Let the People Speak

The Public’s Agenda and Presidential Town Hall Debates

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This study argues that a “devolution” of the presidential town hall debate as public sphere has occurred, whereby every 4 years citizens’ freedom to participate in their debate—as they see fit—has been seriously restricted. The primary purpose of this study is to examine how well the town hall presidential debate, particularly in its current form, addresses issues of greatest concern to the American public. Specifically, to test how well the dialogue of a town hall debate matches the public’s campaign issue agenda, as well as examine possible changes over time, analysis compares the issues discussed in both the 2004 and 1992 town hall debates to the agenda of issues that citizens claimed were most important to them. Results suggest that as candidates have gained greater control over the town hall’s structure and resulting dialogue, the ability of this forum to reflect a citizen’s issue agenda has greatly diminished.

Keywords: presidential debates; town hall debate; public sphere; public agenda

Ann Bronsing, a 63-year-old grandmother from Chesterfield, Missouri, declared following the second 2004 presidential debate, “We feel we represented America well... and asked the questions they would have asked” (Bell, 2004, p. A14). Bronsing was one of the 130 “undecided” citizens from the St. Louis area selected randomly by the Gallup polling organization to question candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry during the 2004 presidential town hall debate. This debate forum continued a practice, first introduced in 1992, of allowing citizens to directly question their would-be presidential leaders. As Schroeder (2000, p. 30) reports, it was actually candidate Bill Clinton who successfully negotiated the establishment of the first town hall debate. Having engaged in numerous town hall meetings throughout his presidential campaign, Governor Clinton argued that citizens, rather than journalists, should be included in the debate dialogue. Of course, Clinton also realized that such a debate would likely favor his communicative abilities to connect with the common citizen—providing him a nationally televised forum to showcase his capacity to “feel their pain” (Maggs, 2004).

With overwhelming public support for these town hall exchanges (e.g., Carlin & McKinney, 1994; McKinney, 2005), the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD)
continued the candidate-citizen forums during the 1996, 2000, and, most recently, the 2004 debate series. The direct insertion of citizen participation in debate dialogue reflects a belief that debates exist—in theory at least—to serve the public. Current CPD Executive Director Janet Brown expressed a philosophy of citizen ownership of debates when she claimed, “These [debates] are the single set of political events that the public still thinks belongs to them” (Marks, 2000, p. A1). In fact, the advent of the town hall debate was regarded by some as a rejuvenation of the public sphere in presidential campaigns. In their analysis of the inaugural 1992 town hall exchange, Depoe and Short-Thompson (1994) concluded that the “debate format featuring direct citizen participation provided an opportunity for the emergence of a public space where politicians could be held accountable for arguments they make to audiences” (p. 85).

Yet, how has “the people’s debate” performed in practice? Is Ann Bronsing of Chesterfield, Missouri, correct? Do these “undecided” citizens actually query the presidential candidates about campaign issues that are considered most important to the voting public? In short, just how well do town hall debates reflect the public’s issue agenda? Close scrutiny of the “evolution” of town hall debates suggests that our presidential candidates have maneuvered to gain nearly complete control over the town hall exchange since the debate was first introduced in 1992. In fact, the principal argument of this study is that a “devolution” of the town hall debate as public sphere has occurred, whereby every 4 years citizens’ freedom to participate in their debate—as they see fit—has been seriously restricted. The available evidence also suggests that as candidates have gained greater control over the town hall’s structure and resulting dialogue, the ability of this forum to reflect a citizen’s issue agenda has greatly diminished.

The purpose of this study is to examine how well the town hall presidential debate, in its current form, addresses the issue concerns of the American public. Specifically, to test how well the dialogue of a town hall debate matches the public’s campaign issue agenda, as well as examine possible changes over time, analysis will compare issues discussed in both the 2004 and 1992 town hall debates to the agenda of issues that citizens claimed were most important to them. Following a brief review of relevant debate studies analyzing whose interests and agendas are typically addressed in debate dialogue, a description of the structural changes in presidential town hall debates from 1992 to 2004 will be provided.

The Competing Interests of Presidential Debates

Presidential debate scholars have long argued that the primary function of debates should be to inform the public. Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1979) were among the first to put this thinking to empirical test by asking, “For whom are the debates held?” (p. 179). These scholars framed debate dialogue as the confluence of three agendas—the candidates’, media/journalists’, and the public’s agenda. Their content analysis of the 1960 and 1976 debates compared the candidates’ and panelists’ issue agendas with the existing public agenda, as evidenced from public opinion polls, finding very little relationship among these three agendas. In particular, they found that the public’s
issue agenda was least represented by the issues discussed in the debates, concluding, "Thus, it appears that the debates are held for the major party candidates." Perhaps somewhat presciently, these scholars suggested as a remedy that might place the public’s agenda at the fore “call-in shows with voters asking their questions directly” (p. 179). Although the phone-in question has yet to appear in presidential debating, citizens were allowed, beginning with the 1992 town hall debate, to question the candidates directly.

Also interested in the extent to which presidential debate dialogue reflects the public’s issue agenda, Benoit and Hansen (2001) analyzed all debates from 1960 to 2000 to see how well questions asked by journalists during the debates corresponded to the campaign issues most important to the public—with the public’s issue agenda measured through national opinion polls. Their findings were rather stark when considering the ability of debates to actually serve the information needs of the public:

In only one debate (1960) do journalists’ questions have significant positive correlations with the public’s interest.... Surprisingly, in 1992 and 2000 there were in fact significant negative correlations between the topics of journalists’ questions and the topics that mattered to voters. (p. 135)

Important to note for the current study, however, is that Benoit and Hansen’s (2001) analysis does not include the town hall debates of 1992 or 1996. Rather, their investigation was interested only in comparing a media agenda, reflected in journalists’ questions, to the public’s issue agenda.

Once citizens were included directly in presidential debates, beginning with the 1992 town hall forum, a series of qualitative studies found the town hall exchange to be the public’s most popular—and useful—debate (for a review of this research, see Carlin & McKinney, 1994; McKinney, 2005). Specifically, debate viewers felt that the citizen forum, more so than other debate types, addressed issues of greatest public concern, and also that the undecided citizen-questioners did not engage in “softball” or uninformed questioning of the candidates—a criticism often levied by political pundits and media critics of the town hall exchanges. Rather, debate questions posed by undecided citizens were more easily understood by, and therefore useful for, the many debate viewers who may not be following the ongoing campaign as closely as a journalist or political junkie (McKinney, Dudash, & Hodgkinson, 2003).

In a direct empirical test of the relationship between debate formats and issue discussion, Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2000) conducted an experimental study of the two 1996 presidential debates, examining the degree to which the issues discussed by Clinton and Dole in their journalist-led versus town hall debates addressed issues that voters thought were most important. The Kaid et al. (2000) findings point to a rather clear debate format effect relating to issue agendas (p. 76). In the first debate, conducted by single-moderator Jim Lehrer, the public’s issue agenda had very little relationship and an insignificant correlation with the issues discussed during the debate. Alternatively, in the town hall forum, the debate viewers’ predebate issue agenda was
significantly correlated with the rank order of issues raised by the citizen-questioners and discussed in the debate itself. This difference in the issue agenda agreement between the first and second debate supports the notion that a town hall forum, one that allows citizens to ask any question they wish of the candidates, taps more directly into the issue priorities of ordinary voters.

Yet, in 2004, presidential candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry participated in a vastly different town hall forum than that originally conceived and executed in 1992. The 2004 “pseudo”-citizen forum was described by one journalist as the “so-called ‘town hall’ debate in St. Louis . . . [that] has been so thoroughly straitjacketed and stifled by rules and caveats that the chance of viewing any real democracy at work is slim at best.” Indeed, the author of the present study supported this rather bleak assessment by noting, “It’s now to the point where these citizen-questioners are really just on the stage as props” (Reisman, 2004, p. A1). So, in the span of little more than a decade—from 1992 to 2004—how did we go from the “people’s debate” serving to rejuvenate the public sphere to a town hall forum in which citizens serve little more than TV props performing a parody of democracy in action for the American public? The following brief history of the presidential town hall debate’s (d)evolution provides an excellent case study in political candidates’ desire—and ability—to gain almost total control of their campaign communication, especially control of such “high-stakes” communication events as a nationally televised debate.

The Incredibly Shrinking Citizen in Presidential Town Hall Debates

From Richmond, Virginia, in October 1992, debate moderator Carole Simpson of ABC News introduced the very first presidential town hall debate with words that suggested the momentous nature of the occasion:

Now, tonight’s program is unlike any other presidential debate in history. We’re making history now and it’s pretty exciting. An independent polling firm has selected an audience of 209 uncommitted voters from this area. The candidates will be asked questions by these voters on a topic of their choosing—anything they want to ask about; and there is no subject matter that is restricted. Anything goes. We can ask anything.1

For the next 90 minutes, Ms. Simpson roamed the University of Richmond field house floor asking, “Who’s next?” or “Over here, who has a question for the candidates?” In turn, the sometimes visibly nervous citizens stood face-to-face with President George H. W. Bush, Governor Bill Clinton, and billionaire H. Ross Perot and quizzed the candidates with questions that had not been subjected to prior review or approval. Thus, as Simpson noted at the debate’s outset, these citizens had free reign. With a national audience of nearly 70 million watching, no one knew until the very moment they uttered their query what these citizens would ask the presidential candidates. No one—not authorities with the debate commission, the moderator, and cer-
tainly not the candidates or their campaign handlers—had knowledge of or control over what would be asked.

The 1992 citizen-questioners enjoyed additional freedoms as well, freedoms that would not be granted their counterparts in subsequent town hall meetings. In this first town hall debate, the citizens remained standing following their questions in the event they wished to follow up their original query, particularly if the candidates failed to address their specific concerns. For example, in responding to the question, “How can we create high-paying jobs with the education system we have, and what would you do to change it?” Governor Bill Clinton responded, “Let me reel some things off real quick, because you said you wanted specifics.” Following Clinton’s reeling off five specific programs that he claimed he wished to implement, the citizen pressed further, “But what are they going to cost?” Finally, candidate-to-citizen interaction was also permitted during the inaugural town hall debate. Bill Clinton, again, the master of the town hall forum, took full advantage of this feature on multiple occasions, engaging the citizen-questioners in direct exchange. For example, when a questioner wanted to know how the recession and economic problems facing the country had personally affected each of the candidates, Clinton began his response by asking the questioner, “Tell me now, how has it affected you?”

Four years later, with only two debate meetings included as part of the 1996 presidential debate series, a second town hall forum took place in San Diego, California. Yet we find in the negotiated debate agreement between candidates Bob Dole and Bill Clinton that the 1996 citizen-questioners would not be allowed the same freedoms to control the debate dialogue as their 1992 counterparts. In the 1996 forum, citizens were not allowed to stand while questioning the candidates, nor were they allowed any follow-up questions. During the 1996 town hall debate, however, questioners were still permitted to ask any question they wished without prior screening and approval from moderator Jim Lehrer (McKinney & Lamoureux, 1999).

Perhaps the exclusion of follow-up questions in the San Diego forum resulted from the candidates and their negotiators learning from 1992 the dangers of allowing citizens to press the candidates to respond to their questions. One of the more memorable moments of the 1992 debate series, in fact, occurred when President George H. W. Bush attempted to respond to the question, “How has the national debt personally affected each of your lives? And if it hasn’t, how can you honestly find a cure for the economic problems of the common people if you have no experience in what’s ailing them?” At first, Bush began to answer this question with an explanation of the national debt; the questioner then interrupted the president to clarify that she wanted him to address how the current recession and economic difficulties facing the country had personally affected him. Bush finally responded to this interlocutor, “Look . . . I’m not sure I get it. Help me with the question here and I’ll try to answer it.” This exchange, particularly Bush’s somewhat terse response that “I’m not sure I get it,” was interpreted by the media as evidence that the president was simply out of touch with the economic struggles of ordinary Americans (Depoe & Short-Thompson, 1994, p. 93). Clearly, although such format restrictions as allowing no follow-up questioning might protect candidates from being pressed to clarify answers or to provide greater detail,
not permitting such questioning allows candidates to further control the debate dialogue by ignoring or sidestepping issues raised by the citizen-questioners.

Even greater restrictions were placed on the citizens who participated in the 2000 George W. Bush–Al Gore town hall forum. For the first time, the undecided citizens were required to submit their questions to moderator Jim Lehrer before the debate, who then screened and selected which questions would be asked of the candidates during the debate. At the appointed time, the selected citizen was invited to stand and ask his or her prescreened and approved question. As in 1996, no follow-up questioning was allowed. Also, candidates were prohibited from any form of interaction with the assembled crowd. For example, the following question was put to Vice President Gore: “Mr. Vice President, in the school district in which I work and in countless others across the nation, we face crumbling school buildings, increased school violence, student apathy, overcrowding, lack of funding, lawsuits, and the list goes on… What can you tell me and my fellow American teachers today about your plans for our immediate future?” Gore began his response by asking this teacher, “What grade do you teach?” Just as the citizen uttered the word “high…” moderator Jim Lehrer blustered, “No, no, no, no… that’s a violation of the rules, Vice President Gore… Please, sir!” This exchange begins to illustrate the “citizen as prop” characterization in which the selected citizens are asked to stand on cue and recite their preapproved question, yet any dialogue between the candidate and citizen is strictly forbidden—even as seemingly innocuous as a concerned teacher revealing what grade she teaches.

Finally, the candidates’ attempts to take complete charge of the people’s debate only intensified with the 2004 town hall forum when the two campaigns actually codified numerous restrictions and controls to be placed on the citizen-questioners, with the campaigns going so far as to dictate punishments should the citizens not behave as instructed. The author of this study, through national media contacts who covered the presidential debate negotiations, obtained a copy of the 32-page “Memorandum of Understanding” negotiated by Vernon Jordan Jr. for the Kerry campaign and James A. Baker III for the Bush campaign. The document begins by stating, “This Memorandum of Understanding constitutes an agreement between Kerry-Edwards, ’04, Inc. and Bush-Cheney, ’04 Inc. (the ‘campaigns’) regarding the rules that will govern debates in which the campaigns participate in 2004,” and is signed by Bush campaign manager Ken Mehlman and Mary Beth Cahill for the Kerry campaign.

The New York Times reported that the 2004 debate negotiations resulted in the most detailed agreement ever produced regulating presidential debates, with particular restrictions devised for the town hall exchange:

The memorandum of understanding negotiated by the campaigns also includes an unusual level of prescriptions, particularly over the town-hall-style debate, which some say undermines the idea of a voter-driven discussion… the agreement includes five pages of [town hall] provisions—up from only one page in 2000. (Wilgoren, 2004, p. A4)

Specific citizen restrictions and punishments outlined in the agreement include the following:
7 (a) There shall be no audience participation in the October 8 debate other than as described below. Other than an audience member asking a question as permitted by this section, at the start of the October 8 debate and in the event of and in each instance whereby an audience member(s) attempts to participate in the debate by any means thereafter, the moderator shall instruct the audience to refrain from any participation in the debate as described in section 9 (a) (viii) below;
7 (d) The audience members shall not ask follow-up questions or otherwise participate in the extended discussion, and the audience member's microphone shall be turned off after he or she completes asking the question;
7 (e) Prior to the start of the debate, audience members will be asked to submit their questions in writing to the moderator. No third party, including both the Commission and the campaigns, shall be permitted to see the questions. The moderator shall approve and select all questions to be posed by the audience members to the candidates. . . . The moderator will further review the questions and eliminate any questions that the moderator deems inappropriate. . . . If any audience member poses a question or makes a statement that is in any material way different than the question that the audience member earlier submitted to the moderator for review, the moderator will cut-off the questioner and advise the audience that such non-reviewed questions are not permitted. Moreover, the Commission shall take appropriate steps to cut-off the microphone of any such audience member that attempts to pose any question or statement different than that previously posed to the moderator for review.

Those citizens in Richmond, Virginia, in 1992, the first to question presidential candidates in debate, were likely unaware of just how lucky they were. It all seemed so simple: gather a group of undecided voters together with the presidential candidates and let these citizens question the candidates as they saw fit. Yet, by 2004, this rather straightforward expression of democracy now required high-powered legal teams drafting pages of contractual restrictions deemed necessary to control the unpredictable citizens—or, more accurately, needed to protect candidates from a rare moment of spontaneity. Certainly, on a philosophical level, one might agree that a democracy should allow citizens unrestricted access to their representatives and the freedom to question and hold to account their leaders. Yet, a very different question, one that suggests empirical investigation, is whether citizen control of a town hall debate really matters? Does it matter, in terms of the resultant debate dialogue, just who controls the selection of questions or whether citizens are allowed to follow up their questions or even engage in direct interaction with the candidates? The specific measure that is of primary interest in this study is whether a tightly controlled citizens' debate, or one in which the citizen is in control, seems to produce a debate dialogue any more or less in line with the issues of greatest concern to the American public. To investigate this issue, the following research question is posited:

Does a town hall debate in which citizens are free to question candidates however they wish better reflect the public's issue agenda than a town hall debate in which the questions are controlled by a journalist/moderator?
Method

The first step in answering the research question was to obtain transcripts of the 1992 and 2004 presidential town hall debates (from the Commission on Presidential Debates’s Web site at www.debates.org) so that the issue agenda featured in each debate could be determined. The 1992 town hall debate represents the town hall forum in which citizen-questioners had complete freedom to question the candidates, and the 2004 town hall exchange represents the tightly controlled debate with questions selected by the journalist/moderator, Charles Gibson of ABC News and Good Morning America. Next, a Lexis-Nexis search was conducted to locate a public opinion poll reporting those topics the public identified as their most important campaign issues. Although many polls exist, there is usually very little disparity among the major national polls (such as Harris, Roper, Gallup, The New York Times, etc.) as to the public’s most important campaign issues. Also, throughout a general election campaign, very little movement typically occurs regarding the public’s top issue concerns. Two selection criteria were used to obtain appropriate public opinion polls to compare to the debate dialogue featured in both the 1992 and 2004 early October town hall debates. First, a national poll reported just before each debate was sought; also, a poll conducted by the same polling firm was desired to ensure some level of uniformity. For both 1992 and 2000, the Gallup poll was selected to represent the public’s most important campaign issues.

Next, using the issues identified in the opinion polls as issue categories, two coders placed each of the debate questions in the appropriate category. For example, in the 1992 town hall forum, the question, “I’d like to ask Governor Clinton, do you attribute the rising costs of health care to the medical profession itself, or do you think the problem lies elsewhere? And what specific proposals do you have to tackle this problem?” was coded as a health care question. Or, in 2004, the question, “Senator Kerry, we have been fortunate that there have been no further terrorist attacks on American soil since 9/11. Why do you think this is?” was classified as homeland security/terrorism. An issue category was created for any topic discussed in the debate that was not represented in the opinion poll. Cohen’s (1960) kappa, which controls for agreement by chance, was used to calculate intercoder reliability of both coders’ identification of the sixteen 1992 debate questions and the twenty-two 2004 questions. The kappa achieved for categorizing the questions was .95 for 1992 and .81 for 2004, with a mean intercoder reliability of .88.¹

Once debate questions were coded, a word count was conducted to represent the total debate dialogue devoted to the discussion of each issue. This count was used to construct the issue discussion agenda for each debate. A total word count was performed to provide a more exact measure of each debate’s issue agenda, rather than simply constructing a debate agenda based on the total number of questions corresponding to each issue category. Specifically, different structural features of the two debates necessitated the word count. For example, due to follow-up questioning in the
1992 debate—a feature not allowed in 2004—when a citizen pressed a candidate to further explain his answer to a particular question, discussion of this issue would be extended and thus greater debate dialogue and emphasis would be devoted to a particular issue. Also, candidates’ responses were timed differently between the two debates. In 1992, there were no set time limits on responses, unlike the tightly controlled candidate responses in 2004 (thus resulting in the greater number of questions posed in the 2004 debate). This structural difference allowed candidates, in 1992 at least, to respond in greater length to some questions, particularly those in which citizens pressed for more details, while devoting less time to other questions. Again, rather than simply counting each question equally, a count of the total words devoted to discussion of each issue provides a more accurate measure of each debate’s issue agenda. As reported in Table 1, for example, the topic of education represented 17.93% of the total dialogue of the 1992 town hall debate.

Although one may argue that counting words spoken by the candidates, rather than questions asked by citizens, captures a candidate’s—rather than a citizen-questioner’s—issue agenda, this criticism does not reflect the actual dynamics of the town hall exchange. Particularly, Benoit and Hansen (2001) found that candidates’ responses to questions asked in presidential primary debates correlated significantly with the questions asked; also, and more to the point of the current study, Hansen (2001) found that in the three different debates in 2000—a single-moderator debate, the candidate “chat” debate, and the town hall debate—the only debate that showed a significant relationship between the questions asked of the candidates and their actual responses was the town hall debate. Therefore, this research supports the notion that in town hall debates, the candidates’ responses truly reflect the issues raised by the citizens’ questions.

Finally, Spearman’s rho was computed for both the 1992 and 2004 issue agendas, comparing the rank order of the public’s most important issues—as reflected in the national opinion poll—to the rank-ordered issue agenda that emerged from the town hall debate discussion.

Results

As indicated in Table 1, the 1992 issue agendas, comparing the public’s most important issues to the issues discussed in the 1992 town hall debate, reveal a significant correlation ($\rho = .64, p < .01$). In 2004, however, there is no association between the public’s and town hall debate’s issue agendas ($\rho = .09, ns$).

In 1992, we find that the public’s top three issues of concern (health care, budget deficit, and education) were likewise the top three issues discussed in the town hall debate (education represented 17.93% of the debate dialogue, health care represented 16.82% of the debate discussion, and discussion of the budget deficit represented 13.34% of the total debate dialogue). Furthermore, crime, which was the public’s fourth most important issue, was the fifth topic of discussion in the debate (10.89% of the debate dialogue). Jobs/unemployment, sixth among the public’s greatest issue concerns, was the fourth most frequently discussed issue in the debate (11.33%). In
Table 1

1992 Issue Agendas (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public’s Most Important Issues</th>
<th>Issues Discussed in 1992 Town Hall Debate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Health care 30</td>
<td>1. Education 17.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Budget deficit 29</td>
<td>2. Health care 16.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Education 14</td>
<td>3. Budget deficit 13.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Environment 3</td>
<td>5. Crime 10.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Jobs/unemployment 2</td>
<td>6. Tone of campaign 8.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Foreign policy 1</td>
<td>7. Social Security 8.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Moral values 1</td>
<td>8. Physical infrastructure 6.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Tone of campaign 0</td>
<td>9. Term limits 5.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Social Security 0</td>
<td>10. Environment 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Physical infrastructure 0</td>
<td>11. Foreign policy 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Term limits 0</td>
<td>12. Moral values 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $r = .64$, $p = .01$. $r$ represents Spearman’s rho, rank-order correlation of agendas.

total, when comparing the two 1992 issue agendas, we find that the environment was the only issue among the public’s top five concerns that was not addressed in the town hall debate. Otherwise, the remaining top five public issues also represented the top five issues of discussion in the 1992 town hall debate.

In addition to the environment, the 1992 town hall forum included no discussion of foreign policy matters or moral values, both issues that registered on the public’s list of important issues. Yet the 1992 citizens’ debate included discussion of Social Security, physical infrastructure, and term limits, which were not topics the public indicated as among their most important issues.

In 2004 (see Table 2), perhaps the greatest disparity between the public’s list of the most important issues and the citizens’ discussion was the fact that the top issue of public concern (economy/jobs) was among the least discussed issues in the 2004 town hall debate (ranked as the 10th debate issue at 5.24% of the total debate dialogue). The Iraq war, health care, and terrorism/homeland security were among the public’s top five issues of concern in 2004 and were among the top three issues discussed in the 2004 town hall debate. Yet the public also indicated that Social Security, education, and gay marriage were all issues of concern in 2004, but discussion of these issues was completely absent from the 2004 town hall debate. Finally, the 2004 town hall debate included discussion of several issues that were not among the public’s most important issues, including candidate character (which was actually the fourth greatest issue of debate discussion, representing just over 10% of the total debate dialogue), the draft, abortion, stem cell research, the deficit, and the Supreme Court.

Beyond the actual correlations of the two agendas for both 1992 and 2004, secondary analysis was conducted to examine how well the public’s top five issue concerns were represented in the debate dialogue. First, for each campaign year, a sum of the debate dialogue devoted to the public’s top five issue concerns was computed. In 1992, the public’s top five issues of health care, the budget deficit, education, crime, and the environment represented 61% of the 1992 town hall debate discussion. In
2004, discussion of the public’s top five issues, including the economy/jobs, the Iraq war, health care, terrorism/homeland security, and foreign policy, represented 52% of the 2004 debate dialogue. Analysis reveals a significant difference between the two debates (61% in 1992 vs. 52% in 2004), with significantly more debate dialogue in 1992 devoted to discussion of the public’s top five issue concerns ($df = 1$, $\chi^2 = 6.68, p < .01$).

**Discussion**

When considering the principal measure advanced in this study—whether the citizens’ debate reflects those issue concerns most salient to the American public—the results seem quite clear: When left to their own devices, citizens tend to get it right! In other words, without stricture or controls, the citizen-questioners assembled in Richmond, Virginia, in 1992 spent 90 minutes quizzing their presidential candidates and generated a discussion that closely mirrored the concerns of their fellow citizens. Yet once the political candidates and their handlers supposed the dangers of allowing citizens to actually participate freely in their debate, we end up, in 2004, with a debate dialogue that has very little relationship to the public’s agenda.

In fact, rather than a citizen-controlled forum, moderator Charles Gibson began the 2004 town hall debate by informing viewers that he was in charge—and was simply following the rules devised by the two campaigns—when he proclaimed in his introduction, “I have selected the questions to be asked, and also the order.” From the debate’s opening salvo, we begin to see a typical journalistic approach to candidate interrogation with this question regarding John Kerry’s “waffling” character: “Senator

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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public’s Most Important Issues</th>
<th>Issues Discussed in 2004 Town Hall Debate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Economy/jobs</td>
<td>1. Terrorism/homeland security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Iraq</td>
<td>2. Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Health care</td>
<td>3. Health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Terrorism/homeland security</td>
<td>4. Candidate character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Foreign policy</td>
<td>5. Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Education</td>
<td>7. Draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Taxes</td>
<td>8. Abortion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Candidate character</td>
<td>10. Economy/jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Environment</td>
<td>11. Taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Abortion</td>
<td>13. Supreme Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Deficit</td>
<td>15. Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: $r = .09, n.s.$
Kerry, after talking with several co-workers and family and friends, I asked the ones who said they were not voting for you, ‘Why?’ They said that you were too wishy-washy. Do you have a reply for them?” Here, we witness Patterson’s (1993) politics as “game schema”—with typical focus on candidate character—enacted with this Charles Gibson–selected question. Perhaps to shield himself from charges of partisan bias, Gibson made sure that toward the end of the debate, the discussion would include a question of George W. Bush’s character or leadership abilities—or, more precisely, Bush’s leadership failures—with this question: “President Bush, during the last four years, you have made thousands of decisions that have affected millions of lives. Please give three instances in which you came to realize you had made a wrong decision, and what you did to correct it. Thank you.”

As Patterson (1993) details, citizens, unlike journalists, commonly view politics through a “public policy schema” that seeks to understand how government decisions will affect their lives. Throughout the 1992 debate, we find citizens engaged in this approach to questioning, with such candidate queries as “Do you attribute the rising costs of health care to the medical profession itself, or do you think the problem lies elsewhere? And what specific proposals do you have to tackle this problem?” to “And the question is, what are your plans to improve the physical infrastructure of this nation, which includes the water system, the sewer system, our transportation systems, etc. Thank you.” or, finally, a question such as, “Please state your position on term limits, and, if you are in favor of them, how will you get them enacted?” Thus, with no coaching, prompting, or journalistic filtering, citizens expressed their concerns about specific public policies—and they demanded that candidates offer specific solutions.

The argument made here is not one of journalists’ inferiority and/or the superiority of the citizen (although one might construe the findings of this analysis to help build such a case). Certainly, the media and journalists play a crucial role in political communication in general and a very important role in presidential debates in particular. Yet citizens, too, have demonstrated their ability to perform an important function in the debate exchange. In a direct comparison of the debate questions asked by citizens to those questions proffered by journalists during the 1992 debate series, Eveland, McLeod, and Nathanson (1994) judged both the conciseness and clarity of questions and claimed that although reporters were more concise with their questions (based primarily on number of words per question), both citizens and journalists were equal in asking so-called unclear questions (based on such criteria as poor word choice, non sequiturs, and disjointed phrases). Journalists’ questions, however, were found to be more argumentative, accusatory, and leading than those from the undecided citizens. Finally, when analyzing question topics, journalists asked more questions relating to foreign policy and candidate character, whereas citizen questions focused more so on domestic issues and government policies.

This study’s direct comparison of issue agendas is not meant to suggest that in the practice of presidential debates we must achieve some sort of exact correspondence between the public’s most salient issue concerns and the topics argued in a debate. Certainly, there may be very important issues that do not register in a public opinion
poll that demand the consideration of our presidential candidates (and, in both the 1992 and 2004 town hall debates, a number of issues were raised in the debate discussion that were not on the public’s list of concerns—several more in the 2004 debate than in the 1992 exchange). In fact, with presidential debates occurring relatively late in a general election campaign—typically in October, just a few weeks before election day—one might argue that the public’s chief issue concerns will likely have already received a full hearing through the incessant media coverage of the yearlong (or 2- or 3-year) presidential campaign: therefore, perhaps the debates should delve into those matters and issues that have not yet received full coverage. Again, this argument assumes that all citizens have been closely following the ongoing campaign—listening, reading, and watching attentively the candidates’ every word. Yet, as Pfau (2003) points out, debates may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the interest of the “marginally attentive” citizen—those voters who normally eschew political reporting but will focus for a bit on the much-hyped debate encounter or, more likely, may be exposed to media coverage of the debates. It is for these citizens that a debate dialogue focused on the issues of greatest public concern is most valuable.

**Conclusion**

This project began with an assertion of the public’s “ownership” of debates, articulated by CPD Executive Director Janet Brown, who claimed, “These [debates] are the single set of political events that the public still thinks belongs to them” (Marks, 2000, p. A1). Certainly, if presidential debates are to belong to the public, the citizens’ town hall debate is—or should be—the one debate forum controlled by the public. Candidates have their ads, their staged-for- TV rallies, and their Internet sites; journalists and the news media have their full arsenal of talk radio, their nonstop broadcast networks and TV programming, and numerous print publications. Where, then, do we hear the citizen’s voice? What forms of political dialogue are controlled by the public?

Clearly, the public’s resources—and ability to control the mechanisms of political communication—are meager when compared to the enormous resources of our political candidates and media establishment. In short, when it comes to the citizens’ debate, the very simple plea “Let the people speak!” seems fitting. In the context of presidential debates, citizens should reclaim full control of their debate forum. This plea is made primarily to our presidential candidates who are ever fearful of relinquishing any control over message and image. Thus, this plea is made primarily to our debate organizers who must be willing to stand up to the candidates and their campaigns and represent the interests of the public.

The *Miami Herald*’s political cartoonist Jim Morin provided a possible glimpse of the future of presidential town hall debates with his sketch of a town hall meeting in which the banner above the presidential podium proclaimed, “Ask the President ( . . . any favorable question that we must approve in advance).” This citizen forum was being reported by a “perky” journalist to the side of the auditorium who announced,
"This has been a fake news correspondent reporting a fake story for a fake news broadcast at a fake town hall meeting . . . with a fake audience. Back to you, Tom." Although this depiction of democracy may seem rather silly, it is cast in a mo more serious light when one is reminded in this article of the vast changes that took place between 1992 and 2004 in our "real" presidential town hall debates. Looking ahead, to the presidential town hall of 2008 or 2012, if we continue to experience even more restrictions on our citizens’ debate, at the hands of our political candidates, the Morin cartoon may not seem so funny after all.

Notes

1. All direct quotations from presidential debates are taken from the official debate transcripts provided by the Commission on Presidential Debates and found at www.debates.org.
2. A PDF file of the 2004 “Memorandum of Understanding” can be obtained by contacting the author at McKinneyM@missouri.edu.

References

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