patriotism frame was that of morality and appeared only once as well. In the next round of questions following Obama’s call for economic patriotism, Romney referred to the national debt as a “moral” crisis for America (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 8). He was directly referring to the passing on of such a massive deficit to future generations. Regardless, the term morality, in combination with economics, took the discussion of the great divide to another level altogether; that of the history of economic theory, hardly accessible to the average American (Lakoff & Wehling, 2012). Yet, the term morality would most likely resonate, despite being misappropriated, with Romney’s conservative Republican base.

The economic patriotism frame was the overarching frame of this research under which all others aligned. The frame was about the interrelatedness of class, the responsibilities of wealth and power, about pulling your own weight and holding down a job, being patriotic versus being a traitor, and having concern for others versus disregard for the plight of others in shared economic space.

In the media.

The economic patriotism frame also appeared only once in the media sample used for this research. The single instance was found in the MSNBC text as Chris Matthews played the video
clip in which the President said it in the first debate. The context for playing it was to illustrate how President Obama focused his rhetoric on the middle class during that debate (Matthews, Fineman, et al., 2012, p. 9).

**The Broad Middle: A political sweetspot**

Pew’s four-part middle class was the rhetorical target for both candidates. Its strategic importance came from its broad and shapeless definition. This meant that the candidates could define it to fit their purpose and speak to it, even from polar opposite policy positions on the economy. The *broad middle class* frame runs a close second to the economic patriotism frame in importance in this research. Both candidates focused on the independent voter from the *broad middle*, however they differed in their use of the broad middle frame in order to suit their goals. Other issues would have informed a voter’s decision but the frame of the broad middle class preyed on genuine concerns about fair play and justice. It may also have been intended to exploit class jealousy, fear, and resentment.

The unfortunate middle class had been “crushed,” “buried,” and “burdened.” They had been “dumped on,” “hurting,” “suffering,” “squeezed,” “hard hit,” “declining,” and “held hostage.” They were also “wiped out,” “eviscerated,” and “knocked on their heels.” They needed help and relief, and each candidate was the one to do it while the other one would continue to burden them under a crushing tax burden. This was the operation of Entman’s frame functions in sharp relief. *Diagnosis* — the middle class was framed as the victim of either — *identify cause*: the Obama administration, or the unscrupulous bankers of Wall Street and a Republican top-down economy, depending on who was talking. According to Obama, the middle needed to be able to get “a computer for their kid going off to college,” and some more “pocket money” in order to feel secure and worry less. In contrast, Romney simply wanted them
to get back to work. His middle class was a class of workers. America needed to get back to work and to be trained for work. Despite the various ways of painting the plight of the shrinking, insecure, and out of work “middle”, both candidates were framing the middle as Aronowitz’s (1999) servants of capital. The differences were premised on how the middle worked in the scheme of things, as employees or as consumers. And due to the shapelessness and vast differential of ideology held by the broad middle, the candidates could shoot wide and still hit something. Obama said “America does best when the middle does best” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 2). This was Obama’s dominant theme for the purpose of the middle class in relation to the whole. One definition of America “doing best” could be that the middle is employed and working, as it did in the following Romney’s statements. “I’ll restore the vitality that gets America working again” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 3). “My priority is jobs” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 7). However, in Obama’s statements, “doing best” was primarily framed as when they, the middle class, are feeling secure and not worried (Obama & Romney, 2012a), with the result that they are spending and consuming. It is within the middle-class-as-spender frame that Obama referred to more “pocket money” for the middle class, or the middle class being able to buy “a computer for their kid who is going to college” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 5). For Obama, the middle class serves capitalism when they spend. In further contrast to Romney, Obama’s primary focus was not on jobs, but rather on “opportunity,” “ladders of opportunity” for those in the middle class and for those who want to get there (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 23). This was echoed in his call for more teachers and improving education, but his framing for the middle class purpose in the troubled economy was as ambiguous as is the definition of what exactly was the middle.
Obama’s frame for the middle was suited to a class struggle from the perspective of the lower economic rungs, with its eye on how the wealthy are doing, and how the behavior of the wealthy is highly influential on whether or not the middle can be “doing best.” Romney’s suited the view from the top, that everyone should get to work and pull their fair share. Romney’s opening statement for the first debate contained two human-interest stories, one coming from someone he met, the other from someone whom his wife, Ann, met. One was a woman from Dayton who had been unemployed; the other a woman with a baby declaring her husband had had four jobs and their home was in jeopardy of being lost. This was the middle specifically in relation to working (Obama & Romney, 2012a). While Obama called for education, Romney called for job training. Romney’s hope for the middle, and his definition of the middle’s purpose, was honed in on work, and the subsequent paying of taxes and the subsequent getting off of government support. Romney never varied from this perspective on the middle class. For Romney, the middle class does best and serves capitalism when it has a job.

In the media.

The candidates framing of the “middle” class went unchallenged in the media data set used for this research. The coverage focused on the broader and more conflict-oriented themes of who would effectively come to the aid of the economy, which was guilty of giving preferential treatment to the wealthy, or even the ideological preference of the anchorperson. Rachel Maddow wondered, “Why would you bring a guy who’s an expert at jobless recoveries and jobless politics and jobless economics, bring them in and make them president of the United States when that’s the very problem we have right now” (Maddow et al., 2012, p. 38). Chris Matthews summed up Romney’s message in the second debate: “all the rich people in the world
will come to America to make business because this will be the easiest place to practice business in the world. That was his religion last night” (Matthews, Soto, Drury, & Fineman, 2012, p. 40).

In contrast, Fox News host Bill O’Reilly drew a line between Obama and himself with regards to government and health care.

Instead of reforming Wall Street with effective oversight, Mr. Obama and the left continue to attack it. Corporate America is seen in some liberal quarters as the enemy. The left wants the government to largely control the entire economy as it wants the feds to control health care. (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 7)

Fox News reported primarily on political division, as in Sean Hannity’s commentary, shared with Ann Coulter about Candy Crowley, “But when she’s out there, she can do whatever she wants. Why do Republicans keep allowing liberal moderators?” Coulter responded,

I know. I know. Well, we’ll see how things go. I hope she’s like Jim Lehrer, because I hate when, you know, they give you 30 seconds to answer a question, and say, that’s it, we’re moving on. But there are two things I will say in Candy Crowley’s defense and again, we’ll see how the questions go tomorrow. One is, she is one of the rare smart CNN on-air personalities. (Hannity, 2012, p. 17)

CNN utilized interviews with average Americans or with party or campaign officials for commentary regarding the middle. Quite a bit of attention was paid to Romney’s 47 percent statement. Single mom Jessica Lundgren was interviewed by CNN at the end of her 20-hour work day. She had been leaning toward voting for Romney until the 47 percent statement was published. At the time of the interview she was undecided, concerned that Romney was not going to care about everyone (Blitzer et al., 2012a). Minutes later, Sharon Wiseman, a conservative Christian, was interviewed. She was leaning toward Obama because of the 47
percent statement and because she perceived that he (Romney) was “talking about me.” This segment concluded with Blitzer’s interview of Romney in which Romney declared that “the words that came out were not what I meant.” CNN contributor Galen summarized, “His true statement, his true feelings were what he said that night. I didn’t hear him stumble. I didn’t hear him stutter. He was quite clear” (Blitzer et al., 2012a, pp. 15–16).

The middle as a family

Both candidates used the descriptor family primarily in reference to the middle class. There were no wealthy or poor families, only middle class families or middle-income families. Use of this frame for the middle was unrelenting in Obama’s statements. Romney broke this pattern to sometimes refer to middle income tax payers: “I want to get middle-income taxpayers to have lower taxes,” closely followed by an affirmation of the wealthy taxpayer: “The top 5 percent of taxpayers will continue to pay 60 percent of the income tax the nation collects” (Obama & Romney, 2012b, p. 9). Yet, the middle-class-as-a-family frame was predominant whether the topic was the role of government, health care, or the tax code. It is also of interest that the middle was rarely framed as a middle class individual unless they were individuals who were out of work, in which case they were usually cast as breadwinner for a family.

It is compelling to question the use of the family frame, especially when it is quite absent from references to any other economic class but the middle. The single exception to this found within these data was Vice President Biden’s mention of the 120,000 families who would disproportionately benefit from a further continuation of the Bush tax cuts. The 120,000 families, with an average income of $8 million a year, were “patriotic Americans” who were not asking for a further extension of the tax cut, despite the Romney/Ryan insistence on it (Biden & Ryan, 2012, p. 19). It is likely that the family construct resonates deeply in the American conscious, as
deeply as the idea of a middle class. The candidates and advisors do not choose words without exacting purpose, and the intense repetition of the word trio “middle class family” was perhaps intended to trigger a circling of the wagons, sounding the alarm that one needs to protect one’s own against the intruding other classes. This would serve as an additional way to create an us and a them, which is a function of class. Invoking the importance of family would trump the responsibility and connection we have to each other in our shared economic space.

**In the media.**

The middle as a family did not appear in the media texts.

**The middle as victim**

The workings of Entman’s (2003) frame functions—diagnosis of the problem, identification of causes or assignment of blame, moral judgment, and suggestion of remedy—were found most vividly here. The diagnosis from both candidates was that the middle had been crushed, buried, and eviscerated. The other candidate, his ideology or his administration was to blame. President Obama: “Are we going to double down on top-down economic policies that helped to get us into this mess?” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 2). Former Governor Romney: “Under the President’s policies, middle-income Americans have been buried. They’re just being crushed” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 4). For Romney the passing of moral judgment for the harm the middle had suffered was simple. “When you came to office 32 million people on food stamps. Today 47 million people on food stamps” (Obama & Romney, 2012c, p. 44). Obama had a more complex assignment of blame. He needed to identify causes that Romney merely represented as a wealthy person and a Republican. “What we can’t do is go back to the same policies that got us into such difficulty in the first place” (Obama & Romney, 2012c, p. 44). For
Obama, the middle was the victim of Wall Street excess, the disregard of wealthy people and Republican economic policies that may have brought about the recession.

Romney never mentioned the losses related to the recession as a source of the victimization of the middle class. Paul Ryan referred to the recession as the excuse Obama was using for his failed policies. Wall Street was mentioned by the Republicans only in reference to poor regulatory policy of the Obama administration. Clearly the Obama administration was victimizing the middle with bad decisions and policies. Although, in the first debate, for Romney, the middle was being crushed, but so were “people in the coal industry” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 4). In the Romney frames, and the Fox News frames, many were being crushed and victimized by the Obama administration; some of these people were middle class and some of them were wealthy owners of companies.

In the media.

The middle as victim appeared in the transcripts of CNN, Fox news and MSNBC. This was primarily due to the use of clips from the debates in which the candidates were using the frame, or a pundit used it during an interview. For example, David Plouffe White House senior advisor made an appearance on MSNBC and in discussion of tax policy framed the middle as victim (Matthews, Schmidt, et al., 2012). On CNN, Buzz Bissinger noted that “I don’t think he (Obama) has earned the right to a second term…middle class income has dropped $4000” (Morgan 2012). On FOX news, in a twist on the use of the frame, Kristen Powers, as a guest on Bret Baier’s show, commented on Joe Biden’s ability to relate to the middle class yet suggested that if you were to “string together a couple months worth of his comments such as ‘the middle class has been buried under the Obama administration’” and have anyone but Biden say it, it would “paint a very frightening picture to people of the administration” (Baier & Shawn, 2012,
A rare example of a host using the frame was found on MSNBC in an analysis between hosts Chris Matthews, Rachel Maddow, and Ed Schultz. Schultz asked “How are you going to rebuild the middle class when you send middle class jobs over to China and only a few people are going to gain, and that would be Romney and a few investors?” (Maddow, Matthews, et al., 2012).

**The Wealthy Individual**

The wealthiest economic level was never referred to as a class, nor defined consistently. This group remained almost as undefined as the far larger broad middle. The first debate on October 3 focused on domestic policy. During this debate Obama described the wealthy as the “well-to-do,” “folks at the top,” including himself as a member of that class with “those of us who have done very well” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 9). Romney’s descriptions of the wealthy emphasized their efforts and importance to society. The wealthy were “high income Americans,” “high income individuals,” the “highest income tax payers,” “at the high end,” the creators of jobs, and they would do “just fine no matter who is president” (Obama & Romney, 2012a). Romney’s frames emphasized the innovation and resilience of the wealthy. The wealthy were discussed in the context of free enterprise, innovation, and creativity. In contrast, Obama inferred that these individuals were “blessed,” highlighting good fortune versus effort, and accentuating how much money they make by describing them as “millionaires” and “billionaires.” Neither candidate used the terms capitalist or capitalism during the debates.

Obama and Biden repeatedly used the terms “fair,” “fair play,” and “level playing field” in reference to the lower tax rates that are applied to the very wealthy under the Bush tax cuts. Obama’s benign phrase “do a little more“ (Obama & Romney, 2012c) enveloped the idea that the wealthy capitalist was selfish who would not willingly share just a “little bit more” with their
country that is in a bit of trouble (Obama & Romney, 2012c, pp. 16 & 46). The Obama argument was that either the rich pay more, or the middle would have to sacrifice more. Or, in the opposing Romney frame, either those on entitlements would have to sacrifice those benefits, or the middle would suffer. No matter who does it, someone must sacrifice in order for the math “to add up” (Obama & Romney, 2012a).

The Romney frame for who must not sacrifice was crystal clear, though implied for the most part. Giving tax relief to the wealthy would ensure growth. The wealthy are the job creators, declared Paul Ryan in the vice-presidential debate on October 11 (Biden & Ryan, 2012). They are the innovators and risk-takers in our shared economy, said Romney in the first presidential debate on October 3rd (Obama & Romney, 2012a). If you lower their taxes, they will create more jobs. To ask them to sacrifice, or to hamstring them with regulation, is to force them to close the gates on the flow of new jobs. In the Romney frames, the wealthy class of makers is more important than the workers.

In his appeal for votes, Romney’s appeal to the *top of class* majority of the broad middle becomes critical. Romney could frame the middle class as crushed, and include those making as much as $100,000 a year (Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends, 2008).

**In the media.**

The candidate’s frames of the wealthy were readily adopted by the news media sample with the exception that the wealthy did not appear as individuals in the media texts. Whereas the candidates might refer to the wealthy as individuals or folks, the media texts featured, overwhelmingly, *the wealthy*, with occasional uses of *wealthy Americans*, *wealthy people*, or as a pejorative, *the rich*. The economic importance of the wealthy, or capitalist class appeared when Chris Matthews of MSNBC referred to the “cowboy capitalism” that would return if Romney
were elected (Matthews, Soto, et al., 2012, p. 40). Additionally, Bill O’Reilly, of Fox News, spoke of Obama as waging war against capitalism and declared that the “battle between capitalism and quasi-socialism” was the real election story (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 7).

**Wealthy as victim**

The frame of the wealthy capitalist as victim, or scapegoat, was only implicit in the debates, but explicit within the media data. The wealthy-as-victim frame originated with Romney, as previously stated. This victim frame lacked some of the destructive imagery of crushing and burying as in the middle-class-as-victim frame, but the implication was that the wealthy were being taken for granted and being done wrong. They are the 5 percent who pay “60 percent of all income tax the government collects,” and the importance of their unique talent and skills is cast aside in any argument for equality, their guaranteed freedoms as Americans to earn as they wish and create as they wish, threatened (Obama & Romney, 2012b, p. 9).

**In the media**

The wealthy-as-victim frame cascaded through Fox News, where Romney himself epitomized the wealthy individual, and was protector of the free market and of American capitalism, standing against Obama’s hope for a level economic playing field. The wealthy as victim frame could also be seen on MSNBC as Rachel Maddow and Chris Hayes interviewed Rudy Giuliani who was the self-perceived “victim” of their yelling and screaming. Hayes: “Mr. Giuliani, you have a very large tax cut because you are, to your credit, a high-earning individual, and of course, you’ll see a large bounty from the tax cut. That’s the question on the table.” Giuliani: “Stop the ad silliness, OK? The reality is true for everyone. Let me finish my answer rather than yelling and screaming at me?” (Matthews, Soto, et al., 2012, p. 3).
The invisible poor

The poor as a class were almost completely absent from the debate discourse. Neither candidate referred to the poor as individuals or families. They were simply “the poor.” It is interesting to consider what meaning would be created if the poor were referred to as families, or even as an individual. It is possible that in that case, the poor would attract attention or concern beyond that afforded to a faceless, nameless group. If the poor were a family, it would invoke the symbolic meaning of family as something that should thrive and be protected in America, as was the middle class family frame in the debates. It is likely that speaking of the poor or legislating on their behalf would not win votes or popularity as they do not factor into the interactions of a thriving economy, and quite possibly do not vote.

Romney framed the poor as a possession of the states in which they live rather than being the responsibility of an overlarge federal government. In the first debate on the subject of Medicare, Romney wished to turn the care of the poor over to the states. He claimed that the state governors asked if he would please do that. “We can care for our poor in so much better and more effective a way than having the federal government tell us how to care for our poor” (Obama & Romney, 2012a, p. 13). In this, and in the final debate, he reiterated his own preference as governor of Massachusetts to run programs for the poor himself. The poor could not be framed as individuals or families when they, as a class, are a possession and the responsibility of whichever government entity cares for them.

There may have been an additional but veiled reference to the invisible poor. Romney spoke of the 47 percent of Americans who were on food stamps under the Obama administration. It is likely though that, to Romney, they were more a dislodged fragment of the broad middle,
not considered as poor or vulnerable, only in need of “good jobs” (Obama & Romney, 2012c, p. 47). The poor were absent from Obama’s rhetoric, with the exception of an oblique framing of the poor as those who are “striving to get into the middle class” (Obama & Romney, 2012b, p. 10).

In the media

A segment from MSNBC was the only reference to the invisible poor found in the media sample. This same segment also affirmed that getting into the middle class was Obama’s oblique reference to the poor. MSNBC host Lawrence O’Donnell interviewed Obama campaign advisor Robert Gibbs before the debate at Hofstra University and asked if the President was planning to speak to “poverty, peace, and human rights” as requested by the Hofstra faculty. O’Donnell asked if the President would speak to this “politically…forgotten population.” He said, “…The poverty population is that segment of the 47 percent that I don’t hear any candidate talking about. I hear the president talking about the middle class. They’re included in Mitt Romney’s 47 percent” (Maddow, Matthews et al., 2012, p. 37). Gibbs response was “I think you’re going to hear the president talk extensively about what we need to do to strengthen the middle class, but what our real goal should be is, let’s lift people out of poverty into that middle class” (Maddow, Matthews et al., 2012, p. 37).

The Frame of Inequality: The 47 percent

The 47 percent remains the clearest explanation of the great divide from a textual analysis perspective. In this frame Romney declared an us—the wealthy—and a them—those who receive help from the federal government. The covert recording was of a fundraising gathering that occurred in May, but the recording was not released until September 17, two weeks and two days prior to the first debate on the third of October (Beaujon, 2012). From May to September
the recording lay like “unexploded digital ordinance” until it reached the mainstream on that Monday (Smith, 2012, para. 1). The frame was used only once by both Obama and Biden in the debates.

**In the media**

The 47 percent frame was so prevalent in the media data sample for this research that it must be mentioned as a finding. It was so closely associated with the election coverage of the debates that a candidate may as well have spoken it in a debate. The 47 percent occurred more often in the relevant media texts than any other descriptor of class. The 47 percent was the perfect storm of Entman’s procedural frame for the media, in that the frame was more about suitability than it was about substance. Entman distinguished the procedural frame as directing focus more on issues of performance and suitability than policy (Entman, 2004). In this case, the 47 percent as procedural frame brought into question Romney’s ability to understand and therefore lead everyone in the country. “How can you put your faith and trust in a candidate that doesn’t care about everybody?” (Blitzer et al., 2012a, p. 14). The speaker was Jessica Lundgren, an undecided voter, interviewed by CNN. Her statement embodies, again, the impact of the Romney statements regarding those who receive federal aid. The 47 percent frame, the discussion of its presence or absence in the debates rhetoric, and its implications for Romney’s electability and suitability for office, was found most often in the CNN transcripts, followed closely by MSNBC. The 47 percent appeared in the Fox News sample only two times. Most notable was when Jason Riley referred to the 47 percent as having been “served up” by Biden as “lots of red meat“ for Democrats to eat (Gigot et al., 2012, p. 11).

MSNBC’s Chris Matthews and others carried their analysis explicitly into class conflict and the great divide. Here the wealthy were framed as arrogant, believing themselves to be
“virtuous” (Matthews, Soto, et al., 2012, p. 44), yet without their own wage earning “careers” (Matthews, Soto, et al., 2012). The wealthy were guilty of holding on to their wealth and leaving America with a “jobless recovery” (Maddow et al., 2012, p. 38) and exploiters of the middle class both as workers and as spenders. The wealthy were framed as manipulators of public policy who value stockholders over workers and are essentially a “ruling class” (Matthews, Soto, et al., 2012, p. 41). The MSNBC framing of the group, called the “wealthy” by the candidates, was the capitalist class written about by sociologists and journalists from my literature review.
Chapter V

Discussion

Framing the Makers and the Takers

This research sought to examine the framing of class and inequality within the 2012 presidential debates and media coverage of those debates. The goal was to explore those communications frames and to develop possible interpretations of what they might mean within the context in which they were found. The discovered frames reflected the goals of the candidates to speak to as large a segment of the population as possible regarding their party’s economic ideology, and to fuel class resentment in such a way as to get votes. The class tension was primarily between those vice-presidential hopeful Paul Ryan had dubbed as the makers and the takers, those who act responsibly in a shared economy and those who do not. In the Romney/Ryan scheme, the wealthy were the makers and those who do not work and pay taxes, or those who receive government assistance, were takers. The Obama/Biden scheme was the reverse. The wealthy had taken more than their fair share and therefore were takers, and the suffering middle class, who must do well in order for America to do well, who are the heart of the American economy, were the real makers. In January of 2013 Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel laureate in economics, agreed with the conceptualization of the middle class as the real makers and believed also that the “skyrocketing” great divide of inequality was in fact keeping America from economic recovery (Stiglitz, 2013, para. 7).

A new American two-class structure was revealed in the data. The upper and lower middle classes of the old five-class model had been subsumed into the broad middle. According to American sociologist Eric Wright, class is a subjective location on a spectrum that is culturally agreed upon. Class is also an objective factual location in relation to resources, and also a way
of explaining inequality. In any case, it is based on similarities of life style and expectations.

Members of the broad middle of 2012 shared little with one another other than a preference for casting themselves as middle class, despite having such a vast differential of life experiences and resources.

Was the broad middle a frame of convenience for elites or a glimpse into a new economic reality? Surprisingly no one in my media sample marked the vast and undefined nature of this middle class, or the vast undefined nature of the wealthy for that matter. Early in the debates President Obama drew a line of demarcation for the wealthy class as those who make $250,000 per year or more. Later in the debates that line of demarcation had shifted to $1 million per year. There is likely a vast differential between the life experiences funded by those drastically different incomes. And clearly, class is fluid.

Elite speakers are well positioned to create ad hoc meanings for class. Certainly there were other issues at play in this election such as healthcare, foreign policy, and funding of Big Bird. However the state of the economy and the relational nature of class stood at the forefront of the conflict. Although Obama introduced the frame and was the only person to speak it, *economic patriotism* was what both sides sought to define. The idea contains a veiled accusation. From Obama’s perspective, the wealthy person was unpatriotic and selfish to withhold from paying more taxes when they were perfectly able to do so, and the country in which they had prospered was in need of aid. Romney’s perspective was that those who do not work and pay taxes are unpatriotic, using the country’s resources and contributing nothing.

Here it is helpful to briefly revisit the different frame functions as described by Robert Entman. The *diagnosis* for both candidates was that the economy was in bad shape. The *identified perpetrator* of this wrong was the other candidate or his ideology. The *moral*
judgment of this wrong was expressed in the descriptors used for what had been done to the broad middle, the crushing, eviscerating, knocking on their heels, and hard hitting. For both candidates the broad middle was the victim of that violence, and for Romney the wealthy individual was also victim as a misunderstood, job creating, innovator who pays more taxes than anybody else.

The most profound exclusion was the invisible poor. The poor as individuals and families with a right to equal opportunity were indeed invisible, pushed aside for sake of the larger drama of the great middle and the wealthy.

Class is relational, fluid, and subject to historical forces such as wars and recessions. In better economic times we have seemingly coexisted happily. But in a time of massive debt, retreating opportunity and the accumulation of resources bunching up at the least populated end of the spectrum, our responsibilities to each other became something to worry about, and did indeed resonate throughout the election. The actions of wealthy bankers that brought about the financial collapse of 2007/08, the resulting recession and the continued sluggishness of the economy drove the elite frame competition in the debates. The key was to see who could blame whom most effectively.

Conclusion

Framing is a well-traveled field in political communication research. However there is a lack of research into how economic class is framed by elite speakers. This research explored an isolated public event, the 2012 presidential debates and considered a sample of coverage of the framing of class by three cable news outlets. It affirmed that the candidates framed class in politically expedient ways. Both candidates framed class in America as a two-tiered structure consisting of a wealthy minority, and everybody else and fostered class resentment and conflict.
Those frames went mostly unchallenged in the media sample and as a result the candidates were free to exploit class conflict as they wished.

Because of the American inexperience with class structure and relationships, it is important for media scholars and journalists to carefully scrutinize the frames used by elite speakers as defined in this project. The frame that cascades from the elite tiers of cultural discourse has the power to shape realities and create issues. For this reason those frames require our attention and study.
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