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Political Debates

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Although various types of political campaign debates had taken place in the United States since the 18th century, it was regarded a major innovation in campaign communication when televised face-to-face debates between presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon occurred in 1960. The Kennedy/Nixon exchanges, in fact, inaugurated what has now become an institution in presidential campaign communication. Although general election debates would not happen again until the Ford/Carter encounters 16 years later, a tradition of presidential debates is now firmly established with an unbroken chain of debates occurring since 1976. Along with the public's expectation for presidential debates, political campaign debates are indeed a common place for all levels of elective office. Among the many types of political messages, campaign debates are regarded as one of the most useful and significant forms of campaign communication by the public, political candidates, and the media.

Perhaps the most often cited justification for the great attention paid to presidential campaign debates is the fact that they reach large audiences. For example, approximately 80% of the U.S. adult population viewed or listened to at least one of the 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debates, and viewership for televised general election presidential debates remains strong, typically in the range of 50 to 60 million. In fact, the first 2016 Clinton–Trump debate set a record high viewership of approximately 84 million watchers. Presidential debates continue to generate the largest viewing audience of any single televised political campaign event. Much like the attention they receive from the public, campaign debates are also a popular topic of analysis for political communication scholars. In a “state-of-the-art” review of the political debate literature that appeared just over a decade ago (see McKinney & Carlin, 2004), approximately 800 political debate studies were noted, and this body of literature has now grown to well over 1,000 published studies that focus predominantly on presidential-level campaign debates and explore a wide range of research questions guided by a number of research methods.

Across nearly six decades of published research, perhaps the most frequently pursued topic of analysis within the political debate literature has sought to answer the question, “Do debates matter?” This question, focusing on the nature of debate influence, has centered primarily on the key outcome variables of candidate preference and vote choice: specifically, do campaign debates influence election outcomes? On this point, the corpus of related research findings is rather convincing (see McKinney & Warner, 2013). In short, debate viewing produces significant changes in primary elections, and while general election campaign debates largely reinforce pre-existing candidate choice yet changing few minds, general election debates have been shown to affect changes among a small number of undecided and weakly committed voters that can ultimately influence outcomes in particularly close elections. Additionally, political debate exposure has also been found to produce a host of cognitive and attitudinal effects that are of great value to the electoral process.

Most recently, within the past 10 to 15 years, political debate research has moved away from its almost singular focus on the ability of debate viewing to affect candidate preference and vote choice, devoting greater attention instead to a better understanding of how particular effects are achieved. Here, scholars are beginning to grapple with how debate messages, and particular communicative elements within the overall debate message, are processed by individuals. This research also has begun to explore how debate effects vary based on differences among particular voters, and why certain debate messages may be more effective than others depending on campaign context and political climate. In order to examine the nuances of debate influence and explore the features of candidates' debate arguments, debate scholars have employed a range of experimental and content analytic research methods in their analyses of political debates. Using the contours of the extant debate

research as its guide, this entry provides an overview of communication research methods that examine the effects and content of political campaign debates. The entry first highlights the experimental methods employed in the analysis of debate effects, followed by an exploration of the methods of debate content analysis. Finally, the entry concludes with a discussion of data analytic procedures used in the most recent studies that incorporate analyses of social media use and political debate research.

Debate Effects

Political debate research has most frequently examined the influence of debate exposure on a variety of debate viewing outcomes including specific behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal effects. As previously noted, while very little change in candidate preference is typically recorded following exposure to general election debates, these debates have been found to affect the voting intentions and behaviors of enough undecided and uncommitted citizens to influence the outcomes of several very close presidential contests (including the 1960, 1976, 1980, 1992, and 2000 debate series and elections). A number of specific cognitive effects from political debate exposure have been well established in a long line of research, as candidate debates provide an “information-rich” source of campaign communication that has been found to facilitate viewers’ acquisition of issue knowledge; and debate exposure also has been found to influence viewer perceptions of candidate character or image traits. Finally, a number of studies have explored the attitudinal effects of campaign debates, including such normative democratic outcomes as heightening viewers’ interest in the ongoing campaign, encouraging citizens to seek out additional campaign information following their debate viewing, and prompting greater participation in the campaign through such activities as talking to others about one’s preferred candidate and increases in reported likelihood of voting. The attitudinal effects studies have also found that debate viewing enhances citizens’ sense of political efficacy, including political information efficacy, decreases political cynicism, and strengthens support for political institutions. With few exceptions, political debates’ behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal effects have been explored through quantitative research that employs experimental and survey research methods.

Experiments

Debate effects have often been explored by utilizing a number of experimental designs. A meta-analysis examining the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates (see Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003) found that experimental debate studies most frequently employed either a pre-post test or posttest-only design (and approximately half of the studies included in the meta-analysis involved control or non-viewer comparison groups). The pre-post test experiments sought to assess changes in behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal measures following debate exposure, with data collection most often occurring in a laboratory setting that also frequently involved “real-time” debate watching—as the national debate broadcasts occurred live—in group viewing settings. The control of laboratory designs allowed researchers to prevent participants’ exposure to post-debate commentary before registering their own debate viewing responses. Many of the posttest-only designs employed a phone survey following the debate broadcast, with these studies utilizing nonstudent “adult” participants and with debate viewing occurring in a more naturalistic environment (i.e., in the home or in other social settings where groups gather to watch presidential debate broadcasts). Limitations of the posttest-only design with data collected via phone survey, however, include participants self-reporting their debate viewing exposure and attention, and also the inability to prevent exposure to post-debate commentary (although some studies

actually incorporated exposure to post-debate commentary as part of their key variables of analysis). The limitations of convenience samples consisting of student participants, thus limiting generalizability of findings, are also well known. Still, in the previously cited meta-analysis of debate effects studies, approximately two-thirds of the studies included in this analysis employed nonstudent subject pools, and one-third of the studies used student samples, yet the meta-analysis found no differences in the effects sizes of variables analyzed between student and nonstudent samples.

Surveys

Survey research is also utilized as a common method for examining debate effects. Multi-wave panel data collected from two national surveys have been analyzed in a number of debate studies. First, the American National Election Studies (ANES) has included limited questions relating to presidential debates in its survey, although its inclusion of campaign communication survey items in general and debate-related questions in particular has been inconsistent at best and at times non-existent, thus limiting comparative analyses across national elections and debate cycles. Still, analysis of a limited range of ANES survey items has been incorporated in several debate studies focusing particularly on voter learning from debates, and also assessment of citizens' interest in and attention to debates. Utilizing ANES data, studies comparing voters' issue knowledge in those presidential elections with debates versus election years without (i.e., 1964, 1968, and 1972) found that survey respondents were much more knowledgeable about campaign issues during those years with debates. A second and much more useful national survey that has provided data for a number of debate studies is the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In existence since the 2000 presidential election, the NAES focuses specifically on political attitudes, with its survey items exploring campaign issues and a range of campaign communication variables. This survey's multi-wave panel design is also much better equipped than the ANES to identify debate-related effects as the Annenberg survey is planned around major campaign events, including the debates, and its survey items are more attuned to measurements relating to these events. Secondary analyses with survey data provided by ANES and the Annenberg survey afford researchers the opportunity to observe debate effects across different election cycles and also to make claims with greater generalizability based on national population samples.

While this data collection method has certain advantages, a particular limitation with traditional survey research is the ability to isolate and associate specific debate content effects with survey responses. For instance, with a survey administered even immediately or at some point after debate exposure, it is difficult if not impossible to ascertain the particular elements of the debate message that may have directly influenced debate outcomes. Additionally, as noted previously, depending on the time that has elapsed between debate viewing and survey completion, participants' recall will be influenced by memory and even more so influenced by post-debate commentary and the continued message stream that accompanies the ongoing campaign. To mitigate the impact of these limitations, a number of debate studies have incorporated survey measurements taken as the debate occurs in real time, assessing debate viewers' instantaneous and continual reactions using automated response systems (or more commonly known as response dials) and also data collected with a range of mobile apps by which debate viewers can register their reactions to the candidates and the ongoing debate, including responses to attitudinal measures while the debate is happening. These survey methods allow researchers to better understand how viewers are processing the debate message stream and also allow researchers to isolate the effects of specific debate content on viewer responses.

Debate Content

Although the primary approach to political debate analysis has been from a media effects paradigm, a secondary focus of study has been the exploration of various features of debate content, including both verbal and visual message elements. This research has employed both content analysis of debate messages and rhetorical analysis of candidates' arguments. The following sections provide a brief description of the programmatic lines of research utilizing each of these methods of analysis.

Content Analysis

Content analyses of political debates have explored the media coverage surrounding campaign debates as well as verbal and visual features of the debate message, including issue agendas developed in debates; analysis of journalists' debate questions; candidates' development of arguments; candidates' patterns of interaction, including clash and attack strategies employed during debates; the content, form, and function of candidate responses to debate questions; candidates' language styles; and also content analysis of the visual/nonverbal elements of the debate including its visual structure (e.g., camera shot and angles, candidates' screen composition, duration of candidates' camera shots, etc.), and candidates' nonverbal presentation (e.g., facial expressions, eye contact, body movements, etc.).

Perhaps one of the most developed content analytic lines of debate research is the application of Benoit's functional theory to political debate discourse (see Benoit, 2013). Functional theory has been used to analyze primary and general election debates, as well as candidate debates occurring in a number of countries around the world. Benoit has identified three primary functions of candidates' utterances, including candidates acclaiming themselves, attacking their opponent, or defending themselves when attacked, with candidates focusing their utterances on matters of policy and character. From Benoit's exhaustive analysis of debate dialogue, we have learned that debates focus overwhelmingly on campaign issues rather than candidate character; candidates in debates acclaim far more often than they attack their opponent; and attacks outnumber defenses. Also, candidates attack less frequently in primary than in general election debates, yet primary candidates acclaim more frequently than do general election candidates, and there is less policy discussion in primary versus general election debates, and, interestingly, in primary debates, candidates attack their own party more often than they do the opposition party.

Rhetorical Analysis

A limited number of studies have applied various rhetorical theories and the application of rhetorical criticism as a method of examining debate messages, and as debates are composed of a series of arguments, much of this research is guided by argumentation theory. Programmatic rhetorical analysis of political debates has focused on candidates' attack and defense strategies in debate dialogue and also examination of evidentiary standards in candidates' debate responses. A number of rhetorical criticism "case studies" are also found within the political debate literature, with particular attention devoted to a single debate or debate series that is regarded as somehow exceptional or noteworthy. Such analyses include the very first Kennedy–Nixon "great debates" of 1960, the single Carter–Reagan debate in 1980, the Ferraro–Bush vice presidential debate in 1984 as Geraldine Ferraro was the first

major-party female candidate to appear in a general election debate, and particular attention and analysis was devoted to the 1992 Clinton–Bush–Perot debate series that featured, for the first and thus far only time, a third candidate along with the two major-party nominees on the debate stage (and also the first town hall debate that occurred in the 1992 debate series).

Moving Forward: Social Media, Political Debates, and Data Analytics

A recent development in the practice and study of political campaign debates reflects changes in how debate viewers now engage the televised debate message. The final section of this entry provides a brief overview of the ways in which social media data and analysis have been incorporated in political debate research. As with most media engagement today, engagement with political broadcasts such as televised debates also increasingly involves not one but multiple screens. Indeed, reports of the ever-growing “second screen” phenomenon suggest that a vast majority of TV watchers do so while using a second screen (with some reports suggesting such behavior is now as high as 90%), and an increasing number of individuals, particularly the millennial generation, access their TV programming, movies, and news—including public affairs programming such as televised political debates—on mobile and digital devices. Accompanying this shift away from traditional TV watching to forms of digital engagement has been the rapid growth of social media use, particularly the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and the intersection of social media messaging and campaign communication is now prevalent in all elements of electoral politics.

Political communication scholars have increasingly included social media as a topic of study and also as a source of data collection and method of analysis. The political debate literature initially incorporated social media as a variable of interest following the 2008 presidential debate cycle, focusing particularly on YouTube and Facebook, and this work was followed in 2012 with a focus on Twitter and its role in the presidential debates. McKinney, Thorson and colleagues have advanced a programmatic line of research exploring the content and effects of social media use in conjunction with debate viewing (see McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, 2014; Thorson, Hawthorne, Swasy, & McKinney, 2015). Their concept of “social watching” examines the behaviors and outcomes of individuals who engage and process a televised political message, such as a political debate, while interacting online with others who are part of their social media network. Political debate “social watching” research has found that those who have greater interest in the ongoing political campaign and who are more likely to talk about politics with friends and family will tweet more frequently while watching political debates. Also, those who tweet more often while watching debates register greater confidence in their political knowledge following debate viewing, report greater satisfaction with the debate viewing experience, and perceive the debates to be more important. In terms of the content of “social watching” activity, debate viewers tweet more about candidate image than campaign issues, their twitter comments are more frequently directed toward the candidates they oppose, and debate viewers who are more highly polarized will tweet in a more negative tone. Finally, the verdict is still out regarding the effect of “social watching” behaviors on learning from debates. At least one national study utilizing a post-debate phone survey found debate watchers who reported greater use of social media while watching presidential debates were not as accurate in their recall of the candidates’ issue discussion than those viewers who did not engage in social media use while watching debates. However, at least one experimental study found that those who tweeted more often during their debate viewing learned more—scored higher on post-debate knowledge items regarding candidate claims made during the debate—than those who tweeted less frequently while watching the debate. Thus, whether “social watching” or tweeting during debates is a distraction to learning or actually enhances processing of the debate message and therefore may lead to greater recall

or learning remains an unsettled question.

Certainly, political debate scholars face a number of challenges relating to data collection and analysis when attempting to incorporate social media data as part of their research. First, given the sheer volume of social media traffic during a nationally broadcast presidential debate (e.g., during the first Clinton–Trump debate of 2016, approximately 10.3 million tweets were generated), one must be aware of the tools available to capture these large data sets. A variety of web-based tools are helpful in collecting tweets and Facebook trends and topic data. One such tool is *DataSift*, a fee-based service that provides access to the full stream of tweets and allows one to capture targeted and topic-specific posts using designated search terms during a delimited time period. Publicly available tweets can also be collected directly from Twitter using its streaming application programming interface. Researchers also have several tools available to analyze large social media data sets once these data have been collected. A common variable of analysis of social media messaging is the assessment of the lexical tone or sentiment of comments or posts. Among the more frequently used sentiment analysis tools are *SentiStrength*, which scores the positive and negative sentiment of words and texts, and also the Affective Norms for English Words program, which scores the tone of key words based on various affective dimensions, including pleasure (pleasant to unpleasant), arousal (calm to excited), and dominance (controlled to out-of-control).

Political debate scholarship represents a vibrant body of research that employs a range of research methods. While much of this research emanates from a media effects paradigm, utilizing experimental and survey research methods, other political debate studies focus primarily on the content of the debate message, employing both quantitative content analysis and rhetorical criticism. The incorporation and analysis of social media represents the latest advancements in political debates research, with this work examining both the content of social media messaging and the effects of “social watching” political debates.

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See also [Experiments and Experimental Design](#); [Political Communication](#); [Political Debates](#); [Rhetoric](#)

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