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What is This?

Social Watching a 2012 Republican Presidential Primary Debate

Mitchell S. McKinney[1], J. Brian Houston[1], and Joshua Hawthorne[1]

Abstract

This study examines the "Twitter election of 2012," and specifically young citizens' "social watching" behaviors while live-tweeting a 2012 nationally televised Republican primary debate. We find several important relationships between key demographic, social, and political engagement variables and participants' social watching activity (frequency of tweeting while watching the debate). We also find important links between tweet content (frequency of candidate mentions in tweets) and debate viewers' candidate evaluations.

The intersection of social media and political campaign communication continued its emergent trajectory throughout the 2012 U.S. presidential election, with the rise of the social networking microblog Twitter as just the latest addition to the digital and social media campaign communication toolbox. McKinney and Banwart's (2011) brief tracing of the development of digital politics, a history that now spans at least two decades, begins with Governor Bill Clinton's nascent use of the just emerging Internet during his 1992 bid for the presidency; and Whillock (1997) notes that President Clinton went on to launch the very first White House web site in 1994. Over the next decade, and certainly by 2000, websites and email lists became rather common communication tools and practices for political office holders and candidates at all levels. Perhaps as prelude to candidate Barack Obama's mastery of social media as campaign

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communication tool in 2008, Howard Dean's 2004 Democratic presidential primary bid demonstrated the Internet's social networking utility for political campaigning as thousands of supporters were organized through "meet ups" and mobilized as Dean campaign volunteers. The Dean campaign also established the Internet's effectiveness as a tool for raising campaign cash (Trippi, 2004). Finally, as McKinney and Banwart (2011) note, "by 2008, the 'digital revolution' in presidential campaign communication was ripe, and BarackObama.com was there to lead the revolution" (p. 5).

With Twitter having just launched in 2006, social media milestones during the 2008 presidential campaign were marked more by a presidential candidate's number of Facebook "likes" as well as the occasional viral YouTube sensation (such as "Obama Girl" or the "Hillary 1984" Apple parody ad). Yet, at least in the realm of social media, the story of the 2012 presidential election was most frequently told via messages of 140 or fewer characters. Indeed, a number of indicators suggest that Twitter became a recognized political communication force in the 2012 election. The growing Twittersphere, as of the time of the analysis reported here, boasts more than 200 million monthly active users (Fiegerman, 2012), generating more than 500 million tweets per day at a rate of approximately 5,800 tweets per second (Terdiman, 2012). Admittedly, while the hundreds of millions of daily tweets focus less on political affairs and much more on the affairs of celebrities or of one's random musings and daily life log, tweeting about politics and the presidential candidates was a frequent activity for many citizens during the 2012 election. In fact, Twitter set new records for live-tweeting political events at each stage of the unfolding 2012 campaign season. In January 2012, a record was set for live-tweeting a political event when citizens generated 14,131 tweets per minute during Barack Obama's State of the Union Address (Sasso, 2012). Yet this record was erased by the 52,756 tweets per minute during Barack Obama's August 2012 acceptance address at the Democratic National Convention (Groom, 2012). Still, the DNC numbers seemed paltry compared to the 158,690 tweets per minute generated during the first 2012 Obama–Romney presidential debate; and Twitter pointed to the first Obama–Romney exchange on October 3, 2012 as the most tweeted single U.S. political event with 10.3 million tweets generated during the 90-minute debate (Camia, 2012). However, the most heavily tweeted political moment was yet to come when, on election night in November at the time the networks called the Obama victory, citizens were generating 327,452 tweets per minute (Lee, 2012).

With such outpouring of political comment at key moments in the unfolding campaign, how might we begin to make sense of this bevy of public expression? What understanding might we glean from the mass—and mess—of political tweeting that could tell us something meaningful about public attitudes toward the candidates and campaign issues? Twitter attempted to bring some meaning to the stream of political tweeting throughout the 2012 campaign with the advent of its Twitter Political Index, or Twindex, a daily tracking score of political tweets that mentioned either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney (see election.twitter.com). The daily Twindex score reported the sentiment of each candidate's tweets, using a baseline score of 50 calculated as the "average" sentiment of the entire Twittersphere. Thus, Twindex scores above the

50-point baseline were more positive and those scores below 50 were more negative than the average sentiment of all tweets. Evaluation of the two candidates' Twindex scores throughout the 2012 campaign revealed two general conclusions: First, Barack Obama's daily Twindex scores (representing tweets about Obama) were most often more positive than Mitt Romney's daily scores; but, in general, tweets for both candidates were almost always below the 50-point baseline suggesting tweets about politics and the two presidential candidates were generally more negative than all other tweets.

The fact that Barack Obama fared better than Mitt Romney in the Twittersphere, yet talk of both candidates most often fell within the negative range of sentiment, might best be interpreted by comparing Twitter talk of political events and candidates with overall public opinion. As analysis by the Pew Research Center (2013) reveals, Twitter political talk is often in conflict with public opinion. First, Twitter reaction to political candidates and events is typically much more negative in tone than overall public opinion regarding the very same events and candidates; and, the tone of Twitter political conversation is even more negative than mainstream news coverage. Furthermore, twitter conversation tends to be more liberal than public opinion in general and, not surprisingly, more positive toward Barack Obama. The Pew analysis concludes, "Much of the difference may have to do with the narrow sliver of the public represented on Twitter [where] users are considerably younger than the general public" (p. 3).

That Twitter's political content may differ from larger public opinion is certainly no reason to dismiss this important and growing form of civic expression. The fact that Twitter emphasizes the political expression of younger citizens provides opportunity for greater understanding of the online political engagement of an important yet often ignored segment of the electorate. Furthermore, our media—and political—engagement now increasingly involves not one but multiple screens. Documenting the growing "second screen" phenomenon, Smith and Boyles (2012) asked a national phone sample, "When you use the Internet on your smartphone, which if any of the following do you do at the same time?" with the largest response, 52%, indicating they watched television while also using their smartphone's Internet. In addition, analysis by Ranie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, and Verba (2012) reports that young citizens with some college education are among the most frequent second screen users. Finally, as Brenner (2013) reports, young citizens represent the most frequent users of social media. While 67% of online adults report using online social media, 83% of those 18 to 29 use social networking sites.

Yet, within the political media context, we know very little about our young citizens' "second screen" use. The current study provides an exploratory investigation of young citizens' "social watching" behaviors, whereby one engages and processes a televised political message while interacting online with others who are part of their social media network. We have developed the term "social watching" to explain the phenomenon of watching a program while interacting with other people, either in-person or mediated through social media (see also Thorson, Hawthorne, Swasy, & McKinney, 2013), and in the current study we explore the social watching behaviors

of young citizens viewing a televised campaign message while communicating via social media.

Specifically, our analysis examines participants' live-tweeting a nationally televised Republican presidential primary debate. The research questions we pursue are designed to illuminate who is more likely to engage in greater social watching behaviors (more frequent tweeting activity while watching the debate), and with what effects, as well as to provide an analysis that attempts to tie tweet content with viewers' candidate evaluations. In the section that follows we offer a brief review of relevant literature related to social media and politics and discussion of research relating particularly to social media use and debate viewing.

Review of Literature

Only recently have researchers begun to explore citizens' use of social media for political purposes. Estimates from the 2012 campaign report that 39% of American adults used social media to actively engage in political activity, including persuading others to vote, engaging in political discussion, and interacting with politicians and campaigns (Ranie et al., 2012). Such activity indicates that a significant portion of the electorate now uses social media as a vehicle to engage in politics. Ranie and colleagues (2012) as well as Warner, Hawthorne, and Turner-McGowen (2012) have found that those who discuss politics more, both online and offline, tend to engage in more political communication activity via social media. A number of studies have found that using social media for political purposes is related to greater engagement in politics offline (Houston, Hawthorne, & McKinney, 2012; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). Researchers also have begun to explore the use of social media in a variety of political contexts, including engaging in acts of political consumerism (Warner, Turner-McGowen, & Hawthorne, 2012), communicating political protests (Lotan et al., 2011; Rahimi, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), and predicting election outcomes based on social media content (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2011).

The current project focuses on the use of social media to live-tweet a televised candidate debate, and a limited number of studies have explored the use of social media during campaign debates. The initial investigations in this area have been largely descriptive in nature reporting frequency and quantity of posted comments, with rather limited analysis of tweet content. Researchers found that greater tweet activity at particular moments throughout the course of the debate corresponds with specific events occurring in the debate exchange, with spikes in tweets matching questions asked of candidates, at moments of candidate turn-taking, and at points of candidate clash; also, tweets were found to focus more heavily on candidate evaluation rather than issue discussion (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Shamma, Kennedy, & Churchill, 2009). More recent analyses have explored the effects of social media use during debates and have found that live-tweeting debates encourages more debate watching (Thorson et al., 2013) and that social media communication about debates

tends to influence candidate assessments, with social media debate engagement resulting in more partisan candidate evaluations (Hawthorne & Warner, 2013).

Even before the record 10.3 million tweets were generated during Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's first general-election debate exchange, Twitter had already become a common way for media and political organizations to engage citizens as active participants in campaign debate dialogue. On July 20, 2011, six of the Republican presidential candidates (including @newtgingrich, @TeamBachmann, @THEHermanCain, @RickSantorum, @GovGaryJohnson, and @ThadMcCotter) participated in the first-ever online presidential debate on Twitter, sponsored by www.TheTeaParty.net (Summers, 2011). Citizens used the hashtag #140townhall to put questions to the candidates. All of the six candidates responded to questions selected by the debate moderator (@secupp) and also tweeted their opening and closing statements (such as Michelle Bachman's, or @TeamBachmann's, closing statement which read, "I ask 4 ur vote as I try 2 return ur voice to DC. If elected POTUS, I will represent u w/a titanium spine no matter the cost.").

Throughout the long 2012 Republican primary contest, which set a new debating record for Republican candidates with 23 nationally televised debates, several of the Republican debate exchanges incorporated Twitter as a means of citizen engagement. For example, Fox News and Twitter joined forces in a Republican primary debate on January 16, 2012, when viewers were instructed to evaluate the candidates' responses to journalists' questions by tweeting the hashtags #answer and #dodge along with the candidate's name (Stelter, 2012). Using color-coded "answer meters" (red for "dodge" and green for "answer"), Fox tallied each candidate's #answer and #dodge tweets and reported online and in its postdebate broadcast which candidates were judged by debate watchers as more frequently dodging or answering their questions. Finally, in several of its nationally televised primary debates CNN invited viewers to tweet questions to #CNNDebate, and featured a Jumbotron screen in the debate hall that displayed a live stream of citizens' tweeted questions. CNN debate moderators, including Wolf Blitzer, John King, and Anderson Cooper, would occasionally direct candidates' attention to the screen and ask that they respond to a tweeted question ("GOP Candidates to Appear," 2012). Clearly, citizens' campaign participation via Twitter was a prominent and constant feature throughout the 2012 presidential election, and particularly during the Republican presidential primary debates, prompting Adam Sharp, head of Twitter's Government, News and Social Innovation team, to boast, "All this explosive growth in conversation has fueled Twitter as a platform for civic debate and created a massive data set for analysis . . . it's easy to see why pundits are calling 2012 'the Twitter election'" ("A New Barometer," 2012).

To better understand citizens' social media behaviors as part of the "Twitter election of 2012," we offer an exploratory study of viewers' "social watching" behaviors during a nationally televised Republican primary debate. Our analysis is guided by basic questions that explore participants' amount of tweeting during the debate and also the relationship between tweeting activity and political engagement attitudes and debate viewing effects. Finally, we also examine the relationship between tweet

content and debate viewers' overall candidate evaluation and assessment of candidates' debate performance.

Our first general research question (*What factors are associated with more frequent tweeting while viewing a televised presidential debate?*) examines important social and demographic factors, including gender (male/female), party identification (Republican/Democrat), political ideology (conservative/liberal), and one's social media use, including the size of one's social media network and the frequency with which one uses Twitter—the social media platform that is the focus of this study—to communicate with others. With this research question, we seek to identify possible differences in participants' social watching behaviors based on these key factors.

Our second research question (*What is the relationship between political engagement attitudes and frequency of tweeting while viewing a televised presidential debate?*) explores participants' social watching behaviors—tendency to tweet—and key political engagement attitudes that have been shown in past research to be affected by debate viewing. Specifically, our analysis examines the political engagement constructs of *political information efficacy* and *political campaign interest*. First, the concept of political information efficacy is an attitudinal construct grounded in important theoretical links between general political efficacy and one's feelings of confidence in the political knowledge one possesses. While traditional political efficacy has been defined as an individual's feelings that he or she has the ability to influence the political process (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954), the concept of political information efficacy is defined as the level of confidence one has in one's political knowledge and that one possesses sufficient knowledge to engage the political process through such behaviors as voting (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). A number of investigations in the context of televised presidential debates (e.g., McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney, Rill, & Gully, 2011) have found that debate exposure strengthens one's political information efficacy. In the current study, we are intrigued with the possibility that those with greater political information efficacy—those who feel more confident in their political knowledge—may in fact engage in greater social watching behavior with more frequent tweeting about the debate than those debate viewers with less political information efficacy. Political information efficacy, we feel, offers an important attitudinal construct that may help us better understand social watching behaviors in the political context.

Studies have also found that exposure to a candidate debate can heighten viewers' interest in the ongoing campaign (e.g., Lemert, Elliott, Nestvold, & Rarick, 1983; McKinney et al., 2011). Similar to the conceivable linkage between social watching behavior and political information efficacy, we are also interested in exploring the possible relationship between campaign interest and one's social watching behavior during a debate. Are those who are more interested in the campaign more likely to tweet their reactions to the debate message?

With our third research question (*Is there a relationship between tweet content and debate viewers' candidate preference and assessment of debate performance?*), we examine a number of possible relationships between tweet content and debate watchers' candidate evaluations. First, we wish to determine whether the candidates with the

greatest support and most positive image evaluations are also the subject of the most Twitter discussion among social watchers. Our analysis employs two measures of candidate evaluation, including vote choice and assessment of candidate image. Also, we draw on primary debate research as we seek to illuminate social watching message activity in response to a primary debate exchange. McKinney and Houston (2012) have argued that, unlike one's general-election candidate choice, the determination primary voters must make is a multifaceted decision involving assessments of primary candidates' viability and electability (see also Yawn, Ellsworth, Beatty, & Kahn, 1998). On one hand, primary voters are asked to decide which of their party's several candidates best represents and most clearly articulates party principles and ideas (party viability); at the same time, however, primary voters must also assess the matter of electability as they project to the general election contest and determine which party candidate would be the strongest challenger to face the opposition party's known or eventual nominee. As McKinney and Houston (2012) conclude, the primary debate encounter, featuring multiple candidates on the same stage at the same time, is perhaps the single most important campaign communication event to facilitate voters' comparative assessments of candidates' viability and electability. In the current study of social watching a presidential primary debate, we are interested in evaluating whether those candidates seen as most viable and/or electable, as well as those who gain most in viability and electability as a result of debate performance, are reflected in debate viewers' tweet content through frequency of candidate tweet mentions.

Method

Sample

A total of 94 respondents viewed the January 26, 2012, Republican primary debate from Jacksonville, Florida, that was broadcast nationally by CNN. The debate included the following four Republican candidates: former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, former Georgia representative and U.S. House speaker Newt Gingrich, former Pennsylvania U.S. senator Rick Santorum, and Texas governor Rick Perry. Of the 94 respondents, 64% were female and 36% were male. In terms of party affiliation, 45% were Republican, 38% were Democrat, and 17% identified themselves as Independent. The mean age of the respondents was 20 years, ranging in age from 18 to 30.

Procedures

Participants were all enrolled in basic communication courses and received extra course credit for taking part in this research. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous. During the recruitment phase, potential participants were instructed that they had to bring a laptop, smart phone, tablet computer, or some other form of mobile computing device with Internet access to the research session held in a

campus auditorium. They also were informed that they must have a public Twitter account already established to be eligible to participate in this research activity.

As they arrived, respondents completed online pretest questionnaires, which included demographic information and a series of items designed to measure their attitudes about politics and evaluations of the Republican primary candidates. The respondents then watched the first hour of the 90-minute debate in real time and were instructed to use their own Twitter account to tweet about the debate using the hashtag #mizdeb. Immediately following the debate the respondents completed a posttest questionnaire, which included repeat measures of the political attitude and candidate evaluation items.

Measures

Political ideology. To measure political ideology, participants were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 10 (*extremely conservative*).

Social media use. Participants' overall social media use was measured with questions that assessed size of one's Twitter network and also how frequently one used their Twitter account. Size of Twitter network was a sum of how many people a participant followed on Twitter and also of how many people followed that participant on Twitter. To determine frequency of Twitter use, participants responded to two questions: how frequently they posted updates (tweeted) using their Twitter account and how often they checked their Twitter account. Responses included *rarely or never, a few times per month, a few times per week, once per day*, and *several times per day*.

Political information efficacy. A four-item scale was used to measure political information efficacy (PIE). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (using a 5-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) on four statements reflecting their level of confidence in their political knowledge (including "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics," "I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people," "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," and "If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for"). Consistent with past research (e.g., Kaid et al., 2007; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney et al., 2011; McKinney & Rill, 2009), Cronbach's alpha for this measure reached acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .91$).

Political campaign interest. Four-items were used to measure the amount of interest the participant had in the ongoing 2012 campaign. This scale has been used in previous research (McKinney et al., 2011). Participants were asked to indicate their responses on 5-point scales to questions including, "How informed are you about the Republican presidential primary campaign?" (answers ranging from *very well informed* to *very uniformed*), "How interested are you in the Republican presidential primary campaign?" (answers ranging from *very interested* to *very uninterested*), "How often have

you been exposed to media coverage of the Republican presidential primary campaign?" (answers ranging from *a lot* to *never*), and "How often have you talked with other people about the Republican presidential primary campaign?" (answers ranging from *a lot* to *never*). Consistent with past research (e.g., McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney et al., 2011), Cronbach's alpha for this measure reached acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

Candidate preference and evaluation. Before and after the debate, participants were asked to indicate their candidate vote preference, assess candidate image, and also evaluate the candidates in the debate in terms of electability and viability.

Candidate preference. Vote choice was determined by asking participants if they were going to vote in a Republican primary, for whom they would vote. All candidates appearing in the debate were presented as response options, along with an undecided option, and participants were instructed to select only one candidate.

Candidate image evaluation. To measure perceptions of candidate image, the "feeling thermometer" was utilized (Rosenstone, Kinder, Miller, & the National Election Studies, 1997). Both before and after debate viewing, participants were asked to indicate their overall feelings toward each candidate on a scale with possible responses ranging from 0 to 100, where scores between 0 and 49 indicate unfavorable feelings, 50 degrees indicates a neutral evaluation, and scores ranging from 51 to 100 degrees indicate a favorable evaluation of the candidates.

Candidates' pre and post feeling thermometer means and standard deviations included the following pre feeling scores: Paul $M = 48.29$, $SD = 21.25$; Romney $M = 46.88$, $SD = 25.76$; Santorum $M = 39.24$, $SD = 22.80$; Gingrich $M = 37.46$, $SD = 26.32$. Post feeling scores were as follows: Paul $M = 70.75$, $SD = 23.55$; Romney $M = 62.08$, $SD = 27.69$; Santorum $M = 42.06$, $SD = 24.14$; Gingrich $M = 23.26$, $SD = 24.46$

Candidate viability and electability. Our measures of candidate viability and electability were adapted from Yawn et al. (1998). To determine each candidate's viability, participants were asked at both pre- and posttesting, "Of the following Republican candidates [Gingrich, Paul, Romney, Santorum], how likely do you think it is that each candidate will win the Republican nomination?" and were instructed to select one choice for each candidate, with choice options ranging from *very unlikely* to *very likely*.

Candidates' pre and post viability means and standard deviations included the following pre viability scores: Paul $M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.92$; Romney $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.17$; Santorum $M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.86$; Gingrich $M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.07$. Post viability scores were these: Paul $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.28$; Romney $M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.03$; Santorum $M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.99$; Gingrich $M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.20$.

The measure of candidate electability included on both the pre- and posttests asked, "For each of the following Republican candidates [Gingrich, Paul, Romney Santorum], how likely is it that each can beat President Barack Obama in the 2012 general

election?" Participants were instructed to select one choice for each candidate, with choice options ranging from *very unlikely* to *very likely*.

Candidates' pre and post electability means and standard deviations included the following pre electability scores: Paul *M* = 2.28, *SD* = 1.05; Romney *M* = 2.72, *SD* = 1.16; Santorum *M* = 2.13, *SD* = 0.83; Gingrich *M* = 2.39, *SD* = 1.00. Post electability scores were as follows: Paul *M* = 3.03, *SD* = 1.20; Romney *M* = 3.27, *SD* = 1.12; Santorum *M* = 2.22, *SD* = 1.13; Gingrich *M* = 2.21, *SD* = 1.07.

Tweet Content

Prior to the debate the participants were instructed to tweet throughout the debate using the Twitter hashtag #mizdeb. Participants were also asked in their online survey to supply their Twitter user name that they were using to post their #mizdeb tweets. The tweets posted using the supplied hashtag were harvested with the online tweet collector Datasift.com. We then matched the specific user names that the participants provided to the tweets posted so that we could analyze the specific tweet content in relation to the experimental data collected. In total, there were 1,350 tweets posted to the #mizdeb live stream.

Tweet frequency. We calculated how many tweets were posted by each participant. This was accomplished by computationally counting the number of times each user name posted a tweet.

Candidate mentions. Each tweet was computationally searched for whether it included a candidate's name (including uses of first, last, or both names, as well as candidate nicknames and abbreviations such as "BO" and "Mittens"). While a single tweet could include more than one candidate's name, these tweets were excluded from our analysis of each candidate's distinct tweet mentions.

Analysis

Raw frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used to describe results. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to test for associations between variables. Paired samples *t* tests were used to test for pre- and posttest differences in variables.

Results

Our first research question explored which key social and demographic factors were associated with participants' frequency of tweeting while watching the televised Republican primary debate. In terms of gender, male participants tweeted significantly more about the debate than females ($r = -.22$, $p = .02$). In terms of party identification and political ideology, results revealed that being a Democrat ($r = -.18$, $p = .04$) and reporting a liberal political ideology ($r = -.19$, $p = .03$) were associated with tweeting more about the debate.

We also were interested in the relationship between participants' social media use and social watching behaviors. Respondents with a larger Twitter network (including followers and follows) tweeted more frequently about the debate ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). There was no relationship between how often one tweeted about the debate and reported Twitter use (measured as predebate frequency of tweeting and checking one's twitter account).

Our second research question explored the relationship between participants' social watching behaviors and key political engagement attitudes, including PIE and political campaign interest. First, following exposure to the one-hour debate program, participants' PIE increased significantly ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.977$) compared to their predebate PIE ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(94) = 5.35$, $p < .001$. In terms of PIE and social watching, participants with higher predebate levels of PIE tweeted about the debate more often ($r = .31$, $p = .001$). Also related to PIE and social media use in general, we found that participants with higher predebate levels of PIE had larger twitter networks ($r = .25$, $p = .008$).

In analyzing the relationship between participants' campaign interest and social watching behavior, we first assessed interest in the ongoing campaign as a single measure (combining how informed about the campaign, how interested in the campaign, how often exposed to campaign media coverage, and how often talked with others about the campaign) and found that combined predebate campaign interest was significantly related to more frequently tweeting about the debate ($r = .29$, $p = .002$). Next, as two of our campaign interest items represent behavioral measures (how often exposed to campaign media coverage and how often talked with others about the campaign) and responses to these questions would not necessarily change following viewing the 60-minute debate program, we isolated and examined separately the two remaining campaign interest items. Here, we found that participants reported being significantly more informed about the campaign after viewing the debate ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.88$) compared to before the debate ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(93) = 8.00$, $p < .001$. Also, participants became significantly more interested in the election following debate viewing ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.13$) than they were before the debate ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(93) = 7.07$, $p < .001$.

Our third research question explored the relationship between tweet content (tweets with distinct or individual candidate mentions) and candidate evaluations, including vote choice, assessment of candidate image, and evaluations of viability and electability. Table 1 presents results for each of these measures. Specifically, in terms of frequency of distinct candidate tweet mentions, Ron Paul led all candidates with the most mentions, followed by Mitt Romney, with Rick Santorum garnering the third most tweet mentions and Newt Gingrich receiving the fewest mentions of all candidates.

Next, Table 1 provides feeling thermometer, viability, and electability pre to post change scores. Positive change values indicate improvement in a candidate's postdebate evaluation, with negative values indicating a candidate losing ground following his debate performance. The value for each change score is based on a calculation of post minus pre mean scores.

Table 1. Tweet Mentions and Candidate Evaluations.

Candidate	Tweet mentions	Feeling thermometers	Viability	Electability	Vote choice (%)		
		Change	Change	Change	Pre	Post	Change
Paul	278	22.15	.82	.85	19 (18)	52 (49)	33 (31)
Romney	158	16.38	.47	.54	27 (25)	33 (31)	6 (6)
Santorum	111	3.78	.00	.05	1 (1)	2 (2)	1 (1)
Gingrich	103	−14.19	−.46	−.22	10 (9)	3 (3)	−7 (6)
Undecided	—	—	—	—	43 (41)	10 (9)	−33 (32)

Within the vote choice section, the value in parentheses represents the number of participants (*n*) within that cell.

Participants' candidate feeling thermometer assessments show Ron Paul with the greatest gains in postdebate image evaluation, followed by Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, and then Newt Gingrich, who was the only candidate whose feeling thermometer and image evaluation decreased following the debate.

The pattern of pre to post change candidate viability reveals Ron Paul with the greatest gains, followed by Mitt Romney, with Rick Santorum third among the four candidates and registering no change in his viability assessment, and Newt Gingrich as the only candidate whose viability score decreased following his debate performance.

Assessments of candidates' electability follow the very same pattern as both feeling thermometer and viability pre to post change: Ron Paul had the greatest gains in his electability score, followed by Mitt Romney, with Rick Santorum's electability only slightly improving following the debate, while Newt Gingrich was the only candidate whose electability assessment decreased following the debate.

Finally, participants' vote choice is also displayed in Table 1, including each candidate's pre/post level of support and net change. In assessing candidate vote choice, we find that the overall net change in postdebate vote again mirrors the order of each of the other candidate evaluation measures, including distinct candidate tweet mentions: Ron Paul achieved the greatest gains in support, followed by Mitt Romney, with Rick Santorum only slightly increasing his support and in third place overall in terms of vote choice, while Newt Gingrich was the only candidate whose support decreased following his debate performance.

Discussion

Our examination of young citizens' social watching a Republican primary debate reveals much about presidential campaign debate viewing in general, as well as intriguing findings regarding social watching behaviors. First, as past research has found (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), exposure to a campaign debate message has a number of positive effects on citizens' political engagement attitudes. Following the

60-minute debate, our participants felt they were more informed about the ongoing 2012 presidential campaign, were more confident in the political knowledge they possessed (had greater PIE), and were more interested in the election. The debate also aided viewers in making their candidate selection, as the largest number of respondents (43%) indicated they were undecided before the debate yet far fewer were undecided (only 10%) following the debate. As a form of campaign communication that facilitates candidate selection and promotes the development of more informed, engaged and interested citizens, televised presidential debates—despite their flaws—are an important and useful feature of our electoral process.

Analysis of participants' social watching behaviors provides preliminary yet important insight into young citizens' use of social media in conjunction with a televised political message. First, that male participants tweeted more about the debate than females seems to run counter to overall social media use, as females are significantly more likely to use social networking sites (Brenner, 2013). Yet, within the context of social watching a political event, we might interpret males' more frequent tweeting in conjunction with our finding that also reveals those with greater PIE tweeted about the debate more often. On this front, further analysis of PIE reveals that male participants reported significantly greater PIE ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.19$) than female participants ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(92) = 8.76$, $p = .004$. Males, seemingly more confident in their political knowledge than females, expressed their political views and reactions to the debate through more frequent tweeting.

The finding that Democrat participants and those who reported a more liberal political ideology tweeted more about the debate does, in fact, agree with the emerging picture of the greater Twittersphere. As previously noted, analysis by the Pew Research Center (2013, p. 1) has found that Twitter reaction to political events in general is more "pro-Democratic and liberal" than overall public opinion. Even within our small slice of "the public," consisting of 94 Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, it was participants identifying as Democrat and more liberal who engaged in greater debate tweeting, even though the debate featured Republican primary candidates. Here, more research is warranted to better understand the political and ideological differences in social watching political events.

Our results also point to interesting links between political and even greater social media engagement and willingness to participate in social watching behavior such as live-tweeting a televised candidate debate. A profile of the more politically engaged citizen who seems more willing to tweet politics emerges from our results as those with greater campaign interest and also those who are more confident in their political knowledge tweeted more frequently about the debate. Also, greater social media engagement revealed interesting connections with social watching politics as respondents with a larger Twitter network tweeted more frequently about the debate, and those with a larger Twitter network were significantly more confident in their political knowledge. Here, too, more research is needed to better understand the relationships between social media use and political engagement.

Perhaps the most interesting and revealing findings from the current study are those that show a very clear and repeated pattern between tweet content—mentions of

candidates—and participants' various candidate evaluations. While viewing the Republican primary debate, our participants tweeted most often about Ron Paul, followed by Mitt Romney, with Rick Santorum in third place in terms of total number of tweets, and Newt Gingrich receiving the least amount of tweet attention. This same prioritization can be found (see Table 1) in every measure (net change) of candidate evaluation we incorporate in our analysis, including feeling thermometer scores, viability and electability assessments, and vote choice. Ron Paul was clearly the subject of most tweeters' attention, and he gained the most in terms of his image/feeling thermometer assessment, he achieved the greatest gains in viability and electability, and he went from third place in predebate vote choice (trailing Mitt Romney and undecided) to top of the pack in terms of vote choice following the debate. In each case, all other candidates' level of Tweet mentions had corresponding gains (or, in the case of Newt Gingrich, losses) in candidate evaluation measures. While our participants' support for Ron Paul is in line with his wider appeal to youth and college-age voters who were attracted to his campaign's more libertarian message of individual rights and personal freedoms, less government involvement, and antimilitary views (Goodale, 2012), Paul's gains in popularity among our participants is clearly a function of their social watching behaviors during this primary debate.

These findings suggest that the candidates who generate the most social watching attention achieve corresponding gains in terms of debate watchers' candidate evaluations. We should also point out that the social watching attention a candidate receives seems to be related to the notice they generate from their actual debate performance, rather than predebate standing or front-runner status. As predebate vote choice indicates (see Table 1), Mitt Romney was the favored candidate—over Ron Paul—before the debate; and Romney was viewed as the more viable and electable Republican candidate (see pre/post mean scores presented previously in the method section). Still, even though Mitt Romney was the favored candidate on several measures before the debate, Ron Paul captured the attention—indicated by tweeting activity—of our participants as well as the most positive postdebate evaluations. This important result should be added to the emerging social media analysis that has linked frequency of Twitter mentions with commercial and political success. For example, Asur and Huberman's (2010) analysis finds that Twitter "chatter" regarding movies can be used to forecast box-office success. Also, Tumasjan et al. (2011) examined more than 100,000 tweet messages during the 2009 German federal election and found that party mentions reflected the eventual election outcome. While we may not yet be to the point of determining election—or debate—winners based on candidates' tweet mentions, our initial analysis of debate viewers' social watching behavior is suggestive of such potential.

As an exploratory study, this examination of young citizens' social watching behaviors is limited in several respects. First, with only one case reported here, we need further investigation to determine if findings and patterns identified in this study—and particularly the apparent connections between candidate tweet mentions and debate viewers' candidate evaluations—occur in other campaign debates. Also, more thorough examination of tweet content, beyond frequency of candidate mention, would

be useful. Still, in the context of a primary campaign debate involving multiple candidates, assessment of which of the several candidates is the subject of greatest viewer attention is telling.

While our exploration of the "Twitter election of 2012" will likely soon give way to the next digital and social media advancement (or disruption), our pursuit as political communication scholars transcends the latest media technology or interactive tool for deeper understanding of citizens' communicative engagement and construction of our democratic polity. These new avenues for citizen interaction and forms of media and political engagement demand fresh research approaches, new questions, and cutting-edge methods of analysis. Our exploration of social watching a televised political event leaves many questions unanswered and provides ample opportunity for further investigation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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