

To Unite and Divide: The Polarizing Effect of Presidential Debates

Benjamin R. Warner & Mitchell S. McKinney

This study analyzes the effect of viewing a presidential campaign debate on political polarization. The results of quasi-experimental debate studies of all presidential general election debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 as well as vice presidential debates in 2008 and 2012 demonstrate a consistent effect: Viewing a debate increased political polarization. However, predebate levels of polarization moderated this effect such that those viewers with very little polarization experienced the most significant increase and those who were highly polarized prior to viewing a debate experienced no significant change. Overall, our findings contribute to a growing body of research on the polarizing effects of campaign communication and raise important questions about how these effects should be interpreted in future research.

Keywords: Campaign Communication; Political Polarization; Presidential Debates; Vice Presidential Debates

Presidential campaign debates have received a great deal of scholarly attention both in terms of their effect on citizen vote choices (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001; Chaffee & Choe, 1980; McKinney, 1994) and for their normative democratic outcomes (Chaffee, 1978; Lemert, 1993; McKinney & Chattapadhyay, 2007; McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979). Similarly, political polarization has received increasing scholarly attention as concerns arise that selective exposure (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010), narrowcasting (Jones, 2002), and media fragmentation (Sunstein, 2007) may risk a new era of heightened political

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polarization. The role of presidential debates in the polarization process is unclear, however. While the digital media age is characterized by extremely high choice (Prior, 2007) allowing individuals to seek information that reinforces existing attitudes, political debates are the most balanced messages throughout the entire campaign that many partisans will receive. Both candidates present the best version of their arguments and viewers have a chance to see the most polished and persuasive case each candidate is capable of making. This does not necessarily mean that debates will reduce polarization though, as plenty of evidence suggests that partisans view attitude-discrepant information skeptically (Coe et al., 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006) and that debate viewers interpret what they see through their own partisan perspective (Holbrook, 1996). Indeed, there is evidence that exposure to campaign communication in general may increase polarization (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012), and that debate viewing in particular may motivate viewers to seek out polarizing campaign communication (Cho & Ha, 2012). Nevertheless, the specific effect of viewing a presidential debate on citizens' polarization remains unknown.

We fill this gap in the political communication and campaign debate effects scholarship by presenting results from 14 quasi-experimental analyses of debate viewing spanning 12 years of presidential campaign debates. We explore the polarizing potential of debates across multiple campaigns, including all three presidential election debates in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012, and vice presidential debates in 2008 and 2012. In doing so, we are able to determine whether there is a general trend toward (or against) polarization from viewing a presidential debate, whether this effect is consistent across different debates and election cycles, and whether all debate viewers experience the same polarizing effects regardless of predebate attitudes.

The Effects of Debate Viewing

Much of the discussion campaign debates receive focuses on whether a single debate will influence the outcome of a given election (Hu, 2012). There appears to be ample evidence that, while debates have the potential to influence close elections in which a small number of undecided voters may sway the result (Chaffee, 1978; Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Geer, 1988; McKinney, 1994), the vast majority of voters do not change voting intention after debate viewing (Benoit et al., 2001, 2003; Katz & Feldman, 1962; McKinney & Carlin, 2004; McKinney & Warner, 2013). Debate effects on vote choice are minimal, in part, because reactions are interpreted through the partisan beliefs that viewers bring to the debate (Holbrook, 1996; Jarman, 2005) and thus viewers are likely to have their ideas reinforced by the candidate they support and dismiss counterattitudinal information presented by the candidate they oppose.

While the conversation about presidential debates probably overemphasizes the marginal but occasionally important influence they have on vote choice, Michael Pfau (2003) has argued that the most significant effects are on the normative democratic outcomes of debate viewing. These positive outcomes of debate viewing include increased viewer interest in the campaign (Chaffee, 1978; Wald & Lupfer, 1978), increased frequency of political talk and the probability that a viewer will turn

out to vote (McLeod et al., 1979; Patterson, 2002), increased political information efficacy (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney, Rill, & Gully, 2011; McKinney & Warner, 2013), and reductions in political cynicism (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000; McKinney & Banwart, 2005; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; McKinney & Warner, 2013).

While democratic and electoral benefits of campaign debate viewing are numerous and well documented, there is some evidence that debates may also increase political polarization—a potentially insidious side effect of an event that may otherwise be the democratic high point of a presidential campaign. Early research suggested that debates might reduce polarization because viewers expressed increased evaluations of both participants (Chaffee, 1978), an increased understanding of each candidate (Katz & Feldman, 1962), and an enhanced legitimacy of both (Lanoue & Schrott, 1991). However, more recent scholarship suggests that debates may contribute to the increasing climate of partisanship (Geidner & Holbert, 2011; Holbert, LaMarre, & Landreville, 2009) and indirectly increase polarization by encouraging more media consumption and political talk in ideologically segregated social and media environments (Cho & Ha, 2012). These findings pose a troubling question for campaign debate scholars: Have we entered a new era of political polarization and, if so, do campaign debates—generally thought to be beneficial for democracy—further polarize the electorate?

A New Era of Polarization

The extent to which America is polarized—or at least experiencing a period of increased polarization—is subject to some controversy. It is widely accepted that political elites are polarized at historically high levels. Ideological measures of members of the U.S. Congress reveal that the current period is the most polarized since the civil war era (McCarthy, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). However, the extent to which Americans mirror the polarization of their elected officials is subject to some dispute. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2011) argue that there are not fewer people describing themselves as moderate nor are more people describing themselves as strong partisans, and median opinions on hot-button social issues are not becoming more extreme. There is considerable evidence, however, that those who are most engaged in the political process are becoming more polarized (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Jacobson, 2012). Moderates, conversely, are more likely to opt out of politics, preferring entertainment media to the news (Prior, 2007). Thus, our political discourse may be more polarized even if a majority of Americans do not consider themselves highly partisan.

While the majority of Americans may not be moving to the ideological extremes of the political spectrum, those who participate most frequently (and vocally) are becoming *affectively* polarized—they increasingly dislike or even hate the political opposition (Iyengar et al., 2012). Though polarization is not always a bad thing—Mutz reminds us that strongly held positions are often a prerequisite to social change and that “extremist sentiments have fueled many an important social movement”

(2006, p. 134)—affective polarization undermines the legitimacy of political opponents, a legitimacy that allows pluralism to thrive in modern democracies and acts as a bulwark against violent radicalism (Mouffe, 2000). It is therefore important to know how and when political communication may exacerbate affective polarization.

The evolving media environment, driven by digital technology, has received the most scholarly attention—and blame—with reference to polarization. Digital media allows individuals to sort themselves into ideologically homogeneous networks that reinforce preexisting attitudes (Sunstein, 2007) and increase polarization (Stroud, 2010). However, while individuals do personalize news content to suit their preferences (Tewksbury, 2005) and to seek information that reinforces existing attitudes (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly, 2007; Holbert et al., 2010; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011), there is ample evidence to suggest people using digital political media do not avoid different perspectives (Brundidge, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Holbert et al., 2010; Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Kobayashi, 2010; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Thus, it does not appear to be the case that citizens wall themselves off from difference by creating ideologically homogeneous media cocoons. Instead, people have a tendency to filter attitude-discrepant information through a partisan lens and even counterargue when exposed to information that contradicts their position (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Furthermore, while television continues to provide the best opportunity for exposure to information from different political perspectives (Godlman & Mutz, 2011), people often select cable news programming in accordance with their political party preferences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This partisan filtering frames the evaluation of news content such that “hostile” news is evaluated as less accurate and useful than attitudinally consistent information (Coe et al., 2008). Presidential debates do not offer viewers the opportunity to select only attitude-consistent messages but may be subject to the same biased processing identified in media effects research (e.g., Coe et al., 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Debates, then, provide a unique opportunity to test whether balanced messaging can ameliorate the consequences of selective exposure or whether biased processing will diminish the value of exposure to balanced messages.

Biased processing may explain some of the media effects identified in recent studies of ideological media. If alternative perspectives are discounted through biased processing, those who use ideological media may become more extreme regardless of the diversity of their media diet. Because ideological media exhibits a more extremist tone than traditional media (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), those who consume ideological media may become polarized regardless of the balance in their media diet. There is evidence that ideological media have a direct persuasive effect (Lin, 2009; Stroud, 2010; Warner, 2010) and can thus increase polarization by spreading uncivil political invective—an effect that may occur regardless of an individual’s partisan predispositions (Feldman, 2011; Warner, 2010). Altogether, these findings suggest that ideological media may be driving an increased era of political polarization.

In addition to partisan media, polarization has also been linked to ideologically homogeneous interpersonal networks. Social networks are important as interpersonal

interactions are among the places people are most likely to encounter information about the election, and debate viewing in particular has been found to increase political discussion in interpersonal networks (McLeod et al., 1979; Patterson, 2002). Individual social networks, however, are the most ideologically segregated sources of information in an average person's political environment (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). While those who encounter a range of political positions in their social networks have been found to be more tolerant and understanding of other viewpoints (Mutz, 2006), those who are exposed to ideologically homogeneous perspectives become increasingly extreme (Binder, Darlymple, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2009) and more resistant to change (Visser & Mirablile, 2004). Furthermore, while a diverse network of friends and acquaintances builds political tolerance and reduces the effects of polarization (Mutz, 2006), diversity must be present in an individual's personal social network. Random exposure to heterogeneity (e.g., interacting with politically diverse strangers) is insufficient to foster tolerance (Wojcieszak, 2011).

Polarization has also been connected to personality. People who score higher in authoritarianism (or acceptance of authority) tend to be more polarized (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). Furthermore, those who tend to trust others and have a positive view of humanity tend to be strongly partisan liberals while those who are more cynical about human nature tend to be strongly partisan conservatives (Kaltenthaler & Miller, 2012). Finally, extroversion and agreeableness have both been linked to polarization, while openness has been associated with less polarization (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011).

In light of the great deal of scholarly attention devoted to polarization as an outcome of the changing media landscape, personal social networks, and even personality traits, it is surprising that there has not been more focus on how electoral campaign communication influences polarization. Iyengar and colleagues (2012) found that greater exposure to campaign messages (primarily political ads) increased polarization, but their study did not isolate specific campaign messages. Instead, they discuss the overall tone of political campaigns. Earlier research also suggested that campaign advertising can increase polarization (Iyengar, Jackman, & Hahn, 2008), and very limited work has examined the role of presidential campaign debates in the broader process of campaign polarization. Cho and Ha (2012) found an indirect effect of debate viewing in the 2004 election cycle on polarization mediated by increased conversation and news consumption after debate viewing. It is this finding that we seek to expand upon with the present study. Specifically, Cho and Ha examined partisan evaluations of candidates seven days after viewing a presidential debate and documented how viewing a campaign debate increased engagement in the broader campaign—thereby exposing debate viewers to a wider range of campaign communication. Consistent with Iyengar and colleagues (2012), Cho and Ha found that people who are exposed to more campaign messages (via news consumption and political talk) express more polarized candidate evaluations. Debate viewing facilitated this outcome by motivating increased exposure to the campaign.

We propose to isolate the specific effect of debate viewing on political polarization—*independent of other processes of campaign communication*—so that the

unique contribution of debate viewing on polarization can be disentangled from the broader electoral context. Given the evidence that other forms of campaign communication increases polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012) and the research that has linked debates to partisanship and polarization (Cho & Ha, 2012; Geidner & Holbert, 2011; Holbert et al., 2009) we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Viewing a presidential debate will increase political polarization.

While we expect a polarizing effect of debate viewing, it is not clear that debates will influence all viewers the same. Presidential debate scholars (The Racine Group, 2002) have argued that we need to better understand how debate effects are achieved and under what conditions certain viewers will experience these effects. Any polarizing effect of debate viewing should be tested for variability between different groups of viewers as individuals bring different attitudes to the debate. Some citizens enter a debate-viewing experience with strong partisan preferences and are already highly polarized. Others may be partisan but not highly polarized, and still others may be undecided or express only slight candidate preferences. If, as previous research suggests, debates do polarize viewers, it is unclear whether they further flame the existing fervor of highly polarized voters, strengthen the preferences of weaker partisans or engage those who enter the viewing with little preference. We therefore pose the following research question:

RQ1: Does the effect of viewing a presidential debate on polarization vary by respondents' prior level of political polarization?

We also seek to confirm the polarizing effect of debates beyond a single election. The Racine Group called for an examination of "trans-campaign effects" (2002, p. 199), a call echoed by Benoit and Holbert's (2008) recommendation that political communication research replicate findings to establish well-documented effects across individual cases. This study presents an opportunity to examine debate polarization across four election cycles and 14 individual cases. We therefore propose two additional research questions:

RQ2: Does the effect of debate viewing on polarization vary by election cycle?

RQ3: Does the effect of debate viewing on polarization vary from debate to debate?

Method

Sample

Data for this study were compiled from the 12 presidential debates spanning the 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential elections as well as the 2008 and 2012 vice presidential debates. The combined analysis included a total of 4657 debate viewers.

Across the four election cycles, we had 194 participants in 2000, 979 participants in 2004, 1958 in 2008, and 1526 in 2012. In total, 3843 participants viewed a presidential debate and 814 viewed a vice presidential debate.

The debate respondents included 57.7% ($n = 2687$) females and 41.7% ($n = 1941$) males (with 0.6%, $n = 29$, not identifying their sex). A plurality of the respondents identified with the Democratic Party (39.4%, $n = 1837$), 34.3% ($n = 1598$) identified with the Republican Party, and 26% ($n = 1213$) either identified with a third party or no party at all. Of the respondents, 0.2% ($n = 9$) did not indicate a party affiliation. The mean age of the respondents was 20.87 ($SD = 5.37$), with participants ranging in age from 18 to 99.

Procedures

A vast majority of the participants were undergraduate students from colleges and universities throughout the United States recruited by faculty researchers who served as members of the national presidential debate research team headed by the second author of this study.¹ Though a vast majority of the participants were university students recruited from communication and political science classes, some of the groups that participated also included members of the local community. While student samples present problems for generalizability, meta-analyses of both debate viewing (Benoit et al., 2003) and political advertising (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999) report no differences in effect sizes between studies using student subjects and those with more representative samples.

In each wave of data collection, participants viewed the debate while assembled in a lab environment (such as a classroom, lecture hall, or other group-viewing location). Respondents completed a pretest questionnaire that included demographic information and a series of items assessing a variety of political attitudes. The respondents then watched the debate and, immediately following the debate, completed a posttest questionnaire that included repeated measures of candidate evaluation items. Each general election debate lasted 90 minutes. In 2000 and 2004, all questionnaires were administered with paper and pencil. In 2008, approximately half of all participants completed the questionnaires via a web-based survey using personal laptops (participants were asked to power down their laptops during debate viewing). In 2012, all participants completed the questionnaire online using either a laptop or other mobile computing device (e.g., cell phone, tablet). Participants in the 2012 debates were permitted to view the debates while using their “second screen.”

Measures

Polarization was calculated from “feeling thermometer” scales commonly used in the National Election Studies survey to measure candidate favorability (Rosenstone, Kinder, Miller, & the National Election Studies, 1997). Participants were asked to indicate their overall feelings toward both the Democratic and Republican candidate

before the debate, and then again afterward. Participants were told that a score between 0 and 49 indicated an unfavorable feeling, with 0 being the most unfavorable and 49 being only slightly unfavorable, 50 indicated a neutral evaluation, and a score between 51 and 100 demonstrated a favorable evaluation, with 100 the most favorable and 51 only slightly favorable.

To compute polarization from the feeling thermometer scores, the evaluation of the Republican candidate was subtracted from the evaluation of the Democratic candidate and the absolute value was taken. In this way, 0 would represent no polarization at all (an equal evaluation of both candidates) and 100 would represent absolute polarization (where one candidate received a 0 or completely unfavorable and the other a 100 or completely favorable). This approach is similar to polarization measures used in past research (e.g., Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Stroud, 2010). Combining all debates, the overall mean polarization score for the pretest was 47.57 ($SD = 31.45$) and 51.42 ($SD = 33.04$) for the posttest. In both the pre- and posttest the minimum observed score was 0 and the maximum was 100.

To test whether pretest levels of polarization moderated a potential main effect of debate viewing on polarization (e.g., RQ1), an additional variable was created to divide the sample into three groups based on their pretest polarization: a highly polarized group, a somewhat polarized group, and a group of very low polarization. The three-group split was established via a 33 and 66 percentile cut. The low polarization group had scores ranging from 0 to 29 and included 36.2% ($n = 1685$) of all participants. The medium polarization group had scores ranging from 30 to 59 and included 25.3% ($n = 1176$) of all participants. The high polarization group had scores ranging from 60 to 100 and included 38.1% ($n = 1772$) of all participants.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that viewing a presidential debate would increase political polarization. Results of a paired-sample t test demonstrated that pretest polarization scores ($M = 47.56$, $SD = 31.46$) were significantly lower than posttest scores ($M = 51.49$, $SD = 33.04$), $t(4624) = -13.737$, $p < .001$. Viewing debates significantly increased polarization, confirming the hypothesis.

The first research question asked whether the effect of viewing a presidential debate on polarization varied depending on the level of pretest polarization such that those with high, medium, and low levels of polarization would react differently to the debate. To test this, a repeated-measure multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with polarization score as the within-subjects factor and pretest polarization level as the between-subjects factor. The polarizing effect of debate viewing was significantly moderated by pretest polarization, $F(2, 4622) = 83.877$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .035$. Follow-up analyses were conducted using paired-sample t tests in each group to determine whether changes in polarization scores were significant. Pretest polarization was significantly different from posttest polarization for those with low pretest polarization, $t(1683) = -16.351$, $p < .001$, and those with moderate pretest polarization, $t(1173) = -7.148$, $p < .001$. However, those in the high pretest

polarization group did not experience a significant change in levels of polarization. Descriptive statistics for each group are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in Figure 1, a vast majority of the polarizing effect of debates occurred within the low-polarization group. Those with moderate levels of preexisting polarization also experienced an increase after watching a presidential debate, though there was less of an increase. Those in the highly polarized group experienced a slight and not statistically significant reduction in polarization.

The second research question asked whether the effect of viewing a presidential debate on polarization varied by the particular election cycle. A repeated-measure MANOVA revealed that the polarizing effect of debate viewing varied by election cycle, $F(3, 4621) = 21.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .013$. Follow-up analyses were conducted using paired-sample *t* tests in each election cycle to determine whether changes in polarization scores were significant. Results of the follow-up analyses are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in Figure 2, the 2012 debates exhibited the greatest

Table 1 Effects of Debate Viewing on Political Polarization

Polarization effects	<i>n</i>	Predebate <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Postdebate <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mean change
Polarization Groups				
Low	1684	13.52 (10.81)	21.71 (20.68)	8.19***
Moderate	1174	45.68 (6.44)	49.86 (21.32)	4.18***
High	1767	81.24 (14.48)	80.98 (20.74)	-0.26
Election Cycle				
2000	194	42.93 (26.01)	48.35 (30.19)	5.42***
2004	955	53.56 (32.02)	56.64 (32.46)	3.08***
2008	1953	45.92 (31.73)	47.77 (33.81)	1.85***
2012	1523	46.48 (30.93)	53.46 (32.15)	6.98***
Debate				
2000 1st	81	46.11 (24.21)	51.19 (26.98)	5.08*
2000 2nd	40	34.7 (22.95)	43.45 (30.41)	8.75*
2000 3rd	73	43.92 (28.76)	47.86 (33.32)	3.94
2004 1st	424	52.62 (31.57)	56.3 (31.49)	3.68***
2004 2nd	189	55.54 (31.19)	60.82 (31.92)	5.28***
2004 3rd	342	53.63 (33.04)	54.75 (33.81)	1.12
2008 1st	417	49.06 (31.98)	52.65 (32.89)	3.59***
2008 2nd	430	49.36 (31.62)	51.13 (33.25)	1.77*
2008 3rd	617	49.41 (31.46)	54.33 (33.05)	4.92***
2008 VP	489	35.8 (29.83)	32.36 (31.27)	-3.44***
2012 1st	364	46.63 (29.72)	51.36 (31.9)	4.73***
2012 2nd	383	50.56 (30.96)	54.56 (32.04)	4***
2012 3rd	452	50.35 (30.36)	53.9 (32.16)	3.55***
2012 VP	324	36.1 (30.76)	53.9 (32.6)	17.87***

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

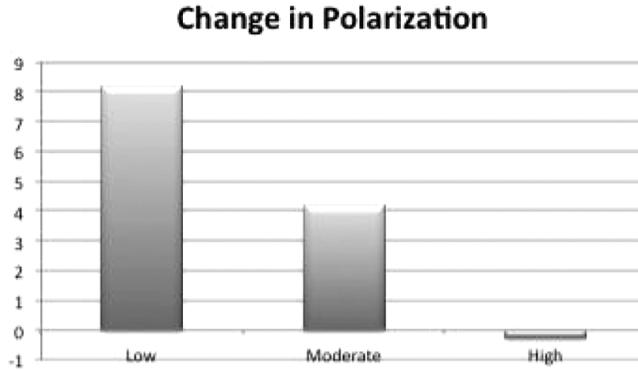


Figure 1 Change in Polarization after Viewing a Presidential Debate by Polarization Group.

polarizing effect, followed by 2000 and 2004. When vice-presidential debates are included, the 2008 debates were the least polarizing overall. A significant polarizing effect from debate viewing was present in all four election cycles.

The third research question asked whether the effect of viewing a debate on polarization varied by the specific debate. There was a significant interaction between the main effect of debate viewing and the specific debate, $F(13, 4611) = 20.473, p < .001, \eta^2 = .055$. Follow-up analyses were conducted using paired-sample t tests in each individual debate to determine whether changes in polarization scores were significant. Results are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, all but 3 of the 14 debates significantly increased polarization. The third presidential debate in 2000 and the third presidential debate in 2008 did not significantly increase polarization. The 2008 vice presidential debate is the only debate included to significantly reduce polarization and the 2012 vice presidential debate was the most polarizing of any included. As can be seen in Figure 3, the polarizing effect of debates varies depending on the specific debate in question, though the trend is clearly toward polarization.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the vast majority of the variance by debate was produced by the two vice presidential debates. Specifically, the 2008 vice presidential

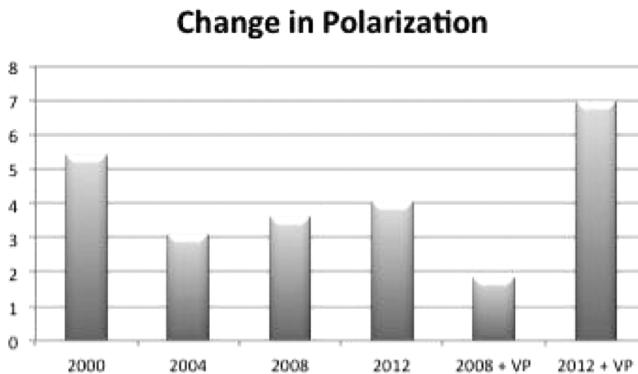


Figure 2 Change in Polarization after Viewing a Presidential Debate by Election Cycle.

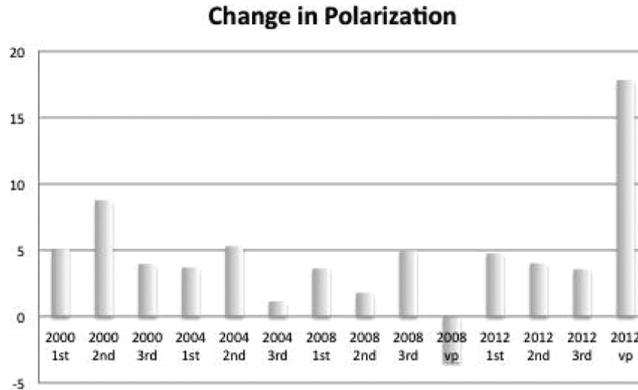


Figure 3 Change in Polarization after Viewing a Presidential Debate by Debate.

debate was the only debate to reduce overall polarization and the 2012 vice presidential debate was the most polarizing single debate in the sample. A follow-up analysis that excluded the vice presidential debates revealed that election cycle did not significantly moderate the polarizing effect of debates (i.e., RQ2) after the two outlying vice presidential debates were excluded. A similar follow-up analysis revealed that, with the vice presidential debates excluded, the polarizing effect of debate viewing was still moderated by the specific election though the size of the moderation was reduced substantially, $F(11, 3800) = 1.824$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .005$. In other words, the observed effect did vary from election to election, but the variance was much smaller after the outlying vice presidential debates were excluded.

While no research question was posed regarding the polarizing effect of specific debates between the polarization groups analyzed in RQ1, post hoc analyses were conducted on each individual debate to determine if the general finding that the vast majority of polarization occurred within the least polarized group was replicated across individual debates. The results of this follow-up analysis demonstrate a consistent pattern following the results of RQ1; a majority of the polarizing effect of debate viewing occurred within those who enter the debate with little polarization, those who are somewhat polarized experience a more modest increase, and those who are highly polarized typically experience very little change in polarization.

Discussion

Presidential debates provide a unique form of campaign communication—they overcome selective exposure by allowing each candidate to make a case for themselves to a diverse audience of supporters, opponents, and undecided voters. Because both sides have equal time to make their case, debates are the most balanced message voters receive over the course of a campaign. Nevertheless, findings that partisans employ biased processing when exposed to attitude discrepant information (Coe et al., 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006) and that debates are often interpreted with partisan bias (Holbrook, 1996) suggest that exposure to balanced messages may further enflame

polarization by forcing partisans to experience messages with which they may disagree, an experience they may find frustrating and ultimately polarizing. In this study, we found a clear and consistent polarizing effect of debate viewing across the 12 years of presidential campaign debates examined. The overall sample became more polarized after watching a debate, and this finding held when each of the four election cycles were analyzed separately and was evident in 11 of the 14 individual debates examined. However, there was considerable variability in the amount of polarization that resulted from debate viewing depending on the participants' level of polarization prior to the debate. Furthermore, there was apparent variability in polarization depending on the election cycle and individual debates, though this moderation was driven almost entirely by the outlying vice presidential debates. In what follows, the significance of a polarizing debate effect is considered and the variability identified in subsequent analyses is interpreted.

In addition to the indirect effect of debate viewing on citizen polarization through increased political talk and news consumption identified previously by Cho and Ha (2012), the present analysis clearly demonstrates a direct effect of debate viewing on polarization. The quasi-experimental design used here allows this effect to be isolated from the broader campaign communication environment and disentangles the polarization effect of debate viewing from the subsequent effects of political talk and media consumption. However, this polarizing effect seems to run counter to a perspective grounded in selective exposure that suggests increased polarization will result from encounters with one-sided perspectives. Debates not only provide both perspectives in equal time but they also allow candidates the opportunity to speak for themselves and to present their perspectives in the best possible light. Why, then, do debates tend to polarize? A possible explanation may be found in Glaeser and Sunstein's (2013) recent work on balanced information in news consumption. They find that people exposed to the same information will react differently depending on their partisan predispositions. They suggest their finding is either because information that reinforces a prior belief is accepted while dissonant information is rejected or, alternatively, the same information may activate a different set of associations that produce polarized responses. Debates can function in much the same way because there is already ample evidence that partisan processing of the debate message is the norm (Holbrook, 1996; Jarman, 2005). It stands to reason, therefore, that this biased processing of information is the primary mechanism through which debates polarize.

While it is likely that partisan processing plays a significant role in the polarization effect of debate viewing, it is important to keep in mind that the greatest polarization resulting from debate exposure occurs in those who are least polarized before they view a debate. This finding has important implications but requires further research. A low polarization score may be the result of a variety of political attitudes. Assigning both candidates a neutral score on the feeling thermometer assessment identifies someone as having lower polarization, yet such candidate assessments may be because one is uninterested in the candidates (apathetic) or because one does not feel they have adequate information to make an informed decision (undecided). Debate

viewing may provide individuals like this with the information necessary to differentiate the candidates or may motivate them to be less apathetic about their candidate preferences. The polarizing effect of this group, in the end, may actually be a positive outcome of debates if it results in greater interest and engagement. As Mutz (2006) reminds us, the more highly polarized citizens are often the catalyst for important social change and, as Prior (2007) observed, lack of political interest in a high-choice media environment has caused many political moderates to abandon politics to people who tend to be more polarized. Even after the significant increase in polarization that occurred after watching a presidential debate, people in the low-polarization group were still well below the average polarization score in our sample. This suggests that polarization within the low group may be a positive development, as it could motivate more moderate people to participate in the electoral process.

The political undecided and apathetic, however, are not the only people likely to have a low-polarization score. An individual may have a low-polarization score because one rated both candidates equally favorable or equally unfavorable (ambivalence). If viewers who strongly dislike both candidates become more polarized after debate viewing, it may indicate that some of their ambivalence has been resolved and at least one of the candidates has altered their negative perceptions. Alternatively, if ambivalence is a result of equally positive feelings about both candidates, the polarizing effect could indicate a souring of opinion toward one candidate. It is unclear what effect the elimination of political ambivalence might have as there is no conclusive evidence that greater ambivalence suppresses voter turnout or other forms of political engagement (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004). The polarizing effect of debate viewing within the low-polarization group can therefore be evidence of the resolution of two different types of political ambivalence (strong negative and strong positive), the amelioration of political apathy, or the movement of undecided debate viewers. Future debate research should differentiate between these various types of low-polarization viewers to determine which process is most responsible for the polarizing effect of debate viewing and to explore the consequences of this polarization—whether a positive increase in engagement or heightened political cynicism and incivility often associated with polarization.

Unlike the low-polarization group, highly polarized viewers did not become more polarized after viewing a debate. While the highly polarized may have had their views buttressed by what they observed during the debate, their relative assessments of the candidates did not change. In part, this could be a feature of the measure—if someone rated Obama a 100 and Romney a 0 before the debate, there would be no evidence of increased polarization following debate exposure as one's predebate score was already at the maximum. However, while this "maximum" polarization is an artificial limit imposed by the measure, it is worth considering whether someone who is maximally polarized before viewing a debate can experience a substantive increase or whether, as dictated by the measure, they are maximally partisan before the effects of viewing a debate are manifest. Indeed, in cases of the highly polarized, it may be useful to examine outlying cases where debates significantly reduce

polarization (such as the 2008 vice presidential debate). Particular attention to a debate such as this, and future debates that may violate the general trend of increasing polarization, may reveal unique features that mitigate polarization among strongly partisan viewers.

While the polarization observed within low-polarization viewers provides important avenues for future research and the absence of a similar effect within high-polarization viewers is promising for the normative democratic potential of debates, it is less clear how the small increase in polarization observed among viewers who were somewhat polarized should be interpreted. In general, we lack clear understanding of how polarization may be good for democratic and electoral processes (e.g., activates people, makes them likely to vote, donate time and money, and pay attention to the election) and at what point polarization becomes problematic for democracy (e.g., undermines the legitimacy of political opponents, undermines civil democratic discourse, balkanizes the electorate). While it does not appear that scores in the medium-polarized group increased to “dangerous” levels, it is unclear at what point (if any) polarization should be considered deleterious to democratic practice. Until future research more fully articulates the degrees and consequences of affective polarization, interpretation of this finding will remain speculative.

In spite of the clear and consistent polarizing effect of debate viewing across the 12 years of debates, there was some variance between election cycles. Specifically, the 2012 debates were the most polarizing overall while the 2008 debates were the least polarizing. However, a debate-by-debate analysis suggested that this result was the consequence of the two most outlying cases included in the analysis: the 2012 and 2008 vice presidential debates. The 2012 vice presidential debate was substantially more polarizing than any other debate included in this dataset, almost twice as polarizing as the next closest (the second presidential in 2000). Conversely, the 2008 vice presidential debate was the least polarizing—it was the only debate that reduced polarization on average. This is perplexing in part because little theorizing exists on how vice presidential debates function and because one participant—Vice President Biden—was present in each. With a sample size of only two cases and with these two the extreme outliers in our entire dataset, it is impossible to know whether the unexpected results are a function of the participants, the electoral climate, the nature of vice presidential debates, or coincidence. Vice presidential debates have been studied less frequently than presidential debates but are distinct both in content and context (Carlin & Bicak, 1993) and tend to be more caustic than presidential debates. Because the vice presidential debates tend to be less civil, the 2012 debate may be more indicative of vice presidential debates in general. It may be that, due to the low expectations of Palin following her interview with Katie Couric and Biden’s concerns about appearing too aggressive (McKinney, Rill, & Watson, 2011), the 2008 vice presidential debate was truly an outlier. The presence of such outliers does not diminish the existence of a clear trend but does illustrate how specific debates can deviate from that trend. Outlying cases such as our two vice presidential debates provide opportunities to explore what features make certain debates more (or less) polarizing than the norm.

Conclusion

This study presents findings from 14 presidential campaign debates spanning four elections and 12 years. We found that, by and large, debates increase polarization within viewers. However, this increase in polarization was most evident in those who are least polarized before viewing a debate. The polarization of this low-polarized group may be evidence that debates reduce uncertainty, apathy, and/or political ambivalence. Because low-polarization citizens are less likely to participate in politics than their more polarized counterparts (Dilliplane, 2011), the boost they receive from debate viewing may in fact be good for democracy as these more moderate spectators may elect to “opt in” to the political conversation after viewing a debate. Conversely, we observed no significant increase in polarization among viewers who were already highly polarized before viewing a debate; a finding that suggests debate viewing is unlikely to increase existing levels of political polarization. Our findings were broadly consistent across all 14 debates though there were two important outliers, the 2008 and 2012 vice presidential debates, which raise questions for future researchers about what might make any given debate deviate from the general trend of increased polarization and whether vice presidential debates follow any trend at all. Future research should also explore polarization that occurs within the low-polarization group to determine what the effects of this increase are and whether it is consistent across different types of low-polarized individuals (e.g., undecided, apathetic, and ambivalent viewers).

Through this study we extend research on debate effects to include the direct effect of debate viewing on polarization and to add to an emerging literature on the various causes of political polarization. However, these findings should be qualified by several limitations. First, because the data for this study spans 12 years and 14 different quasi-experimental data collection efforts, there is variability in the size of samples included. This is especially true for the debates from the 2000 election cycle where the sample sizes are much smaller than subsequent elections. Interpretations about the polarizing effect of the 2000 debates, especially where specific debates appear to be outliers, should proceed with caution. Similarly, because presidential campaign debates only occur every 4 years, our analysis only includes 14 case studies of debates and only four case studies of elections. While this provides much more opportunity for interpretation than analysis of a single debate or election cycle, it is not a large enough sample of cases to make conclusive determinations about trends and outliers. Future elections should be interpreted within the context of these findings to further establish and solidify the trends identified here. Finally, our study consisted of 14 quasi-experimental designs that retested participants immediately after debate viewing. Therefore, we are unable to determine the lasting nature of effects observed in these experiments, particularly during the crucial campaign period just before the election and in the postelection political environment. Longitudinal studies should seek to determine the extent to which these effects were enduring and whether they mediated other known debate effects such as increased engagement in the campaign and increased political information efficacy (Chaffee, 1978; McKinney & Warner,

2013; Wald & Lupfer, 1978). This study represents a major advance in our understanding of the relationship between debate viewing and political polarization. Nevertheless, many questions remain for future debate research regarding the various consequences of the polarizing effect of debate viewing in an effort to determine whether this effect is part of the process of engaging a larger proportion of the electorate or a potentially dangerous contribution to the unhealthy tone of our contemporary political climate.

Note

- [1] The research team included faculty from colleges and universities throughout the United States to achieve geographic representation of all areas of the country, including campuses from rural, urban, and major metropolitan communities. Campuses participating in the 2000 debate experiments included Cosumnes (CA) River College, Dickinson (PA) College, Ohio University, University of Akron, University of Florida, University of Idaho, University of Missouri, University of North Texas, and University of Oklahoma. Campuses participating in the 2004 debate experiments included Cosumnes (CA) River College, Dominican University of California, Emerson College (Boston), New York University, Ohio University, Texas A&M University-Commerce, University of Akron, University of Florida, University of Kansas, University of Missouri, University of Texas-San Antonio, and Virginia Tech. Campuses participating in the 2008 debate experiments included Abilene Christian University, Chapman (CA) University, Cosumnes (CA) River College, Emerson College (Boston), Governors (IL) State University, Iowa State University, Marquette University, New Mexico State University, Ohio University, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Texas State University-San Marcos, University of Akron, University of Florida, University of Kansas, University of Missouri, University of New Haven, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and University of Texas-San Antonio. Campuses participating in the 2012 debate experiments included Auburn University, Emerson College (Boston), Georgia College, Marquette University, Ohio University, Portland State University, Radford University, Rhodes College, Texas State University-San Marcos, University of Georgia, and University of Missouri.

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