



# Shaping political image through politeness strategies in the presidential debates

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Politeness involves evaluations and attitudes which are closely connected to the assessment of actions. Politeness investigations in presidential debates enables voters to assess the candidates' behavior to make well-informed decision during the election. The present study investigated politeness strategies in two different presidential debates within the United States electoral context: the Democratic party and the final presidential debates. Data were analyzed by adopting the coding scheme in Brown and Levinson's frameworks. The overall result indicated that both presidential debates used more positive politeness strategies than the negative politeness. PPS-10 (offer and promise), PPS-12 (include both speaker and hearer in the activity) and NPS-2 (hedge) were more frequently used in both types of debates. PPS-3 (intensify interest to hearer) was frequent in the democratic debate alone. Meanwhile, PPS-15 (give gifts to hearer) was frequent in the final presidential debate alone. The findings imply that the use of the politeness strategies can shape the candidates' positive political images in the presidential debates.

**Keywords:** positive politeness, negative politeness, presidential debates, face threatening act

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## INTRODUCTION

Politeness is paramount in human interactions and plays an essential role in the way that we communicate with one another and define ourselves. Politeness mostly deals with typical interpersonal behaviors (Ryabova, 2015) in which our relationships are explored and maintained which is not only restricted to conventional aspects of linguistic etiquette. It is generally accepted that politeness deals with evaluation and attitudes which are closely connected to assessing the actions of a person, situation or event.

Political debate is a significant source of information about candidates because mostly it is the constituents' only opportunity to look at candidates interacting on stage without campaign affairs (Siepmann, 1962). Furthermore, the discourse of the political debate is one of the richest wellsprings of campaign information for audiences. Jamieson (1987) suggested that political debates offer some benefits for viewers looking for information about candidates in the way that it enables audiences to disclose the candidates' communicative competence and habits of thinking, increase the accountability of candidates, and check out the manipulative tendency of candidates. Political debates also provide an opportunity for the audiences to examine how the candidates respond to the challenges of the dispute. Viewing the performance, they can gather information about how the candidates will behave in office.

Investigating debate and how politeness theory might influence debate practices can give insights to argumentation and rhetoric pedagogy. Debate instructions are considered to serve effective pedagogical tools to boost students' argumentation skills.

[El Majidi et al. \(2021\)](#) claimed that debate instructions can enhance the quality of students' argumentation skills in both written and spoken language as well as the 'structural components' of their arguments. Producing high quality of arguments is not only critical to debate winning regardless of the contexts and stages as in political debates, classroom debate competitions, TV shows, etc. [Mercier \(2011\)](#), and [Mercier and Sperber \(2011\)](#) argued it is also important as predictor of good critical thinking skills. Teaching the politeness strategies in such debate and argumentation classrooms can also facilitate students to be aware of intercultural communication aspects so as they need to gain pragmatic competence.

Given that political debate naturally involves conflicts between at least two parties or candidates, it is highly possible that they are in face threatening situations. The common assumption is that face threats are more likely to happen in competitive situations such as political debates rather than in any normal interactions ([Fracchiolla, 2011](#)). Strategically speaking, the candidates need to break down their rival's opposing views. Through their strong arguments and face-threatening acts, the audiences' attention is drawn to the debates. This way, the candidates can gain support and votes from their supporters. At the same time, both parties are likely to save their faces and concurrently strive to reach their goals, and derive maximum benefit at the expense of their rivals. Therefore, it can be assumed that the candidates tend to use as many politeness strategies as possible during the debates.

[Hinck and Hinck \(2002\)](#) argued that in political debates, good abilities of candidates to persuade people to view their faces in quite positive light can be a decisive factor in winning the debates. Therefore, the present study makes an assumption that the use of politeness strategies in political debates such as presidential debates might enable the constituents to assess the candidates' behaviors and performances under particular circumstances. Thus, it helps them draw a better picture of the candidates who will run for the office.

In the political context of the United States, prior to the presidential debate, which is commonly known as the final stage of the campaign, the candidates need to compete in their own Party; for instance, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama's competition in the Democratic Party in 2008. This stage is considered crucial in helping constituents assess the candidates' fitness for presidential candidacy. The researchers' preliminary analysis indicates that the debate at this stage is quite different from the final one due to its higher stake, which deserves further analysis and discussion with regard to the use of politeness strategies. However, there is a lack of literature concerning how particular candidates behave during the debates at different stages. Given that the circumstances, the face wants, and face threats could be different from one to another, it is worthwhile to investigate what sorts of politeness strategies have been used in such debates.

## Politeness Theory

Concept of politeness has long existed in the literature since 1967 pioneered by Goffman through the notion of face. Face is associated with the notions of social-emotional embarrassment or humiliation ([Goffman, 1967](#)). In many kinds of human interactions, a common tendency is that face can be lost, maintained or enhanced. In general, when people are involved in interactions, they may tend to save each other's' face. They do not only attempt to maintain their own face, but also save others. Because to some extent, face can be vulnerable. In nature, everyone needs to keep their face and their partners' face. In other words, no one wants to be in the situation of being embarrassed and humiliated.

Based on [Goffman's \(1967\)](#) construct of face, [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) advocated a more detailed concept of face. Face can be classified into both positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to one's desire for the approval of others. On the other hand, negative face is one's desire that his or her activities be unimpeded. An act that violates either kind of face is considered as face-threatening act (FTA). Although we do not want to cause any FTA when we interact with each other, FTA is still unavoidable. Generally speaking, when an interlocutor causes an FTA, the interlocutor tends to use some strategies to mediate or minimize face damage in the process of FTA.

[Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) asserted that any act performed towards satisfying another's positive face refers to positive politeness, and towards satisfying one's negative face refers to negative politeness. Instead, positive politeness focuses on face-saving acts concerning others' positive face. Meanwhile, negative politeness refers to maintaining the negative face of others. Thus, the strategic use of positive politeness and negative politeness can be categorized into positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies, depending on the perspective of the face that interlocutor wants to save. Following Brown and Levinson's concept of politeness, the present study explores the use of politeness strategies in presidential debates in American contexts.

## Presidential Debate

Debate refers to the process of inquiry and advocacy. It is a strategy for reaching a reasoned judgment on a proposition ([Freeley & Steinberg, 2005](#)). The use of debate to persuade people with arguments is not new. It has been a long tradition since the periods of Plato and Aristotle which was known as rhetoric ([Brummet, 2018](#)). Debate enables people to reach decisions in their own minds or to bring others around to their way of thinking. Debate requires the audience and the opposing parties to be involved to compare and evaluate decisions and options that will be taken. In modern and scientific societies, a few effective methods and procedures to make a decision are arranged. One of them is debate. For instance, the court and the legislature are formed to utilize the debate as a means of decision making.

[Freeley and Steinberg \(2005\)](#) defined presidential debate as a sort of debate which is highly distinctive from judicial and parliamentary debate because it is carried out under

particular rules agreed upon by the debaters. This kind of debate is most commonly associated with political figures and their campaign. In the United States political arena, debates between the presidential candidates are well established. They were initially held in 1960 between Kennedy and Nixon. Presidential debate is regarded as highly important in the presidential election because it serves as the focal point of the presidential campaign and is one of the determining factors to predict the winner of the presidential election (Benoit et al., 2003).

Up till now, little research had been done to explore further how politeness strategies are used in presidential debates. Hinck and Hinck (2002) analyzed the 1992 vice-presidential and presidential debates using the Brown and Levinson’s politeness. The results showed that candidates utilized different politeness strategies in both presidential and vice-presidential debates. Fracchiolla (2011) examined televised debate between Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy. The results indicated that Nicolas Sarkozy made excessive displays of deferential politeness and used a wide range of registers while Ségolène Royal was more combative and formal. Using Leech’s politeness maxims, Pakzadian (2012) discussed politeness strategies used in the three 2008 presidential debates between McCain and Obama. The analysis showed that Obama used more politeness maxims compared to his counterpart. Yasmeen, Jabeen and Akram (2014) examined politeness strategies by Pakistani politicians during the session of Privileged Motives. Using Brown and Levinson, the results showed that bald on record strategy is found to be most frequent to exhibit power and carefree style of communication. García (2014) explored politeness strategies in Spanish electoral debates. The result showed that both politeness and impoliteness strategies were genuine elements in debates.

The given review indicates that the previous studies adopted a general concept of politeness strategies as framework their analysis rather than had a more detailed discussion of subcategories of politeness strategies. Besides, most of the studies focused on the investigation of only one genre of presidential debates. They did not compare and contrast to figure out similarities and differences between the presidential debates genres.

To fill the gap, the present study attempts to carry out a comparative investigation of the two kinds of debates which could help readers, particularly the debate viewers, gain an in-depth insight into it. Therefore, the objectives of the present study are to investigate how the presidential

candidates used politeness strategies in both the democratic and the presidential debates, and also to compare and contrast the politeness strategies used in the two different debates.

In line with the given objectives, a few inquiries are put forward in this study: namely, 1) What kinds of politeness strategies do the presidential candidates use when they participate in democratic political party debates? 2) What kinds of politeness strategies do the presidential candidates use when they participate in the final presidential debates? and 3) What are similarities and differences of the politeness strategies used in the two kinds of debates?

## METHODS

Data source consisted of two transcripts of the 2008 US presidential debates: democratic and final presidential debates. The first transcript was the final presidential debate between John McCain and Barack Obama in Hempstead, N.Y on October 15, 2008. The second transcript was democratic presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the National Constitution Center, Philadelphia on April 16, 2008. Transcripts of the two debates were downloaded from the website of The New York Times. The first transcript consisted of 16,408 running words whereas the second one had 19,234 running words.

To analyze the transcript, a coding scheme is adopted from Brown and Levinson (1987) as analytical framework of the present study. The coding schema consisted of 15 positive politeness strategies and 10 negative politeness strategies (see Table 1). These politeness strategies are described in Table 1 along with their definitions. Messages and chunks were analyzed and coded according to the selected coding scheme and frameworks of the analysis. In this step, the researchers attempted to figure out which of the 15 positive politeness strategies and 10 negative politeness strategies were used within the data. In order to achieve the analysis reliability, two coders who are the researchers of the present study analyzed and coded the entire transcripts separately without any collaboration before checking for the results of agreement. When the two coders did not reach an agreement on a particular analysis, the coders discussed it further and made a final decision regarding the analysis disputes. The coefficient of inter-coder reliability was .83 which indicated that the coding is reliable. Table 2 shows two examples of the coding.

**TABLE 1** | Codes for politeness strategies and the definitions

Positive Politeness Strategies (PPS)	Negative Politeness Strategies (NPS)
1. Notice and attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods). Showing that the S is attending to what the H has said or wants	1. Be conventionally indirect Imposing indirectly on the reader by relying on Gricean principles that check for the “felicity” conditions of a request
2. Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H) Using exaggerated intonation, stress, and other aspects of prosodic	2. Hedge Using words to indicate that the S is not assuming that the H will want to comply or agree with the S

<p>3. Intensify interest to H Using words that make one’s own comment more interesting by exaggerating or overstating facts</p> <p>4. Use in-group identity markers Using any of the innumerable ways to convey in- group membership: address forms, language or dialect, jargon or slang and ellipses</p> <p>5. Seek agreement Saying what the S believes H will agree with by repeating or by seeking a safe topic</p> <p>6. Avoid disagreement Saying something to soften disagreement, or hedging one’s opinion, or being vague so as to seem to agree</p> <p>7. Presuppose/ raise/ assert common ground Showing interest in H by starting a message with small talk, greetings, or unrelated topics</p> <p>8. Joke Using humor to indicate shared connections with H and putting H “at ease”</p> <p>9. Assert or presuppose S’s knowledge of and concern for H’s wants Using language to show that the S knows what H wants and is willing to fit his/her wants or needs in the H’s</p> <p>10. Offer and promise Saying that the S will help the H obtain the H’s wants</p> <p>11. Be optimistic Using optimistic words to show the S hopes that imposition on the H is not much</p> <p>12. Include both S and H in the activity Using first person plural pronouns to refer to S only or R only</p> <p>13. Give (or ask) reasons Giving/asking for reasons for an imposition on the reader</p> <p>14. Assume or assert reciprocity Showing the S has acted so as to now obligate H</p> <p>15. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation) Giving praise and statements of appreciation and gratitude</p>	<p>3. Be pessimistic Saying that the S doubts that the conditions apply for even imposing on H</p> <p>4. Minimize the imposition Using words to imply a lesser imposition on H than it seems</p> <p>5. Give deference Using words to abase the S, or to raise H’s status</p> <p>6. Apology Using words to indicate that the S is reluctant to impinge on H</p> <p>7. Impersonalize S and H Requesting or imposing on H indirectly using general words</p> <p>8. State the FAT as a general rule Referring to an underlying principle or document that regulates the H and S</p> <p>9. Nominalize Using a nominalized form to make the request or to state the imposition instead of using a verb</p> <p>10. Go on record as incurring a debt or as not incurring H Stating that the S will feel grateful for help that H may in the future provide</p>
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**TABLE 2** | Examples of the coding taken from the data

Presidential debates	Message	Politeness Strategy
Final	And the fact is, it's gotten pretty tough. And I regret some of the negative aspects of both campaigns (John McCain).	NPS-6
Democratic party	I will make it very clear that we will do so in a responsible and careful manner, because obviously, withdrawing troops and equipment is dangerous (Clinton Hillary).	PPS-10

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As aforementioned, the researchers analyzed the debate transcripts using the adopted coding scheme in [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) framework. The distribution of politeness strategy use concerning both positive politeness and negative politeness strategies in the two different debates;

namely, the final presidential debate and the democratic presidential debate, is presented in [Table 3](#) and [Table 4](#) respectively.

**TABLE 3** | Distribution of positive politeness strategies in the two debates

Positive politeness strategies	Final presidential debate		Democratic presidential debate	
	n	%	n	%
PPS-1 Notice and attend to H	0	0%	0	0%
PPS-2 Exaggerate	1	0.72%	6	4.26%
PPS-3 Intensify interest to H	2	1.45%	48	34.04%
PPS-4 Use in-group identity makers	4	2.90%	2	1.42%
PPS-5 Seek agreement	5	3.62%	3	2.13%
PPS-6 Avoid disagreement	0	0%	1	0.71%
PPS-7 Presuppose/ raise/ assert common ground	0	0%	0	0%
PPS-8 Joke	0	0%	0	0%
PPS-9 Assert or presuppose S’s knowledge of and concern for H’s wants	0	0%	0	0%
PPS-10 Offer and promise	26	18.84%	35	24.82%
PPS-11 Be optimistic	10	7.25%	8	5.67%
PPS-12 Include both S and H in the activity	52	37.68%	36	25.53%
PPS-13 Give (or ask) reasons	4	2.90%	0	0%
PPS-14 Assume or assert reciprocity	0	0%	0	0%
PPS-15 Give gifts to H (Goodness, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)	34	24.64%	2	1.42%
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 illustrates the distribution of positive politeness strategies in the two types of debates. The two debates share several positive politeness strategies: “exaggerate”, “intensify interest to hearer”, “use in-group identity markers”, “seek agreement”, “offer and promise”, “be optimistic”, “include speaker and hearer in the activity”, and “give gifts to hearer”. Nevertheless, two different strategies are little used; namely, “avoid disagreement” is only used in the democratic debate meanwhile “give (or ask) reason” is only found in the final one. In both debates, the strategies of “offer and promise” (PPS-10) and that of “include speaker and hearer in the activity” (PPS-12) are highly used. The strategy of “intensify interest to hearer” (PPS-3) is more often used in democratic debate compared to that in the presidential one whereas the presidential one used more PPS-12 than the democratic one did.

The presidential candidates in the Democratic debate frequently used the positive strategies of “intensify interest to hearer” (PPS-3). Concerning the gender difference, the female candidate in Democratic presidential debate tended to be more cooperative than the male counterpart. Hillary confirmed that her ideas were in line with Obama’s ideas and American people’s hopes. Both candidates were shaping a good political image that they were good partners for the candidacy of the Democratic Party. This result is in agreement with Shigemitsu (2003) who analyzed in Japanese context that politeness was utilized in Japanese debate TV show in order to maintain harmony among the debaters. The findings consistency between Shigemitsu (2003) and the present study seem surprising even though the debate contexts under investigation are highly contrast.

The first is more related to entertainment whereas the latter is political and with its nature is competition. Yet, the face threats are likely similar in the way that both contestants didn’t not attempt to attack face of their rivals rather they maintain harmony.

The next positive politeness category which was commonly used in both debates is the strategy of “offer and promise”. The analysis shows that all candidates regarded that “offer and promise” (PPS-10) was central important as it enabled them to stress and claim that the hearers’ (opposing partner and public) wants were similar to the candidates’ wants.

The strategy of “include speaker and hearer in the activity” (PPS-12) in both democratic and final debate is to express that the candidates were highly close to the debate’s viewers that American people and them were in the same boat. Excerpt 1 shows how Hillary used PPS-12 in response to Obama. The candidates attempted to claim that they were the representatives of American people in achieving the common goals.

**Excerpt 1**

You know, I am here, as is Senator Obama. Neither of us were included in those original documents. But in a very real sense, we demonstrate that that promise of America is alive and well. But it is at risk. (Hillary Clinton in Democratic debate)

The distribution percentage of “give gifts to hearer” (PPS-15) in the final debate was about 24% meanwhile it was found only 1% in its counterpart. It showed that candidates wanted to give their praises or statement of appreciation and gratitude to hearers in order to show that

they were not mean and harsh. Instead, they respected and appreciated others and gave their positive comments. It helps to establish a positive, friendly, polite political image toward the American citizens.

Table 4 illustrates the distribution of the strategies of negative politeness in the two debates. The negative politeness strategies were not much found in the data. Only a few strategies were chosen; namely, “hedge”, “give deference”, and “apologize”. Thus, there is no considerable difference between the final and democratic presidential debates in terms of using the negative strategies.

“Hedge” is the only most used strategy in both debates. This current result is consistent with Wilamova (2005) who found that hedging devices were the dominant strategies of expressing negative politeness. Yet, in Wilamova (2005) did not mention in what sort of data negative strategies were dominant. He seemed to only confirm his findings to common arguing practices in English culture. In the present result, the researchers find that hedges allowed candidates to minimize the imposition to their opposing partner and also soften the criticisms. The present data indicate what strategy that Obama chose when he criticized McCain’s past policy.

This strategy was used in order to sound not rude. Simultaneously, both candidates wanted to be perceived as not harsh and had good behaviors as politicians. However, this result is in contrast with Ardila’s (2019) investigation on rhetorical strategies used by one particular politician in Spanish contexts. He pointed out that impoliteness such as creating an emotional atmosphere, the escalation of friction, snubbing seemed to be several the preferred rhetorical strategies to threaten the face of his political opponents. The difference of the findings in terms of the negative politeness could be because difference of the circumstance which might deal with the debate rules and format. However, in the given past study, Ardila (2019) did not attempt to compare the Spanish politician’s rhetorical strategies to any debate counterpart as the present study investigates.

The findings conclude that negative politeness was less preferably used and has been less taken into account as proper rhetorical skills in the debates. Negative politeness is considered to have less substantial role in the political debates since the rules format as commonly agreed by the candidates determined who can speak under what circumstances and for how long imposed by a moderator in order to keep the candidates from any immediate interruptions (Hinck et al, 2005).

TABLE 4 | Distribution of negative politeness strategies in the two debates

Negative Politeness Strategies (NPS)	Final presidential debate		Democratic presidential debate	
	n	%	n	%
NPS-1 Be conventionally indirect	0	0%	0	0%
NPS-2 Hedge	24	61.54%	5	83.33%
NPS-3 Be pessimistic	0	0%	0	0%
NPS-4 Minimize the imposition	0	0%	0	0%
NPS-5 Give deference	9	23.08%	1	16.67%
NPS-6 Apologize	6	15.38%	0	0%
NPS-7 Impersonalize S and H	0	0%	0	0%
NPS-8 State the FTA as a general rule	0	0%	0	0%
NPS-9 Normalize	0	0%	0	0%
NPS-10 Go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebting the H	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100%</b>

## CONCLUSION

This study sets out to disclose the American presidential candidates’ use of politeness strategies and compare and contrast when the strategies are used in different stages of presidential debates. The results indicate that candidates in both debates adopted higher number of positive politeness strategies than the negative politeness strategies. PPS-10, PPS-12 and NPS-2 sequentially are more frequently used in both debates. PPS-3 is only frequently used in the democratic debate, meanwhile, PPS-15 is only frequent in

the final debate. The analysis shows that the selected strategies shaped their positive political images in the presidential debates. Having these positive images is considered to be critical importance in determining the winning of the election. However, several limitations of the present study need to be acknowledged in order to give insights into future exploration. First, the data sources were restricted to two presidential debates. Future research might need to increase its data size to be more representative and transferrable. Second, there is no inclusion of non-verbal language in the analysis. Non-verbal aspects such as body

movements and facial expressions can be further investigated to reveal the aspects of politeness by the candidates. Third, little attention was given to gender differences on the use of politeness strategies. Therefore, future research can discuss further gender differences in the presidential debates across political parties and cultures.

This study also yields some pedagogical implications to teaching both debate and argumentation skills. First, information on politeness strategies can be important inputs while designing relevant debate materials concerning linguistic and rhetoric strategies for the learners. Second, having knowledge of politeness strategies can facilitate learners to achieve pragmatic competence and avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural communications. Third, teaching pragmatic knowledge enriched from the literature can facilitate the learners to improve their rhetorical and argumentation skills while learning to organize ideas and noticing the alternatives that they can adapt to sound polite in order that they convincingly establish their claims and arguments. Fourth, instruction of how to well-structure good arguments can inform how to teach critical thinking to the learners

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