

DO PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES MATTER? EXAMINING A DECADE OF CAMPAIGN DEBATE EFFECTS

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This study responds to The Racine Group's (2002) call for campaign debate research that explores "the trans-campaign effects of debates on such matters as voting behavior, image formation, and attitude change" (p. 199). Our analysis of debate effects from 2000 to 2012 provides a number of important insights into how presidential campaign debates function in different campaign contexts. Specifically, we examine debate effects across multiple campaign periods, including analysis of the presidential election cycles and debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012; and we also explore campaign contexts in which incumbents are seeking reelection (2004 and 2012) as well as "open" races with no incumbent president engaged in general election debates. Finally, our analysis allows for comparative assessments across different types of debates as we include viewer responses to both Democrat and Republican primary and general election debates, as well as vice presidential debates. Overall, our findings support existing presidential debate research, provide a greater understanding of specific debate effects, and also raise a number of intriguing questions for future research.

Key Words: presidential debates, primary debates, debate effects, political cynicism, political information efficacy

It has become an expected narrative of the quadrennial U. S. presidential selection that once nominating conventions have adjourned, attention quickly turns to the next big event of the presidential campaign—the presidential debates. After months—sometimes years—of campaigning, major-party nominees finally meet face-to-face, often for the very first time, to persuade voters that each is more qualified than the opposition to lead the United States. During the predebate period marked by heightened media attention and by the candidates attempting to set debate expectations, it is typical for political pundits and journalists to speculate if the debates will be a “game changer,” or, on the other hand, if the debates will even matter at all. For some journalists, campaign strategists, and even academics, the debates’ usefulness seems to turn on their ability to affect the outcome of the presidential contest (Hu, 2012).

While campaign debates may well have their detractors, decades of research provide a convincing response to critics who question whether debates do in fact matter. From their ability to educate voters and positively affect normative attitudes, to their engagement of citizens in the ongoing campaign dialogue, and, yes, debates’ ability to influence votes and elections—especially in particularly tight races—there is compelling evidence to answer in the affirmative when asked, “Do debates matter?” (for comprehensive reviews of the extant campaign debate research, see Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; McKinney & Carlin, 2004; The Racine Group, 2002). In their white paper on campaign debate scholarship and agenda for future debate research that appeared in the pages of this journal, a group of noted debate scholars concluded, “Thus, while journalists and scholars display varying degrees of cynicism about the debates, few deny that viewers find them useful, and almost no one doubts that they play an important role in national campaigns” (The Racine Group, 2002, p. 201).

Indeed, debate scholars have increasingly moved beyond the more simplistic question of whether or not debates matter to focusing greater research attention on illuminating the various ways and specific contexts in which they matter. As The Racine Group (2002) argued, scholars need "to identify the underlying logic of debates" to better understand the specific effects we find, how these effects are achieved, and under what conditions and on which particular debate viewers we find certain effects (p. 215). The scholars of the Racine Group noted that existing approaches to campaign debate research are often lacking in "systematic, long-term coordination" (p. 201); and "we need sustained programmatic research on topics or puzzles that recur across debates . . . more comparative studies in which the operation of a particular variable can be examined in different debates" (p. 215).

The Racine Group's (2002) call for future debate research corresponds with Benoit and Holbert's (2008) call for broader communication research that highlights "empirical intersections," research agendas driven by greater study replication to identify "intersections between studies . . . [and] programmatic research which systematically investigates an aspect of communication with a series of related studies conducted across contexts" (p. 615). Such approach to scholarly work, Benoit and Holbert (2008) argue, allows researchers to build theory as related results

buildup over time and across studies [and] a series of relationships becomes evident . . . results that may arise at one point in time and within a particular context may not withstand the test of time, but this may never become known without replication. (p. 616)

The current study heeds the call for greater attention to "the trans-campaign effects of debates on such matters as voting behavior, image formation, and attitude change" (The Racine Group, 2002, p. 199). In fact, our specific exploration of debate viewing effects includes examination of candidate vote choice, candidate image evaluation, and debate effects on important political engagement attitudes, including political information efficacy and political cynicism. Our study explores debate effects across multiple campaign periods, including analysis of the presidential election cycles and debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012. We also explore campaign contexts in which incumbents are seeking reelection (2004 and 2012) as well as "open" races with no incumbent president engaged in general election debates. Finally, the programmatic research that we analyze allows for comparative assessments across different types of debates as we include viewer responses to both Democrat and Republican primary and general election debates, as well as vice presidential debates. Our principal goal is to explore "empirical intersections" found in the replicated studies that make up our combined analyses, allowing us to identify relationships and patterns on which we might begin to identify "general laws" and build theories of campaign debate effects (Benoit & Holbert, 2008, p. 616).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For many, the central question regarding a presidential debate's usefulness is whether or not debate viewing affects citizens' vote choice. On this question, the extant research points to very little change in voting intention following exposure to general election presidential debates (e.g., Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001; Benoit et al., 2003; Katz & Feldman, 1962; McKinney & Carlin, 2004). As political scientist Thomas Holbrook (1996) notes,

The perception of most [debate] viewers is colored by their political predispositions going into the debate . . . [and] the single best predictor of which candidate a viewer thought won a given debate is that viewer's predebate vote choice. (p. 114)

Although debates may not alter the voting preferences of the vast majority of previously committed viewers, other studies have found that among undecided, conflicted, or weakly committed voters, debates do help form voting preference or even change candidate selection (e.g., Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Geer, 1988; McKinney, 1994). In fact, Chaffee (1978) concluded from his analysis of the 1960 and 1976 presidential debates that influence on voters' candidate choice depends largely on the contextual dynamics of a given campaign, including the particular candidates engaged in debate. Chaffee (1978) identified four specific situations in which voters are most likely to find debates useful: (a) when at least one of the candidates is relatively unknown, (b) when many voters are undecided, (c) when the race appears close, and (d) when party allegiances are weak.

In our study's combined analysis, consisting of both primary and general election presidential and vice presidential debates across four election cycles (2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012), we examine debate viewers' candidate vote preference with the following question:

RQ1: What effect does viewing a presidential debate have on vote choice?

While general election presidential debates typically induce very little change in voter preference, a number of studies have found that primary debates have much greater effects on viewers (e.g., Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson, 2002; McKinney, Kaid, & Robertson, 2001; Wall, Golden, & James, 1988; Yawn, Ellsworth, Beatty, & Kahn, 1988). As Kennamer and Chaffee (1982) conclude, "What appears clear . . . is that the very early [campaign] phase is characterized by widespread lack of information among those who are not following the campaign closely, and uncertainty even among those who are" (p. 647). Voters in a primary campaign season, therefore, are more likely to be seeking information that introduces them to potentially unknown candidates and information that helps clarify often subtle differences among primary campaign rivals. Based on past findings regarding primary debates and candidate vote choice, we hypothesize the following when comparing our study's primary and general election debate viewer responses:

H1: Primary debates have a greater effect on debate viewers' vote choice than general election debates.

Candidate Evaluation

A great deal of presidential debate research has found that debate exposure affects viewer perceptions of candidates (e.g., Benoit et al., 2003; Benoit et al., 2001; McKinney & Carlin, 2004; McKinney, Dudash, & Hodgkinson, 2003; Zhu, Milavsky, & Biswas, 1994). In their summary of numerous studies that examined the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, Katz and Feldman (1962) observed, "There is little doubt . . . that the audience was busy analyzing the character of the contestants—their 'presentations of self'" (p. 195). Lanoue and Schrott (1991) also concluded from their analysis of subsequent general election presidential debates, "Viewers are far more likely to use debates to gain insight into each candidate's personality and character . . . A superior 'personal' presentation appears to be more important to voters than accumulation of issue-oriented debating 'points'" (p. 96).

While much of the presidential debate research on candidate evaluations has been conducted with general campaign debates, a few studies have found that primary debate exposure produces significant changes in viewers' perceptions of candidates (Benoit et al., 2002; McKinney et al., 2001; Pfau, 1987). Yet, in terms of the relative change in debate viewers' candidate assessment, no research exists that directly compares general and primary

debates' influence on candidate evaluation. On this point, as the research examining candidate choice reveals, it is during the early campaign phase and primary debate season that voters are still largely undecided and uninformed about the candidates, and thus, we might expect greater change in candidate evaluation during the primary period. Our study's combined analyses of both primary and general election debates across multiple election cycles allow us to compare primary and general debate effects on candidate evaluation. We first posit a general question regarding the influence of debates on viewers' candidate assessment, and then hypothesize a likely difference between general and primary debates:

RQ2: What effect does viewing a presidential debate have on candidate evaluation?

H2: Primary debates will have a greater effect on debate viewers' candidate evaluation than general election presidential debates.

Political Engagement Attitudes

Several studies have explored campaign debates' normative effects, finding that exposure to candidates engaged in televised debates positively affects citizens' democratic attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, debates have been found to heighten viewers' interest in the ongoing campaign (Chaffee, 1978; Wald & Lupfer, 1978), encourage citizens to seek out additional campaign information following their debate viewing (Lemert, 1993), and encourage greater participation in the campaign through such activities as talking to others about one's preferred candidate and increases in reported likelihood of voting (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979; Patterson, 2002). Our interest in debate effects on citizens' attitudes of political engagement reflects Michael Pfau's (2003) contention that debates have contributed to a strengthening of our political and electoral processes, and thus, "there are no other more important effects that scholars could document" (p. 32). The current study focuses on two such important normative democratic attitudes, political information efficacy and political cynicism.

Political Information Efficacy. Perhaps the cornerstone of a participatory democracy is the *informed* voter. While several scholars have focused their attention on the cognitive dimensions of political knowledge, chiefly the acquisition and processing of requisite political facts and information (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Popkin, 1991), another important element of political knowledge is the attitudinal element of knowledge attainment—specifically, how confident one is in what they know about politics. Here, Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) first developed the concept of Political Information Efficacy (PIE), an attitudinal construct with important theoretical links between general political efficacy and one's feelings of confidence in the political knowledge they possess. While traditional political efficacy has been defined as an individual's feeling 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 their political knowledge and that one possesses sufficient knowledge to engage the political process through such behaviors as voting and persuading others how to vote (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007).

Exploring the effects of campaign communication on PIE, studies have consistently found that debate exposure strengthens citizens' PIE (e.g., McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney, Rill, & Gully, 2011). Also, analysis by Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Yun, and LeGrange (2007) found that presidential debates are in fact more helpful than political ads in strengthening young voters' PIE. As one of the most information rich sources of campaign information, debates offer sustained exposure (typically 60 to 90

minutes) to issue and candidate image information and therefore seem to alleviate concerns that one may be ill-informed about the candidates and campaign issues. Supported by existing research findings, we predict the following:

H3: Viewing a presidential debate increases one's political information efficacy.

Existing studies examining PIE have all been in the context of general election debates, and research has not yet explored possible differences between primary and general election debates' effects on PIE. While past research has found much greater change from primary debate exposure on candidate vote choice and candidate image evaluation, we may also find that greater change in PIE occurs during the primary campaign period. Our analysis comparing debate effects from both primary and general election debates in the current study allows us to ask:

RQ3: Does viewing a primary debate have a greater effect on one's PIE than does viewing a general election debate?

Certainly, citizens' interest in politics and presidential campaigns vary a great deal. While a steady stream of political news and information may feed the media diet of political junkies, many more citizens are among the marginally attentive and follow political news and events much less closely. For those who follow politics intently, they may well have greater confidence in their political knowledge, higher PIE, while the marginally attentive may be much less confident in what they know about politics. On this point, past analyses of PIE have not explored differences in debate viewing effects between those who have lower and higher PIE. It seems likely that those who engage a campaign debate with greater PIE will be less affected by exposure to the debate message than those who come to the debate with much less confidence in their political knowledge. We pursue this possibility with the following question:

RQ4: Do debates have a greater effect on low PIE viewers versus those with high PIE?

Political Cynicism. Among the broad range of political attitudes and values, Delli Carpini (2004) has identified political cynicism as a principal attitude affecting citizens' democratic engagement (p. 398). Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco's (2000) analysis of campaign communication in the 1996 presidential election revealed a clear link between cynicism and voting—specifically, nonvoters' political cynicism was significantly higher than voters. The relationship between political cynicism and debate viewing, however, is not entirely clear. At least one early presidential debate study (Wald & Lupfer, 1978) found viewers became more cynical following their debate viewing. Yet another study (Spiker & McKinney, 1999) found exposure to presidential debates had no effect on citizens' predebate cynicism. Finally, several studies have found that debate exposure does, in fact, significantly decrease viewers' political cynicism (Kaid et al., 2000; McKinney & Banwart, 2005; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009). With conflicting findings regarding cynicism and campaign debates, we posit the following question:

RQ5: What effect does viewing a presidential debate have on political cynicism?

TABLE 1.
PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE EXPERIMENTAL SESSIONS

Election Cycle/Date	Debate Type/Location	# of Participants
2000		
Oct. 27, 1999	Democratic Primary Debate (Hanover, NH)	78
Oct. 3, 2000	1st Presidential Debate (Boston, MA)	81
Oct. 11, 2000	2nd Presidential Debate (Winston-Salem, NC)	40
Oct. 17, 2000	3rd Presidential Debate (St. Louis, MO)	73
2004		
Oct. 9, 2003	Democratic Primary Debate (Phoenix, AZ)	216
Nov. 4, 2003	Rock the Vote Democratic Primary Debate (Boston, MA)	496
Dec. 9, 2003	Democratic Primary Debate (Durham, NH)	58
Feb. 26, 2004	Democratic Primary Debate (Los Angeles, CA)	334
Sept. 30, 2004	1st Presidential Debate (Coral Gables, FL)	461
Oct. 8, 2004	2nd Presidential Debate (St. Louis, MO)	219
Oct. 13, 2004	3rd Presidential Debate (Tempe, AZ)	358
2008		
July 23, 2007	YouTube Democratic Primary Debate (Charleston, SC)	135
Nov. 28, 2007	YouTube Republican Primary Debate (St. Petersburg, FL)	176
Sept. 26, 2008	1st Presidential Debate (Oxford, MS)	486
Oct. 2, 2008	Vice Presidential Debate (St. Louis, MO)	528
Oct. 7, 2008	2nd Presidential Debate (Nashville, TN)	488
Oct. 15, 2008	3rd Presidential Debate (Hempstead, NY)	709
2012		
Jan. 26, 2012	Republican Primary Debate (Jacksonville, FL)	94
Oct. 3, 2012	1st Presidential Debate (Denver, CO)	433
Oct. 11, 2012	Vice Presidential Debate (Danville, KY)	352
Oct. 16, 2012	2nd Presidential Debate (Hempstead, NY)	446
Oct. 22, 2012	3rd Presidential Debate (Boca Raton, FL)	514

METHOD

Sample

Our analysis utilized debate viewer responses to primary and general election campaign debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012. In each election cycle, data were collected from all general election presidential debates, vice presidential debates in 2008 and 2012, and selected primary debates during each of the four election periods. For a complete listing of the 22 quasi-experimental debate viewing sessions that comprise our data set, see Table 1.

The combined analysis included a total of 6,775 debate viewers, made up of 4,308 general election presidential viewers, 880 vice presidential debate viewers, and 1,587 primary debate viewers. Across the four election cycles, we had 272 participants responding to debates in 2000; 2,142 participants in 2004; 2,522 participants viewing debates in 2008; and 1,839 participants in 2012.

The debate respondents included 58% ($n = 3,928$) females and 41% ($n = 2,752$) males (with 1%, $n = 95$, not identifying their gender). Party identification among the respondents was distributed as 38% ($n = 2,606$) Democrat, 36% ($n = 2,453$) Republican, 24% ($n = 1,592$) Independent/Other (with 2%, $n = 124$, not identifying their party). The mean age of the respondents was 20.73 ($SD = 5.01$), with participants ranging in age from 18 to 99.

Procedures

Study participants included undergraduate students from colleges and universities throughout the United States selected to achieve geographic representation of all areas of the

country, including campuses (and participants) from rural, urban, and major metropolitan communities. Participants were recruited by faculty researchers who served as members of the national presidential debate research team headed by the first author of this study. While some study locations included citizens from their local communities in the debate viewing experiments, the vast majority of the participants were recruited from basic communication and political science courses and were awarded extra credit for taking part in this research. We are well aware of the limitations of convenience samples represented by the student participants used in our study, yet meta-analytic analyses of both debate viewing (Benoit et al., 2003) and political advertising effects (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999) report no differences between studies using student subjects and nonstudent "adult" subject pools.

In each of the experimental sessions, with all participants viewing the debates while assembled in a lab environment (such as classrooms, lecture halls, and other group viewing locations), participants first completed pretest questionnaires that included demographic information and a series of items designed to measure respondents' candidate evaluations (including vote choice) and attitudes toward politics. The respondents then watched the full debates, without exposure to pre or postdebate media commentary. Each of the general election presidential debates lasted 90 minutes, while some primary debates were only 60 minutes in length. Immediately following debate viewing, respondents completed posttest questionnaires that included repeat measures of candidate evaluations and attitudes toward politics.

In both 2000 and 2004, all pre and posttest questionnaires were administered as paper/pencil written surveys. In 2008, approximately half of all participants completed their experimental questionnaire as a web-based survey (via SurveyMonkey) using personal laptops, and participants were instructed to power their laptops off during their debate viewing. In 2012, all participants were administered pre and posttest questionnaires as a web-based survey and completed their online questionnaires using both mobile phones and laptops. Participants were allowed to view the 2012 debates while simultaneously using their "second screen" during debate viewing.

Measures

Candidate preference. Before and after each debate, participants were asked to indicate their candidate vote preference with vote choice determined by asking, "If you are going to vote in the upcoming election (primary or general election), for whom would you 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. Response options were recoded for analysis to distinguish between participants who did not change their stated voting intention after viewing the debate, participants who changed their preference from one candidate to another, participants who moved from undecided to favoring a candidate, and participants who moved from favoring a candidate to undecided.

Candidate evaluation. To measure candidate evaluations, 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 indicates a favorable evaluation of the candidates. For primary debates, only the feeling thermometer score for the eventual nominee is presented.

Political information efficacy. For all debate studies beginning in the 2004 general election included as part of this analysis, 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 one's 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 several past studies in which this measure has been used (e.g., Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney et al., 2011), Cronbach's α for our measurement of PIE that combined all debate responses reached acceptable reliabilities with a predebate α of .88, and postdebate α of .90.

Political cynicism. To explore debate viewers' political cynicism, we first used a measurement consisting of items adapted and expanded from the National Election Survey conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. Variations of this measure have been used in a number of previous studies (e.g., Kaid, 2003; Kaid et al., 2000; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Banwart, 2005; McKinney, Spiker, & Kaid, 1998). For each of the items, participants responded to a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items include: "One cannot always trust what politicians say," "One can be confident that politicians will do the right thing," "Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a political campaign is over," "Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think," and "One never knows what politicians really think." This original measure of political cynicism was used in debate studies from 2000 through 2008, and our analysis of all debate viewer responses combined during this period reached adequate reliabilities with a predebate α of .68, and postdebate α of .76.

The political cynicism scale was further modified to more explicitly express attitudes of political cynicism and also to achieve greater reliability. Our revised eight-item measure was first used in the 2012 debate studies, with participants responding to a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items include: "Politicians are more interested in power than what people think," "Politicians are corrupt," "Politicians make promises that are never kept," "Politicians cannot be trusted," "Politicians are too greedy," "Politicians always tell the public what they want to hear instead of what they actually plan to do," "Politicians are dishonest," and "Politicians are more concerned about power than advocating for citizens." The measure has demonstrated strong reliability in research that has utilized this scale (Warner, Turner McGowen, & Hawthorne, 2012); and the combined 2012 debate responses achieved strong reliability with a predebate α of .88, and postdebate α of .91.

RESULTS

Vote Choice

Our first research question explored the effect of viewing a presidential debate on vote choice. As Table 2 indicates, exposure to general election debates has very little effect on vote choice with the greatest number of general debate viewers (86.3%) registering no change in their candidate preference following the debates. Still, nearly 7% of general debate viewers

TABLE 2.
OBSERVED CHANGE IN REPORTED VOTING INTENTION AFTER WATCHING A DEBATE

Type of Debate	No Change	Candidate to Candidate	Undecided to Candidate	Candidate to Undecided
Presidential	3377 (86.3%)	135 (3.5%)	268 (6.9%)	131 (3.3%)
Vice Presidential	739 (88.3%)	20 (2.4%)	54 (6.5%)	24 (2.9%)
Primary	301 (40.2%)	265 (35.4%)	169 (22.6%)	14 (1.9%)

switched from undecided to a candidate choice after the debates, while 3.5% switched from one candidate to another, and 3.3% of general debate viewers who had indicated a candidate preference before watching a debate shifted to undecided after their debate viewing. It is interesting to note that the same pattern in voting intentions from presidential debate viewing was also found in vice presidential debate exposure.

Next, it was hypothesized that primary debates would have a far greater influence on vote choice than general election debates. This hypothesis was confirmed as effects of primary debates on voting intention were significantly different than general election debates, χ^2 (6 $N=5,497$) = 1,233.93, $p < .001$. While 40% of those who viewed a primary debate did not change their vote choice, 35% actually switched their candidate preference and 22.6% went from being undecided to supporting a candidate (only 1.9% of primary debate viewers switched from a candidate choice to undecided after debate viewing).

Candidate Evaluation/Feeling Thermometer

The second research question asked whether debate viewing would influence candidate evaluations as operationalized by changes in feeling thermometer scores. As can be seen in Table 3, both Democratic and Republican candidates in all debates combined (2000 – 2012) experienced a significant increase in their evaluations after respondents had viewed a debate.

Furthermore, we hypothesized that debates would have a greater effect on candidate evaluations in primary debates. To test this, a repeated measure MANOVA was performed with candidate evaluation as the within subjects factor and type of debate (general presidential, vice presidential, primary) as the between subjects factor. As can be seen in Table 6, there was a significant interaction between the main effect of debate viewing and the type of debate. The amount of change in candidate evaluation depends on whether the debate is a general presidential, vice presidential, or primary debate. Post hoc analyses demonstrated that general presidential and vice presidential debates did not significantly differ in the main effect but that primary debates were significantly different than both presidential and vice presidential general election debates. As can be seen in Table 3, significantly greater change in debate viewers' candidate evaluations occurs in primary debates than in general election debates. This confirms our second hypothesis.

In our assessment of debate viewing effects on candidate evaluations (combining debates across all debate cycles), the change in candidates' feeling thermometer scores after viewing a debate was positive and significant in all three types of debate for Democratic candidates but was only significant for Republican candidates in primary and vice presidential debates (see Table 3). To further examine why Republican candidates did not enjoy the same boost in evaluation from general election debates that was observed in the other five contexts, the effect of viewing debates on candidate evaluation was analyzed by cycle (2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012) and by the individual debates (see Table 4).

TABLE 3.

EFFECTS OF DEBATE VIEWING ON CANDIDATE EVALUATION/FEELING THERMOMETERS (MULTIPLE CASES)

Debate Effects	Predebate M (SD)	Postdebate M (SD)	Mean Change	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Overall					
Democratic Nominee	56.88 (31.1)	59.52 (33.2)	2.64***	-11.46	4986
Republican Nominee	47.53 (30.3)	48.96 (32.9)	1.43***	-6.30	4925
Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	56.86 (31.7)	59.03 (33.4)	2.17***	-8.7	3863
Republican Nominee	46.83 (30.9)	46.93 (33.2)	0.10	-.42	3882
Vice Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	55.92 (31.3)	57.92 (34.2)	2.00***	-3.36	831
Republican Nominee	48.75 (28.7)	54.35 (31.6)	5.60***	-9.44	829
Primary					
Democratic Nominee	59.94 (26.0)	70.61 (24.4)	10.67***	-8.81	290
Republican Nominee	55.41 (23.6)	65.01 (23.7)	9.60***	-5.94	212
2000					
Democratic Nominee	57.88 (29.1)	58.26 (30.2)	0.38	-.342	193
Republican Nominee	48.94 (25.9)	49.32 (30.5)	0.38	-.300	193
2004					
Democratic Nominee	49.70 (30.1)	54.73 (31.9)	5.03***	-9.49	1124
Republican Nominee	49.77 (35.2)	51.25 (36.2)	1.48**	-3.13	986
2008					
Democratic Nominee	65.36 (30.2)	66.80 (31.9)	1.44***	-4.3	2131
Republican Nominee	46.59 (29.2)	47.05 (32.0)	0.46	-1.3	2136
2012					
Democratic Nominee	50.27 (31.1)	53.08 (34.1)	2.81***	-6.99	1535
Republican Nominee	47.22 (28.9)	50.06 (32.0)	2.84***	-7.09	1607

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

The main effect of debate viewing on candidate evaluation was also tested for interaction with debate cycle and individual debate to determine whether the effect of debate viewing on candidate evaluation depended on which election cycle and which specific debate was viewed. As can be seen in Table 6, there was a significant interaction for the main effect of debate viewing for both election cycle and individual debate. In other words, the influence of viewing a presidential debate on candidate evaluation varied from one election cycle to another and from one debate to another.

As shown in Table 3, there was no significant change in candidate evaluation for either Al Gore or George W. Bush in the 2000 election cycle. Furthermore, John Kerry enjoyed a much larger increase than George W. Bush in the 2004 debates and John McCain did not experience any increase in favorability during the 2008 debates. In aggregate, both parties enjoyed roughly equal increases in evaluation in the 2012 debates.

Table 4 shows the change in candidate evaluation for each debate included in the data set (note: 2004 primary debates with less than 50 participants were excluded from this analysis). As can be seen, there were no significant changes in candidate evaluation for either candidate in any of the 2000 general presidential debates. Conversely, in the 2004 debates, Kerry enjoyed significant gains relative to Bush after the first debate but each gained at approximately the same rate in the second and third debates. Kerry experienced the most dramatic gains in his favorability after his primary debate performance.

The largest gains in the 2008 election cycle, for both the Republican and Democratic nominees, were also recorded after viewing primary debates. In the 2008 general election debates, the increase in Barack Obama's favorability was only significant after the third debate, while John McCain actually lost favorability in all three general presidential debates,

TABLE 4.
EFFECTS OF DEBATE VIEWING ON CANDIDATE EVALUATION/FEELING THERMOMETERS IN
INDIVIDUAL DEBATES

Debate Effects	Predebate M (SD)	Postdebate M (SD)	Mean Change	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
2000					
First Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	65.44 (28.6)	64.74 (28.2)	-0.70	.40	80
Republican Nominee	44.35 (25.0)	42.38 (30.3)	-1.97	.95	80
Second Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	54.83 (24.0)	56.03 (29.8)	1.20	-.49	39
Republican Nominee	54.13 (22.6)	53.83 (27.0)	-0.30	.11	39
Third Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	51.15 (30.6)	52.29 (31.5)	1.14	-.63	72
Republican Nominee	51.21 (28.0)	54.56 (31.4)	3.35	-1.70	72
2004					
First Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	50.06 (31.0)	55.06 (32.7)	5.00***	-5.59	432
Republican Nominee	47.61 (34.9)	47.85 (35.7)	0.24	-.32	444
Second Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	49.32 (30.3)	51.95 (33.3)	2.63**	-2.80	188
Republican Nominee	50.37 (36.4)	52.87 (37.9)	2.33*	-2.53	193
Third Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	50.25 (31.1)	53.30 (32.5)	3.05***	-3.99	341
Republican Nominee	52.21 (34.9)	54.70 (35.6)	2.49***	-3.40	347
Primary					
Democratic Nominee	51.05 (23.8)	66.4 (23.1)	15.35***	-6.76	104
2008					
First Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	65.56 (30.5)	66.05 (33.0)	0.49	-.61	429
Republican Nominee	44.19 (29.5)	42.91 (31.8)	-1.28	1.65	429
Second Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	65.86 (29.9)	64.16 (33.8)	-1.7	1.72	449
Republican Nominee	43.59 (29.2)	41.93 (32.1)	-1.66*	2.19	450
Third Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	64.48 (30.6)	67.89 (31.3)	3.41***	-6.58	619
Republican Nominee	45.37 (29.5)	42.43 (32.3)	-2.94***	5.72	615
Vice Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	63.31 (31.9)	64.12 (32.3)	0.81	-1.58	501
Republican Nominee	49.14 (29.6)	55.69 (30.6)	6.55***	-9.08	502
Primary					
Democratic Nominee	74.70 (18.5)	83.57 (12.5)	8.87***	-6.32	129
Republican Nominee	60.15 (21.0)	65.99 (20.9)	5.84**	-2.95	136
2012					
First Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	53.75 (31.1)	54.59 (32.5)	0.84	231.16	366
Republican Nominee	43.21 (27.8)	48.72 (31.5)	5.51***	-6.19	363
Second Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	49.84 (32.1)	53.93 (34.6)	4.09***	-5.9	385
Republican Nominee	49.95 (30.8)	49.03 (32.2)	-0.92	1.30	385
Third Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	51.92 (32.5)	54.47 (34.2)	2.55***	-4.9	452
Republican Nominee	47.49 (29.6)	48.20 (31.7)	0.71	-1.30	454
Vice Presidential					
Democratic Nominee	44.68 (26.7)	48.50 (34.9)	3.82**	-2.98	329
Republican Nominee	48.17 (27.4)	52.28 (33.0)	4.11***	-4.07	326
Primary					
Republican Nominee	46.88 (25.8)	63.26 (28.1)	16.38***	-6.22	75

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

though his decline in the first general debate did not reach statistical significance. Sarah Palin enjoyed a significant increase in favorability after participants viewed the 2008 vice presidential debate, while Biden's favorability remained constant.

TABLE 5.
EFFECTS OF DEBATE VIEWING ON POLITICAL INFORMATION EFFICACY AND CYNICISM

Debate Effects	Predebate M (SD)	Postdebate M (SD)	Mean Change	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
PIE	3.40 (.99)	3.57 (.92)	.17***	-17.59	5025
Primary	2.92 (.98)	3.34 (.92)	.42***	-12.13	404
Presidential	3.43 (.98)	3.58 (.93)	.15***	-13.58	3771
Vice Presidential	3.51 (.95)	3.62 (.88)	.11***	-5.73	848
2004	3.47 (.97)	3.65 (.95)	.18***	-7.66	1037
2008	3.49 (.95)	3.67 (.87)	.18***	-14.73	2521
2012	3.21 (1.06)	3.35 (.96)	.14***	-.748	1465
High PIE	4.20 (.47)	4.16 (.65)	-.04**	2.65	1955
Low PIE	2.62 (.65)	3.05 (.76)	.43***	-25.9	1697
Cynicism	3.37 (.74)	3.22 (.77)	-.15***	19.45	6369
Primary	3.26 (.80)	3.19 (.74)	-.07***	4.72	1583
Presidential	3.40 (.71)	3.22 (.79)	-.18***	18.30	3942
Vice Presidential	3.40 (.71)	3.26 (.76)	-.14***	7.90	842
2000	3.70 (.62)	3.41 (.78)	-.29***	7.30	271
2004	3.35 (.78)	3.24 (.81)	-.11***	7.13	2137
2008	3.46 (.68)	3.26 (.75)	-.20***	17.81	2521
2012	3.16 (.73)	3.07 (.72)	-.09***	6.12	1437

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

In the 2012 election, the largest gains in favorability came from Mitt Romney's Republican primary debate performance. Romney also experienced a significant increase in favorability after his first general debate with Barack Obama, while Obama's favorability was stagnant. This finding mirrors the incumbent/challenger pattern from the first 2004 presidential debate in which Kerry enjoyed significant gains while Bush did not. Unlike 2004, where evaluations of both candidates increased after the second and third general debates, only Obama enjoyed significant boosts to his favorability in subsequent debates. Romney's favorability remained unchanged after the first debate. Both Paul Ryan and Joe Biden enjoyed significant increases in their favorability ratings after participants viewed the 2012 vice presidential debate.

Political Information Efficacy

It was hypothesized that exposure to a presidential campaign debate would increase participants' PIE. As can be seen in Table 5, PIE increased significantly after presidential debate viewing.

Furthermore, a research question asked whether change in PIE would be greater for those who viewed a primary debate relative to those who viewed a general election debate. To test this, a repeated measure MANOVA was performed with PIE as the within subjects factor and debate type as the between subjects factor. As shown in Table 6, there was a significant interaction between type of debate and the main effect of debate viewing on change in PIE. Table 5 indicates that this interaction is such that the increase in PIE was much greater for those who viewed a primary debate than those who viewed a general election debate, though in both cases PIE increased significantly. The difference in change in PIE by election type can be seen in Figure 1.

The main effect of debate viewing on PIE was also tested for interaction with election cycle and specific debate. As can be seen in Table 6, there was no interaction between the effect of debate viewing on PIE and the election cycle, as the relationship was consistent across all

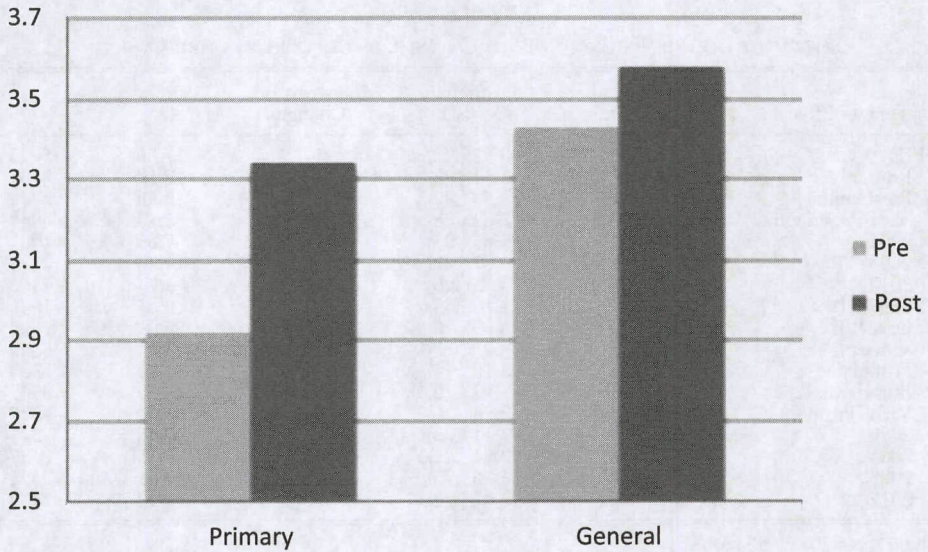


Figure 1: Change in primary and general debate viewers' PIE.

three cycles. There was a significant interaction between PIE and the specific debate such that the effect of debate exposure on PIE depended on the specific debate that was viewed. However, as indicated in Table 6, follow-up analysis demonstrated that primary debates had a consistent effect on PIE regardless of the debate, though there was some variability in the effect of general election debates on PIE.

An additional research question asked whether those with low PIE experienced greater gains from debate viewing than those with high PIE. To test this, a repeated measure MANOVA was performed with change in PIE as the within subjects factor and PIE group (Low/High) as the between subjects factor. A median split was used to create the high and low PIE groups such that participants at or above the median (3.5) were placed in a high PIE group and those below the median were placed in the low PIE group. As indicated in Table 6, there was a significant interaction between the main effect of debate viewing on PIE and whether the viewer was in the low or high PIE group. Furthermore, this interaction was the only interaction observed with a large effect size, $\eta^2 = .125$. As can be seen in Table 5, the effect was such that those who entered the debate with high PIE experienced a slight but statistically (if not substantively) significant *decrease* in PIE (likely just regression to the mean), while those in the low PIE group experienced a significant increase in PIE. The difference in change in PIE depending on predebate levels can be seen in Figure 2.

Cynicism

A final research question asked what effect viewing a presidential debate had on political cynicism. As shown in Table 5, debate viewing significantly decreased cynicism. While we did not posit additional questions regarding debate effects and political cynicism, to be consistent with analyses of previous variables we ran repeated measure MANOVAs to determine if the main effect of debate viewing on political cynicism varied by type of debate, election cycle, and specific debate. As can be seen in Table 6, all of the interaction effects

TABLE 6.
TESTS OF INTERACTION EFFECTS ON THE MAIN EFFECT OF VIEWING A DEBATE

Interactions	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
<u>Feeling Thermometer</u>				
Democratic Nominee				
Debate effect	172.82	1,4984	.000	.034
Debate effect \times type	38.35	2,4984	.000	.015
Debate effect \times cycle	13.19	3,4983	.000	.008
Debate effect \times debate	9.64	17,4969	.000	.032
Republican Nominee				
Debate effect	152.23	1,4923	.000	.030
Debate effect \times type	71.05	2,4923	.000	.028
Debate effect \times cycle	7.07	3,4922	.000	.004
Debate effect \times debate	17.88	15,4910	.000	.052
<u>PIE</u>				
Debate effect	281.17	1,5023	.000	.052
Debate effect \times type	34.62	2,5023	.000	.014
Debate effect \times cycle	2.19	2,5023	.112	—
Debate effect \times debate	13.54	13,5012	.000	.034
Debate effect \times PIE group	519.46	1,3652	.000	.125
<u>General</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	12.63	8,3763	.000	.026
<u>Primary</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	.90	2,402	.406	—
<u>Cynicism</u>				
Debate effect	210.83	1,6367	.000	.032
Debate effect \times type	2.90	2,6367	.000	.005
Debate effect \times cycle	18.71	3,6366	.000	.009
Debate effect \times debate	9.27	21,6348	.000	.030
<u>General</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	6.56	11,3931	.000	.018
<u>Primary</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	11.20	7,1576	.000	.047
<u>2000</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	6.79	3,268	.000	.071
<u>2004</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	11.82	6,2131	.000	.032
<u>2008</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	5.00	5,2516	.000	.010
<u>2012</u>				
Debate effect \times debate	1.67	4,1433	.155	—

tested for were significant. Although debates universally decreased cynicism, the extent to which they did varied. Table 5 reveals that general election debates had greater effects on cynicism than primary debates, and that debates in 2000 and 2008 had greater effects than those in 2004 and 2012.

DISCUSSION

This study of debate effects from 2000 to 2012 provides a number of important insights into how presidential campaign debates function in different campaign contexts. Exploration of the 22 different studies that constitute our examination of debate effects, along with the combined analyses of these studies, allows us to explore presidential debate effects across multiple election cycles, as well as comparison of effects among different types of campaign debates—including primary and general presidential and vice presidential debates—and also comparisons of different campaign situations (including both Democrat and Republican primary debates, and general debates featuring incumbent presidents seeking reelection versus general election debates with no incumbent). Overall, our findings support existing

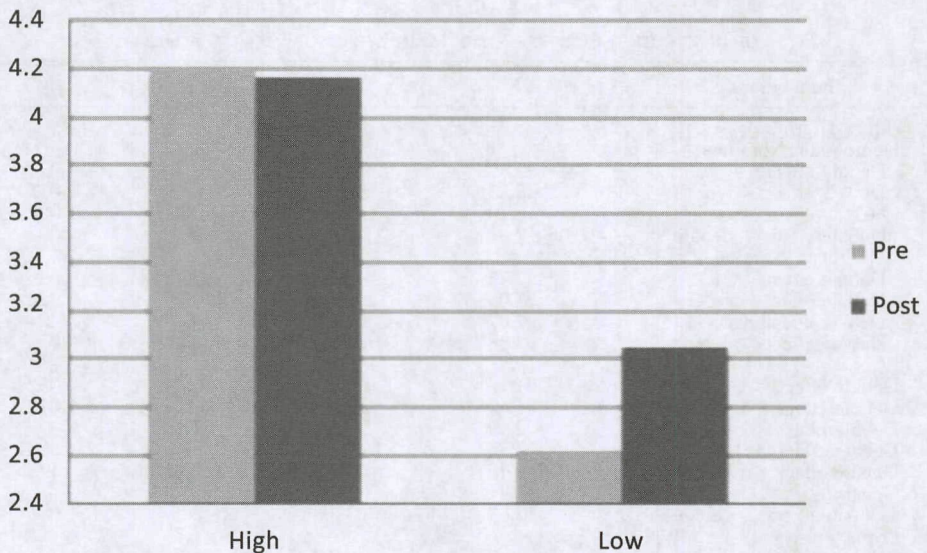


Figure 2: Change in debate viewers' PIE based on pre debate level of PIE (high vs. low).

presidential debate research, provide greater understanding of specific debate effects, and also raise a number of intriguing questions for future research.

First, as previous research has found, general election debates may influence close races where small changes in vote choice at the margins can dictate an election's outcome, but the vast majority of voters at the time of our fall presidential debates (nearly 90% in our combined analysis) are not persuaded to change their candidate selection based on viewing a debate. Historically, McKinney and Carlin (2004) suggest from their analysis of Gallup polling before and after each of our presidential debates since the first 1960 Kennedy-Nixon encounters that debates have had an influence on the outcome of presidential elections in 1960, 1976, 1980, and 2000 (p. 211). Similarly, although much less praiseworthy in their assessment of debates' role in a presidential campaign, political scientists Erikson and Wlezien's (2012) analysis of pre and postdebate polling data also pointed to the debates in the very same general election campaigns identified by debate scholars McKinney and Carlin (2004) as providing a *nudge* to the prevailing candidates in these close presidential contests. Still, even adopting a *limited effects* perspective of presidential debates' influence on general election outcomes, we have four cases (which represents more than one-third of the current 11 presidential campaigns that have featured general election debates) where candidate debates are thought to be important in the outcome of our national elections.

The impact of presidential primary debates, however, is very different. Nearly 60% of primary debate viewers in our study changed their predebate candidate preference, including more than one-third of all primary viewers switching their allegiance from one candidate to another, and nearly one-quarter of our primary viewers switching from undecided to a particular candidate following debate viewing. These results suggest primary debates are particularly useful—and much more so than general election debates—in facilitating undecided viewers' vote choice. Also, the large amount of candidate-to-candidate switching following primary debates suggests these early campaign forums are particularly useful for

voters who are weakly committed or perhaps express their predebate choice based largely on candidate name recognition or front runner status before greater exposure to lesser known candidates.

Of course, our analysis of debate viewers' vote preference or intention does not in any way speak to actual voter behavior. Here, we need more detailed knowledge of the lasting effects from debate exposure—lasting at least until Election Day—with more debate studies that employ a repeated-measure or panel design that might track specific debate effects over time. We realize that campaigns continue in full force following one's encounter to candidates in a single debate, and thus, future debate research should attempt to capture the full campaign message environment and track the longevity of message effects throughout the entirety of a campaign. Future research should also test how a single campaign message like a debate may interact with the many other campaign messages and events.

Next, our investigation of debate viewers' candidate image evaluation—participant's use of the feeling thermometers to indicate the degree to which one favors or likes a particular candidate—shows that debates, in general, provide candidates opportunities to increase their favorability in the eyes of voters. Our combined analysis of debate viewers' candidate evaluation (Table 3) reveals that in every case across all election cycles, in both primary and general debates, for both Democrat and Republican nominees, debate viewers' candidate evaluations increased (and in 12 of the 16 individual analyses this improvement in debate viewers' candidate evaluation was a statistically significant increase). Also, the fact that many individual debates (see Table 4) have both the Democrat and Republican candidate evaluation improving reminds us that campaign debates are not zero-sum for candidates as both or all candidates on the debate stage might benefit from their debate performance. Unlike the eventual voting decision, debate gains for one candidate do not necessarily come at the expense of another.

Yet, despite the general tendency that candidates improve their evaluation following their debate performance, this is not always the case. As Table 4 reveals, the occasional candidate was evaluated more negatively by viewers following a debate, including John McCain in 2008 as his assessments actually declined in all three of his general election debates with Barack Obama and significantly so in two of the three debates. There were a few other examples of candidates' debate performances yielding less favorable assessments such as both Al Gore and George W. Bush's first debate performance in 2000. Thus, while debates generally provide candidates the opportunity to be seen as more favorable among viewers, there is no guarantee they will experience a boost from their debate performance.

Our analysis of candidate assessment across multiple election cycles reveals an interesting pattern that provides evidence of an incumbent disadvantage in the first encounter of a general election debate series. In our four cases of a fall presidential debate series, two of the four—2004 (Bush versus Kerry) and 2012 (Obama versus Romney)—featured incumbent presidents. As revealed in Table 4, in both of these cases, the challenger in the initial debate experienced a sizeable boost in their favorability while the incumbent barely held his predebate evaluation. In this same campaign situation, we may also recall other notable incumbent president's first debate performances, notable for their particularly poor performances, including incumbent Jimmy Carter's first (and only) debate against Ronald Reagan in 1980, and then four years later incumbent Reagan's disastrous first debate against Walter Mondale. Yet, after an initial lackluster first debate performance, it appears that incumbents often rebound in their subsequent debates, as our data show for both George W. Bush in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2012 (and also as Ronald Reagan rebounded nicely in his second

debate in 1984). Still, the evidence on this front seems compelling that incumbent presidents most often falter in their initial debate when seeking reelection and should beware the apparent “curse” of the incumbent president’s initial debate. It may well be that sitting presidents forget what it is like to be directly challenged by a political opponent and are simply out of practice with their debating skills, especially when it comes to debating opponents who have just emerged from a long primary season with many opportunities to hone their debating skills through numerous primary debates.

Just as we found with change in candidate vote choice, primary debates also provide greater opportunity for candidates to increase their overall evaluation or favorability among debate viewers. Our combined analysis reveals (see Table 3) that primary debate gains in candidate evaluations are substantially greater than general presidential and vice presidential debate increases; and Table 4 shows this pattern holds across each of the three election cycles (2004, 2008, and 2012) where we report primary debate effects. Voter impressions of candidates, much like their vote preferences, are more firmly set and less susceptible to change by the time general debates take place. Yet, in the primary campaign phase with candidates who are surfacing and often introducing themselves to a national audience for the first time, with citizens just beginning to pay attention to the emerging presidential race, and with debate viewers forming their initial candidate impressions, we find much greater positive change in primary candidate evaluations.

Finally, our analyses of the influence of debates on citizens’ attitudes of political engagement—including both PIE and political cynicism—highlight the important normative effects of campaign debates. Consistent with past research (e.g., McKinney & Banwart, 2005; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney et al., 2011), our combined analysis (see Table 5) reveals that exposure to a campaign debate increases or strengthens one’s PIE and reduces political cynicism. For both PIE and cynicism, these results hold for all types of debates (general presidential, vice presidential, and primary debates) and across all debate cycles. Such findings speak to the value of the debate message, particularly the effects of this form of campaign discourse on important democratic attitudes. That debates strengthen the confidence viewers have in their political knowledge is certainly important as past research has found that increased PIE is related to greater likelihood of voting (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Debates’ positive effects on political cynicism—in all cases our analysis found debate viewers with decreased cynicism—is important from a normative democratic perspective. Kaid et al. (2000) found debate exposure resulted in a significant lowering of political cynicism and also found non-voters’ political cynicism is significantly higher than voters’. Thus, limited research has found if citizens are more confident in their political knowledge, they are more likely to vote; and those who have less political cynicism are more likely to vote. Our analysis of debate effects show a very clear pattern that exposure to campaign debates increases PIE and decreases political cynicism.

When analyzing the confidence that citizens have in their political knowledge across election phase (primary and general) and the effects of debates on PIE, we find an interesting—albeit conceptually logical—pattern in which PIE exhibits a continual strengthening throughout the campaign. It appears that as the campaign unfolds, and as citizens are exposed to greater campaign information, they become more confident in their political knowledge. Yet, campaign debates serve as an information rich message that positively affects PIE no matter the election phase. As Figure 1 displays, debate viewers’ preprimary PIE is at its lowest point, again at a phase of the campaign where most people have not been following the campaign and where candidates are relatively unknown and citizens are

seeking more information. At this point, the largest increases in PIE occur after viewing primary debates. Then, as much as a year after the primary debates (primary and general election debates in each of the four election cycles were separated by approximately one year), citizens are even more confident in their political knowledge just prior to the general election debates than they were immediately after the primary debates as exposure to the unfolding campaign has likely continued. Still, even with higher levels of PIE before general debate viewing, citizens once again achieve a significant increase in their PIE, demonstrating the ability of presidential campaign debates to strengthen viewers' confidence in their political knowledge. Of course, ours is not a panel design that tracks participants across the full election cycle (again, such research is needed), but our data do provide compelling evidence that PIE exhibits a continual strengthening over the course of a long campaign, and debates especially provide a useful source of campaign information that enhances one's PIE.

To better understand debate viewers' changes in PIE, post hoc analysis found that overall increases in participant PIE comes from those within the low-PIE group (see Figure 2 and Table 5). While political junkies may well follow a presidential campaign closely and express supreme (or high) confidence in their political knowledge, many more citizens live their lives devoting little attention to the daily drama and messages of an ongoing presidential campaign. These "marginally attentive" citizens (Pfau, 2003, p. 3) may feel largely uninformed about the ongoing campaign and express less confidence in the political knowledge they possess. Yet, we find that exposure to a presidential campaign debate clearly increases confidence among low-PIE viewers. In this manner, campaign debates serve as something of an equalizer among the political information haves and have-nots. As our data indicate, people who already feel comfortable in their knowledge (the high PIE's) experience no change in their PIE, while those who engage the debate message feeling very little confidence in the political knowledge they possess make substantial gains.

A couple of final observations regarding debate viewers' political cynicism are warranted, and these findings point to the need for more detailed future analysis. First, our data reveal (see Table 5) debate viewers' predebate political cynicism is substantially higher at the time of general election debates than earlier in the campaign at the time of primary debates (predebate general election cynicism for both presidential and vice presidential debates is at 3.40, while predebate primary cynicism is at 3.26). Again, debate exposure reduces cynicism at each point, as cynicism after both primary and general election debates is at about the same level. With these findings, we wonder if the ebb and flow of citizens' political cynicism throughout an ongoing political campaign is such that cynicism reaches its highest level as the campaign nears its completion? On this front, future research may wish to examine citizens' political cynicism at multiple points throughout the long campaign.

Also, in reviewing citizens' predebate levels of political cynicism, we find (see Table 5) that cynicism is much higher in some elections than others (for example, predebate cynicism is at its highest level in 2000 at 3.70, and at its lowest in 2012 at 3.16). In observing the effects of debate viewing on political cynicism across the four election cycles, the greatest reductions in debate viewers' political cynicism occur in 2000 and 2008, both open elections, while postdebate cynicism is reduced much less in the incumbent/challenger elections of 2004 and 2012. Here, perhaps open elections breed more citizen trust as these candidates and their debate messages offer the hope of a fresh start without the usual attacks on a sitting president that occur in an incumbent/challenger debate? While we can only speculate as to possible reasons for variations in citizens' political cynicism across the several election cycles, future research should explore the dynamics of particular campaigns—such as open versus incum-

bent/challenger races—and how different debate series may affect political cynicism in different ways.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of debate viewer effects across four national election cycles, including primary and general presidential and vice presidential debates, provides findings that support existing campaign debate scholarship, yields new insights regarding debates' effects, and points to fruitful opportunities for future campaign debate research. Our approach that includes both cumulative and individual analyses of debate effects studies across time allows us to explore whether findings from a particular campaign period (2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012) and context (primary versus general debates, Democratic primary versus Republican primary debates, general debates with incumbent president seeking reelection versus general debates with no incumbent) are also found in a different campaign period and context. Comparative analysis across multiple election cycles and campaign debate contexts allowed us to discover several very interesting patterns of debate viewing effects.

We believe the evidence is quite conclusive that campaign debates do indeed matter, and our analysis of “the trans-campaign effects on such matters as voting behavior, image formation, and attitude change” has allowed us to understand just how debate effects function in several very important ways (The Racine Group, 2002, p. 199). The U.S. electorate has now experienced campaign debates in 10 successive presidential elections (and 11 presidential campaigns in all), and we feel there is ample evidence to suggest the public is well served by these important campaign events. Debate scholars must continue their investigation of the content and effects of these messages, pursuing programmatic research agendas that examine how particular debate features and viewer responses function across different debates, allowing scholars to build general laws and theories of debate content and effects.

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