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WHAT'S GROUP GOT TO DO WITH IT? DEBATE, GROUP DISCUSSION, AND
VOTING BEHAVIOR: THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL RACE

A Thesis

Presented to the

School of Communication

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Leslie A. Rill

May 2005

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate
College, University of Nebraska, in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Communication, University of
Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

Barbara Pickering

RISG

Chairperson Michael Hill

Date April 19, 2005

WHAT'S GROUP GOT TO DO WITH IT? DEBATE, GROUP DISCUSSION, AND
VOTING BEHAVIOR: THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Leslie A. Rill, M.A.

University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2005

Advisor: Dr. Michael Hilt

A primary goal of this study was to confirm the effect that presidential debates have on viewers as well as to discover how group discussion has the potential to affect voters after viewing the debate. Debates do have the ability to influence voter's intent to vote as well as their acquisition of knowledge. The study also revealed that group discussion following the debates has an impact on viewers.

Through the use of quantitative methods surveys were distributed to Debate Watch 2004 participants inquiring about their voting behavior. An analysis of the responses yielded positive results as to the effects that debates have on viewers. One-way analysis of variance as well as chi-square showed significant relationships between each variable tested.

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Ursula LeGuin once said, “It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end.” This statement summarizes my experience in graduate school at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

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I can only hope that the path to the end of the next journey is as great as this one has been. Doctoral school will be challenging and scary but because of you I know that I will reach my destination. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

Thanks to continuous advancements in technology, the potential President of the United States is brought into the comfort of our homes, commercial-free and uninterrupted, through televised presidential debates. As consumers of television we have an amazing opportunity because we can watch, listen, and learn about political hopefuls. It is a recognized fact that presidential debates are a prime opportunity for the public to take advantage of information regarding an upcoming election (Weaver & Drew, 2001). Moreover, it is possible for the debates to crystallize issue stances, demonstrate candidate reaction under pressure, and, for some voters, help form opinions allowing them to discuss relevant political issues with others.

Each election, an increasing number of U.S. citizens have shown up at the polls, showing a greater involvement in the process of voting (Faler, 2005). With a close race between George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000, and with a heavily contested race between Bush and John Kerry in 2004, it has become apparent that the communication between candidates and voters is pivotal, especially in close races. Benoit and Hansen (2001) state, “presidential debates are without question an important component of the modern presidential campaign” (p. 130). By the time the contests are televised, the election has been narrowed to two or three candidates, allowing viewers to make a side-by-side comparison of their choices. Thus, they are a critical turning point of the campaign cycle.

The first televised presidential debate between republican and democratic candidates aired in 1960, and televised debates have been a part of presidential

campaigns in every election since 1976 (Kraus, 2000). The debates set forth three crucial opportunities for candidates as well as voters. First, debates involve viewers in the campaign. Second, they inform viewers about key issues and the corresponding platforms of the candidates. Finally, debates reveal personal qualities of the candidates themselves (Best & Hubbard, 1999). Best and Hubbard (1999) further report that debates make obvious the qualifications, traits, and positions of the participants. In short, debates provide voters with the tools to critically evaluate candidates based upon their issue stances, personalities, qualifications, and to confidently cast a vote for America's future.

According to Jamieson and Birdsell (1988), televised debates attract more viewers than any other campaign messages. Carlin (1994) reports, "the second presidential debate in 1992 attracted 69.9 million viewers. Those numbers contrast sharply to the 20.5 million viewers who tuned in for each of the major party conventions" (p. 6). During the 2004 election, 62.5 million viewers watched the first presidential debate where President Bush and Senator Kerry bantered back-and-forth over foreign policy and homeland security ("Opening Bush-Kerry debate," 2004). With so many spectators, it is hard to deny the incontrovertible fact: presidential debates have a sizeable probability of influencing potential voters.

After the "Debates '92" symposium on May 9, 1990, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) co-chairmen Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk decided to restructure the presidential debates to enhance voter education due to the lack of public involvement in the televised debates (Carlin, 1994). From this decision a focus group

study headed by political communication scholar, Diana Carlin, was created. According to McKinney (1994),

A primary goal in designing this project was to assemble groups of likely voters that represented a cross-section of the American electorate. Focus group sites were selected to provide feedback from a wide range of citizens...and diversity of populations (p.21).

This study hoped to gain a greater insight as to the effects of presidential debates on viewers as well as how the media impacts viewers during the debates (Carlin, 1994).

This pilot study has become a nation wide focus group study entitled DebateWatch, in which focus groups are established around the United States to gather data about the effects of presidential debates on viewers.

As we know, many persuasive factors converge when an individual enters the privacy of the voting booth: the opinions of group members and the content of presidential debates chief among them. The following review of literature will look at how agenda-setting affects political communication before then investigating the nature of presidential debates, the process of voter education via those debates, the voters' attitudinal changes regarding the candidates' platforms and personal characteristics, and the effects on voters' decision-making process. This section will thus attempt to better understand what happens in the mind of voters before they mark the ballot.

Review of Literature

Agenda-setting

According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda-setting refers to the media's power to shape public attention and awareness. In 1972, McCombs and Shaw studied the 1968 presidential campaign. After 100 interviews conducted with undecided voters, the researchers compared what voters said were key campaign issues to the amount of print space devoted to those issues. McCombs and Shaw (1972) concluded that a significant relationship exists between the emphasis the media gave to the issues and the importance voters placed on the issues. Agenda-setting separates the informative and persuasive communication functions of the media. This theory reiterates the important role that media plays in the audience's perception of politics (Trent & Friedenber, 2004). Cohen (1963) states that the media does not tell viewers what to think; however, it does tell viewers what to think about. The quantity of media coverage cues voters/viewers as to the relative importance of a story. For example, the media did not tell the public if John Kerry's depiction in the Swiftboat ads was good or bad. Instead the media placed the ads at the front of the daily news circuit, implying that Kerry's portrayal in the ads was of great importance and should be considered as pertinent decision-making information in the 2004 election.

By repeatedly presenting the story to a national audience, the media goes beyond the claim that they are presenting what the viewers want to hear (Trent & Friedenber, 2004). Hollihan (2001) explains that "the mass media is extremely important in forming the political views of today's citizens...from television, people not

only learn about the issues shaping the political scene but also get a look into the political institutions and rituals that characterize the daily operations of the political system” (pp. 50-51). When analyzing newspaper stories about federal spending policies and control of nuclear weapons from two different newspapers during the campaign season, Kraus and Davis discovered (1976) clear differences in the presentation of the information. Their study revealed that readers exposed to the more heavily covered story identified those issues as more important (Kraus & Davis, 1976).

In 1973, Funkhouser conducted a national survey comparing what people identified as the most important topics facing the United States between 1964 and 1970 and what news magazines portrayed as the most important topics of that time. The study concluded that “the average person takes the media’s word for what the ‘issues’ are, whether or not they personally have involvement or interest in them” (Funkhouser, 1973, p. 538). These studies are important because they illustrate the notion that the media sets public priorities by giving attention to certain issues over others (Trent & Friedenber, 2004). Through the establishment of these issue priorities, the media plays a dominant role in the construction of the public’s social reality.

Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw (2002) suggest that presidential campaigns see personal appearances as one of the most important ways for candidates to shape and build their public agendas. Using candidate appearances from 1972-2000, Althaus et. al. (2002) concluded that candidates make personal appearances to drive positive local news coverage. Through the positive news coverage candidates are able to use their air-time to convey their messages. Schaefer (1997) explains that candidates must rely on

the media to get their messages across. Since the media is crucial to success, the candidates need to influence the coverage they receive because it will directly affect their public standing. The increase in local news coverage communicates the message to viewers that they are interested in local issues and more importantly the individuals who make up our country.

Just and Crigler (1999) conducted a study to discover what proportion of the news agendas are set by the candidates compared to the amount set by the journalists. It was concluded that journalists do the majority of the agenda-setting for presidential candidates. Trent and Friedenberg (2004) reinforce this by stating:

As campaigns become more and more sophisticated and candidates attempt to work into their debates the very lines that permeate their speeches and paid advertising, it grows increasingly difficult to isolate the agenda-setting effects of political debate from the overall agenda-setting effects of media coverage of the entire campaign (p. 297).

Tedesco (2001) suggests that in order to control the effects that media have over political candidates, campaigns must use tightly controlled advertising and strategic public and media relation's efforts. All of this research reiterates the idea that the media directs what viewers think about. Through agenda-setting functions, journalists control the significance that media events such as the presidential debates play in viewers' consumption of political communication.

According to Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2000), debates attract the largest media coverage of any other campaign event. During the campaign season, few events

dominate the news arena like the debates (Lanoue & Schrott, 1991), leading researchers to conclude that through the media's agenda-setting function, spectators of the debates will be primed as to what issues are important in voter decision making.

Debates

Debates have been deemed by the public as an important election ritual (Hollihan, 2001; Trent & Friedenberg, 2004). The traditional format for these "rituals" allows for a moderator, two (or more) participants, and a specific time limit. According to Auer (1962), debates consist of five common elements: confrontation; equal and adequate time for candidates to speak; contestants of the same stature; speeches on stated positions; and a wish to gain an audience decision. However, formal presidential debates often lack one or more of these components. Typically, there is a lack of direct confrontation between candidates (Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992). Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon (1992) suggest that stepping aside from a press conference format to actually debate is a potential risk for both candidates. This lack of clash can make candidates look weak. However, if true conflict occurs, it can be holistically detrimental to an audience's perception of a candidate's character. Therefore, in modern debates, candidates try to avoid coming to direct verbal blows (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988).

Another element often jettisoned is the notion of equal and adequate time. Modern presidential debates do not typically last more than 90 minutes. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) argue that, "televised debates of the past two decades have been shaped by the assumption that their audience has a short attention span" (p. 98). In a formal

presidential debate, the format is determined prior to the event; therefore, equal time limits are set. Negating this allotment is the fact that the predetermined time is often inadequate. Ultimately, the lack of time encourages candidates to abbreviate responses, which may not adequately inform viewers.

Televised presidential debates have become an institutionalized part of the campaign process (Friedenberg 1994). According to Jamieson (1987), "...the debates offer the most extensive and serious view of the candidates available to the electorate" (p. 28). As noted earlier, the contests highlight both issues and voting records more thoroughly than any other form of campaign discourse. They also give the public an opportunity to see the candidates as people (Pfau & Kang, 1991).

In addition to highlighting campaign issues, debates are ideally structured to be fair for all participants. Hart and Jarvis (1997) explain that an "ideal debate will put two opponents of equal skill against each other with the hope that truth will emerge" (p. 1100). The authors also suggest that the debates crystallize a campaign's objectives, as well as ensure self-involvement on the part of candidates. Hart and Jarvis (1997) conclude that incumbency does not significantly influence the success of the debater. Because the format is predetermined and contains moderators, the playing field is leveled.

Debate Formats

Currently, through negotiation, candidates and their campaign staff decide whether candidates will debate, how many debates they will participate in, and the

timing and format of the debates (Hollihan, 2001). Over time, debates have changed from structured “press conference” events to also include open forums and roundtable discussions, allowing for more interaction between candidates and the electorate as well as opening the door for an increase in voter education (Carlin & McKinney, 2004).

Some researchers argue that formal presidential debates, in their current state are not actually debates but rather “counterfeit debates” (Auer, 1962, 1981). However, leading researchers such as Diana Carlin (1989) and David Zarefsky (1986) disagree, explaining that although televised debates do not follow the same format as an academic debate model, current debates do appear in many different formats; therefore negating the dispute as to which model is better. Lanoue and Schrott (1991) refer to debates as “joint press conferences” because they give voters the only opportunity during the campaign season to analyze the candidates side-by-side under identical rhetorical conditions (Carlin, 1994; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Owen 1991). Although current debate models may not follow those of the Lincoln-Douglas format, they still have the potential to educate viewers in addition to exposing their character and issue stances.

Carlin and McKinney (2004) suggest that a common criticism of the debates is that, due to time constraints, the candidates are unable to fully develop arguments and there are often a great deal of unrelated topics raised in a single debate. Past formats used by candidates prevented them from being as informative as the electorate wanted. In addition, there is a lack of follow-up questioning, preventing candidates from responding on certain issues. Strict control on responses prohibits direct clash between

candidates and detracts from a direct comparison of candidates on issues. Lamoureux, Entekin, and McKinney (1994) suggest that instead of debating their opponent, candidates often engage in arguments with the journalists that serve as moderators. According to Trent and Friedenber (2004), typical questions proposed by moderators ignore the public's agenda. Since moderators exhibit a great deal of control over the debates, questions that stray from the public's agenda prohibit learning and knowledge acquisition.

Currently, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) is the national debate sponsor. According to Carlin and McKinney (2004), the CPD allowed the exclusion of paneled journalist debates and adopted debate formats such as the single moderator debate, town hall debates, and round table discussions, allowing for less rigid candidate responses and encouraging more interaction between the candidates and viewers. The single moderator format allows candidates to answer questions in more depth and permits follow-up questions to ensure good coverage of each topic (Trent & Friedenber, 2004). Ultimately, formats diverted from panel questioning because not enough time was being spent on the "important issues" and, therefore, only a small amount of information was being presented (Carlin & McKinney, 2004).

Researchers have a great deal of experimentation regarding debate formats. Carlin and McKinney (1994) concluded that participants from their 1992 presidential debates focus group study preferred the use of a variety of formats, with the use of a single moderator outweighing that of the panel format. Researchers have concluded that debate formats do matter because debate dialogue, presentation, and candidates'

personalities are all different depending on the format used (Pfau, 1984; Beck 1996; Bilmes, 1999; Carlin & McKinney, 1994). Meaning that each format allows viewers to evaluate candidates differently, therefore impacting their candidate evaluation as well as the debates cognitive and behavioral effects on viewers.

Debate Effects

Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert (2001) examined the first presidential debate in 2000 between George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore to determine what effects arose from watching debates. They argued that appeals to voters could be made on three key grounds: policy, personal character, and leadership ability. The researchers determined that “watching a debate can influence the perceived importance of certain factors as well as specific issues in vote choice, alter impressions of candidates, and increase voters’ confidence in their vote choice” (Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001, p. 262). However, Friedenber (1979) explains that debates are used to further the interests of the candidates as opposed to informing the electorate. In addition, Holbrook (1999) points out the obvious-yet-essential fact that the primary reason for debating is to win voters. The question remains: Are debates achieving their goal?

Cognitive Effects

Many scholars have analyzed candidates’ debate performance and dialogue in relation to viewer’s reactions of who “won” the debate (Samovar, 1965; Bitzer & Rueter, 1980; Bryski, 1978; Riley & Hollihan, 1981; Rowland, 1986; Levasseur &

Dean, 1996). Although this research makes a significant contribution to the field the current study does not focus on the perceived winner of the debate, but instead the potential for viewers to gather information.

Holbrook (1999) argues that the most important tool provided by presidential debates is their ability to convey information to voters. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) agree, pointing out that debates convey policy stances, party distinctions, candidate personalities, and presidential vision to voters. However, if voters have already been exposed to significant amounts of information regarding a candidate, then the odds of new information presented in a debate being perceived as relevant are not substantial (Holbrook, 1999; Sears & Chaffee, 1979). According to Best and Hubbard (1999), most voter learning occurs during the presidential primary debates. Holbrook (1999) agrees and suggests that the reason for this increased learning is due to the timing of the presidential primaries. In this period, voters are seeking the most knowledge (Sears & Chaffee, 1979). Since the primaries come first in a campaign cycle, it is apparent that there is the largest opportunity for viewers to gather information. As Carlin and McKinney (1994) suggest, either way, the debates prove to be an important voter education tool.

According to Lemert (1993), debates can be used to decrease the knowledge gap between voters with high and low amounts of knowledge. In addition, primary debates are excellent for communicating issue positions to viewers (Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Holbrook, 1999). Finally, Holbrook (1999) points out that debates are more useful in some years than in others. When the election is not considered a close race, the debates

have less of an effect on information gathering and candidate preference (McKinney & Lamoureux, 1999). This affirms the prior argument that early knowledge on the positions and character of candidates encourages further discovery; therefore, the first debate is the most important in terms of knowledge acquisition because it is the first time that the presidential candidates go head-to-head (Holbrook, 1999; Sears & Chaffee, 1979). Unlike the primaries, where only potential presidential candidates debate, the actual presidential debates do give information that can help create or reinforce beliefs about candidates (Holbrook, 1996).

Chaffee (1978) asserts that voters' main reasons for watching the debates were to: "(a) learn the candidates' positions; (b) compare them as personalities; (c) help decide which way to vote" (p. 333). Chaffee argues that in 1960, researchers were not concerned with the learning functions of debates, but with persuasive effects. Therefore, it was imperative to study other effects that may have occurred. Using a sample in Wisconsin, Chaffee (1978) was able to determine that those voters who watched the debates with the intent to learn ended up doing just that.

After tracking voters' intentions through the 1976 presidential race, Chaffee and Dennis (1979) concluded that voters who were uncertain of their vote at any given time were able to make their decision based upon the knowledge they gathered while viewing the presidential debates. Using open-ended questions in a study of the 1988 presidential and vice presidential debates, Drew and Weaver (1991) gauged media effects, including those of the presidential debates on voter learning. It was determined that, after viewing debates, the public placed more importance on issues as opposed to

the candidates' character, illustrating the desire of viewers to obtain knowledge. Drew and Weaver's (1991) research supports findings in earlier studies indicating that debates contribute to an informed electorate (Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Miller & MacKuen, 1979). According to Carlin and McKinney (1994), participants agree that debates are valuable and legitimate tool to promote voter education, aiding in information gathering and comparison between candidates.

As stated prior, these findings are echoed by Sears and Chaffee (1979). When looking at studies conducted after the Great Debates (i.e. televised presidential debates from 1960-1976), they concluded that debates most often clarified candidates' positions on issues, therefore helping voters to learn more and make decisions about candidates more readily. For undecided voters, this provides a critical tool for viewers to learn about candidate character and issue stance (Carlin & McKinney, 1994). Ultimately, those who watch more debates learn more and are able to recall specific information about issues and candidate issues stances (Miller & MacKuen, 1979). After examining the research explaining debates' cognitive effects it is important to look at the behavioral effects that also occur after viewing the debates.

Behavioral Effects

According to Best and Hubbard (1999), "debates have three major functions: (a) debates engage viewers in the campaign; (b) inform viewers about the issues; (c) inform viewers about the candidates" (p. 450). Their study was conducted using university undergraduate students in a pretest/posttest design, examining campaign engagement,

issue evaluations, candidate evaluations, and vote choice. It was concluded that “debates can change viewers vote intentions...debates act as more than mere opportunities for attitude reinforcement, but can serve as important catalyst for change in viewer’s preferences during an election campaign” (p. 461). A *Times/CNN* poll from the 1992 presidential election stated that one third of the respondents said the debates had an effect on their preferences (Barrett, 1992). A study conducted by Dennis, Chaffee, and Choe (1979) explains this. Viewers’ vote intention rose from 55 percent at the beginning of the first 1976 presidential debate to 83 percent who actually cast their ballot on election day due to their candidate perceptions after watching the debates.

Sears, Freedman, and O’Connor (1964) argue that those who have an opinion about the presidential candidates in the primaries watch the debate with the anticipation of cheering on their choice. However, for those who have not yet developed an opinion about for whom to vote, the debates serve as an opportunity to develop attitudes about the candidates. Sears and Chaffee (1979) confirm this by explaining that after the debates, although there was a shift in voting intentions and evaluation of the candidates, the net voting intentions and evaluation of candidates remained constant. Jamieson (1987) states that one reason this occurs is that debates allow viewers to see candidates in a more natural communicative state than they do in other, often scripted, forms of campaign communication. Debates have very little to no effect on an uninterested viewer, however, for those with a weak or unknown candidate preference, debates have been shown to play a pivotal role in their decision-making process (Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992; McKinney, 1994; Greer, 1988; Chaffee & Choe, 1980).

Researchers have found that formal presidential debates have the ability to change a voter's preference for a candidate (Greer, 1988; Sears & Chaffee, 1979). Greer argues that it is hard to determine if the impact of the formal debate on voters' preferences is short-lived or if the campaign season is too long. It is possible that after the debates the public may re-evaluate their opinions of candidates, becoming more in tune with the rest of the campaign prior to voting. In addition, should a favored candidate lose momentum after a debate, it is probable that his campaign strategies will be adjusted, allowing for persuasion of the voters after the debates. Greer (1988) explains, "debates cause many cross-pressured and weakly committed individuals to change their preference for president" (p. 496).

Pfau (2002) contends that televised presidential debates typically produce significant effects, but that these effects are subtle. It was determined that relational content is important because it has a potential influence the voter's perceptions of the candidates. The advantage of having televised debates is that the candidates have an opportunity for contact with voters, creating greater immediacy (Pfau, 2002). The importance of relational cues is evident when analyzing the 1992 debate between Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush. Clinton spoke directly to the audience, creating a feeling of warmth, involvement, and enthusiasm between himself and voters; whereas President Bush was captured looking down at his watch, suggesting to some viewers that he wanted the debate to be over (Pfau, 2002). This illustrates that many actions have a potential impact on a voter's reaction to the debates.

Looking at the 1996 presidential debate, Yawn and Beatty (2000) focus on the extent to which the potential for attitude change exists. First, they confirm that attitude change does or can occur after watching presidential debates. They determine that there is a coherent link between attitude change and the debate itself, before concluding the source of the attitude change. Using a pretest/ posttest design, the researchers were able to detect attitude changes quickly. In accordance with other authors (Lanoue & Schrott, 1989, 1991), Yawn and Beatty (2000) affirmed that voters' attitudes toward the incumbent are less likely to change. However, voters' attitudes towards the challenger are more malleable.

According to Gallup (1988) one effect of the 1976 debates was to increase voter interest. Miller and MacKuen (1979) assert that those who watch debates are more likely to be aware of the political system and those involved as well as increase participation in the political process. Holbrook states that for those who are only moderately interested in the campaign debates may spark interest in and education about the campaign and the candidates. Debates are helpful to those wanting to make comparative evaluations as well as for those with the least amount of candidate information (Miller & MacKuen, 1978). As Kraus and Davis (1981) discuss debates primarily reinforce the opinions of those who are undecided in their candidate preference. Ultimately, according to Carlin and McKinney (1994) debates serve as a reinforcement tool for those intending to vote. As the research explains, debates have the potential to impact attitude change, once again reiterating the significance of the presidential debates. After examining the research on the cognitive and behavioral

effects of the debates it is important to look at the potential that these effects have on the viewers' evaluation of candidates' issues and image.

Candidate Issue/Image Evaluation

Due to the extemporaneous style of debates, candidates are not able to provide scripted responses; they must let their own voices emerge through their communication. This allows voters to see issue as well as image (Jamieson, 1987). Miller and MacKuen (1979) argue that debates have little influence on the outcome of an election. However, they did conclude that those watching the debates left with a more favorable image of their preferred candidate while gaining a less favorable opinion about the other candidate.

Debates give a glimpse as to how candidates will respond under pressure in addition to how they might try to shape society and culture if elected (Leon, 1993; McKinnon, Tedesco, & Kaid, 1993). Hellweg (1993) attests that both image and issue play an important role in presidential debates. Carlin (2000) concurs, suggesting that issue and image work together, allowing debate viewers to make judgments about image based on the candidates' presentation of issues. Lanoue and Schrott (1991) suggest debates help viewers to gain insight about a candidate's character. McKinney, Dudash, and Hodgkinson (2003) support these findings. In an evaluation of the 2000 presidential debates, researchers concluded that a greater number of image evaluation was reported compared to issue acquisition. This means that debate viewers are evaluating the candidates' image.

Group Discussion

Patterson (2002) states, "...debates generate the greatest amount of public interest and more citizen to citizen discussion of any other single campaign event" (p. 123). Yet at this time there has been very little research as to the effects of group discussion on the cognitive, behavioral, and latent effects of viewers.

According to Carlin and McKinney (1994), "...the debates do provide information to viewers, but have less effect as persuasive events which cause voters to switch from one candidate to another" (p. 128). Although debates may not have the most persuasive effects of any campaign communication the social pressure arising from group discussion is persuasive. Communication with strangers in groups enhances voter learning despite relationship or political affiliation. According to Carlin and McKinney (1994), focus groups aid in voter learning and help pique interest in the campaign. Participants in their 1992 presidential debate focus groups suggested that there be an organized movement for viewers to watch debates in groups then hold discussions afterwards. Hollihan (2001) agrees, suggesting that "observing televised debates, and then talking about the issues that emerge in those debates, informs the electorate about the issues, mobilizes them toward political action, and helps develop the skills necessary for self-governance" (p. 176).

Jamieson (1987) continues:

...debates encouraged a focused attention that makes politics a topic of conversation even among people who usually avoid such subjects. The social

pressure on the typical voter to take a sustained look at both candidates creates a climate conducive to political learning (p. 28).

Once the public has gathered information regarding candidates, they will ensure exposure to their own political discussions where they can contribute to the conversations (Miller & MacKuen, 1979). Carlin and McKinney (1994) present a challenge to future researchers when they state, "...there is a wealth of potential research data available. Each participant should be surveyed to determine the impact the discussion had on level of interest, understanding of the issues and candidates, and commitment to vote." (p. 213-214). The following study seeks to help answer that call.

Statement of Purpose

Friedenberg (1994) states, "perhaps no other aspect of political debating has been as subjected to as much study as the effects of political debates" (p. 256). Without a doubt, the 2004 presidential debates were used to convey information regarding the candidates' platforms with the intention of capturing votes. As confirmed in the review of literature, due to the amount of information transmitted throughout televised debates, they have the potential to influence voter turnout by nature of the voters' impressions of the candidates.

The aforementioned evidence supports a relationship between presidential debates and attitude change through the ingestion of information during debates. The impact of presidential debates on the base of voter knowledge is central to the study of political communication, as it reveals the effectiveness of various strategies. It is also

important to examine the relationship between group discussion of debates and attitude change. At this time, communication scholars have yet to assess the impact this group discussion has on voters. This study will examine the impact of watching and discussing presidential debates in relation to the opinion of potential voters.

Specific research questions asked in this study are:

RQ1: Does watching a formal presidential debate increase likely intent to vote?

RQ2: Does watching a formal presidential debate impact viewers' knowledge of the candidates, attitudes toward the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates?

RQ3: Does watching a formal presidential debate change the voting preference of viewers?

RQ4: After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion increase likely intent to vote?

RQ5: After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion impact viewers' knowledge regarding, attitudes toward the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates?

RQ6: After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion change voting preference of viewers?

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study consisted of a convenience sample of male and female voters in the Midwest region of the United States. This study was conducted at a Midwestern University, and the test site consisted of a predetermined viewing facility located on campus. All participants were at least 18 years of age. The study was open to any member of the community to promote a variety of demographics (i.e. education level, income, age, and gender). All participation was voluntary and will remain anonymous. The minimum goal for the number of respondents was one hundred participants; however, the total number of participants equaled 123.

Procedures

After an exact location was determined and dates solidified, flyers advertising the Debate Watch 2004 event were circulated on the campus and through various community organizations (i.e. senior citizen's venues, college campuses in the area, League of Women's Voters, and so forth). A press release was issued to the local newspaper, television, and radio stations. Facilitators for the event consisted of students from the Special Topics in Political Communication class. Facilitators received detailed instructions and training from the researchers prior to the Debate Watch 2004 events. Instruction focused on practical procedures, survey administration, and conducting group discussions.

On the evening of the first presidential debate, participants gathered in the designated area to watch the debate. Facilitators handed out nametags, necessary supplies, and folders containing pre-debate, post-debate, and post-discussion surveys (see Appendix A through C) to the participants. An announcement was made approximately 10 minutes prior to the beginning of the debate, requesting that participants answer the voluntary pre-debate survey (see Appendix A). In addition, the audience was informed that the debate would start shortly and would be viewed via a live broadcast on C-SPAN, uninterrupted, with no political commentary. Participants were asked to keep talk to a minimum. To avoid any exposure to biased commentary following the completion of the debates, the broadcast was immediately turned off by facilitators.

Next, the facilitators requested that the participants fill out a post-debate survey (see Appendix B) located in their folders. Participants were then excused from the viewing location and asked to return after a short break to participate in group discussions. Data was not collected from participants choosing to leave prior to the group discussion. To avoid any potential manipulation, participants were asked not to discuss the debate during the break. Following the break, the remaining participants were divided randomly into groups and directed to round tables. Each group participated in a discussion (see Appendix D) led by facilitators exploring the participants' attitudes toward the debates and their corresponding attitudes towards the presidential candidates. Research was conducted at the first presidential and vice

presidential DebateWatch viewing held in 2004. However, only data collected at the first presidential debate was used for this study.

The group discussions were recorded using audiocassettes. Each group's facilitator took notes, which were turned into researchers upon completion of the event. A post-discussion survey (Appendix C) was administered prior to participants leaving the venue. Following the post-discussion survey, the administrators collected all previous surveys and thanked the participants for contributing to the study. The administrators placed the surveys in a provided envelope and returned them to the head researcher. The entire procedure lasted approximately three hours. Following the collection of the surveys, researchers compiled the data for analysis to be sent to the University of Kansas by midnight on the evening of the debates. To remain consistent, the data collection procedure and events were conducted by the same group of administrators.

Instrumentation

Scales used to answer each research question pretest (Appendix A) and post-test (Appendix B and Appendix C) were adapted from the DebateWatch 2004 event. The pre-debate test (Appendix A) asked general demographic questions as well as candidate preference information, party affiliation, and intent to vote. This information, combined with the post-debate (Appendix B) and post-discussion surveys (Appendix C) (which included but were not limited to questions inquiring about voting intent), was designed to allow researchers to determine if a relationship exists between presidential debates

and likeliness of voting, as well as post-debate discussions and voting behavior (RQ1 & RQ4).

The post-debate and post-discussion surveys allowed researchers to measure attitude change in the areas of viewers' knowledge of the candidates, attitudes towards the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates (RQ2 & RQ5). In addition, researchers looked at voters' candidate preference after watching the debate, as well as after the group discussion, to determine if either of these variables affected viewers' voting preferences (RQ3 & RQ6).

Data Analysis

The fixed alternative responses analyzed in reference to research question one (RQ1) represented nominal data. The researcher examined the independent sample relationship of pre-debate intent to vote and post-discussion intent to vote. Comparing the two groups using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) correlation, researchers calculated the Chi-Square to determine if viewers' intent to vote increased, decreased, or made no change after watching the first presidential debate.

Research question two (RQ2) utilized three different scales (knowledge of the candidates, attitudes towards the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates) representing interval data. Looking at the frequencies of each answer, the researcher was able to determine if watching the first formal presidential debate had any impact on the aforementioned scales.

Research question three (RQ3) was analyzed using the responses to the fixed alternative questions found on the pre- and post-debate surveys (Appendix A and B). The surveys' questions probed viewers' candidate preference and affiliation. Using the SPSS program's crosstabs and then Chi-Square, the researcher was able to compare the nominal data collected in the pre-debate and post-debate questionnaire for each response.

The fourth research question (RQ4) was similar to question one, in that the goal was to determine intent to vote; however, in this question, the researcher ran a Chi-Square analysis on the interval data of the post-debate and post-discussion surveys (Appendix B and C) to determine significance.

Using interval scales, the impact on viewers' knowledge of the candidates, attitudes towards the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates after participating in post-debate discussion was evaluated using univariate analysis of variance procedures (ANOVA) for each element of the fifth research question (RQ5). In each analysis, the researcher used participants' post-discussion answers (Appendix C) as the dependent variable, and the post-debate surveys as the fixed or independent variable.

For the final research question, research question six (RQ6), the researcher used the answers from the fixed alternative questions on the post-debate and post-discussion questionnaires (Appendix B and C) to determine if, after watching the debates, participation in the group discussions changed the voting preference of viewers. Separate Chi-Squared analyses compared viewers' candidate preference and viewers' candidate affiliation.

CHAPTER 3

Results

Completed three-part surveys (pre-debate, post-debate, and post-discussion) were collected from 123 participants. For 116 participants (94%), this was the first DebateWatch event that they had attended. Of those participating in the study, 85 respondents (69%) were between the ages of 18 and 25, 16 participants (13%) fell in the 26-40 age group, 12 people (10%) marked the 41-55 year age group to describe themselves, and nine respondents (7%) chose the “over 55” category for their response. According to the survey responses (Appendix A), 69 (56%) participants categorized themselves as male and 53(43%) respondents considered themselves female .

The population of the participants viewing the first presidential debate predominately defined themselves as “White (non-Hispanic),” with 106 respondents (86%) selecting this option. At the same time, the ethnicity for the remainder of the group was composed of eight respondents (7%) who classified themselves as “Black or African American,” two participants who declared themselves as “Hispanic or Latino,” one contributor who designated himself or herself as “American Indian or Alaskan Native,” and two participants defining themselves as “multiracial.” In addition to age, gender, and ethnicity, the survey also requested that respondents share their party affiliation prior to the start of the debate. The majority of respondents (43%) declared themselves as Democrats. Of the remaining participants, 25% (31 respondents) chose the Republican option, 20 people (16%) said that they were unaffiliated with a political

party, 12 participants (10%) associated themselves with the Independent party, and one person claimed to be affiliated with the Green Party.

The results of this three-part survey (pre-debate, post-debate, and post-discussion) were compiled by the researcher and analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program. The analysis shows that each research question had significant results.

Research Question (RQ1):

Does watching a formal presidential debate increase likely intent to vote?

To determine the relationship between watching a formal presidential debate and likely intent to vote, Chi-Squared was used. The survey questions asked participants to declare their intent to vote in the 2004 presidential election. Of the pre-debate responses (yes, no, and undecided), 91.7% of participants (100 respondents) said they were intent on voting in the 2004 election. However, after the post-discussion survey was administered, 92.6% of respondents (n=101) said that they would vote in the election (Figure 1.1). Using Chi-Squared, it was determined that RQ1 had a significance level of .000 (Figure 1.3): Therefore, the results were significant (less than .05). This establishes that a positive significant relationship does exist between debate viewing and voting behavior.

To delve further into the analysis, the relationship between age, sex, and the likely intent to vote was examined. Using a multivariate ANOVA as the means of

analysis, where the fixed factor was age or gender and the dependent variables were pre-debate intent to vote and post-discussion intent to vote, no significance was found.

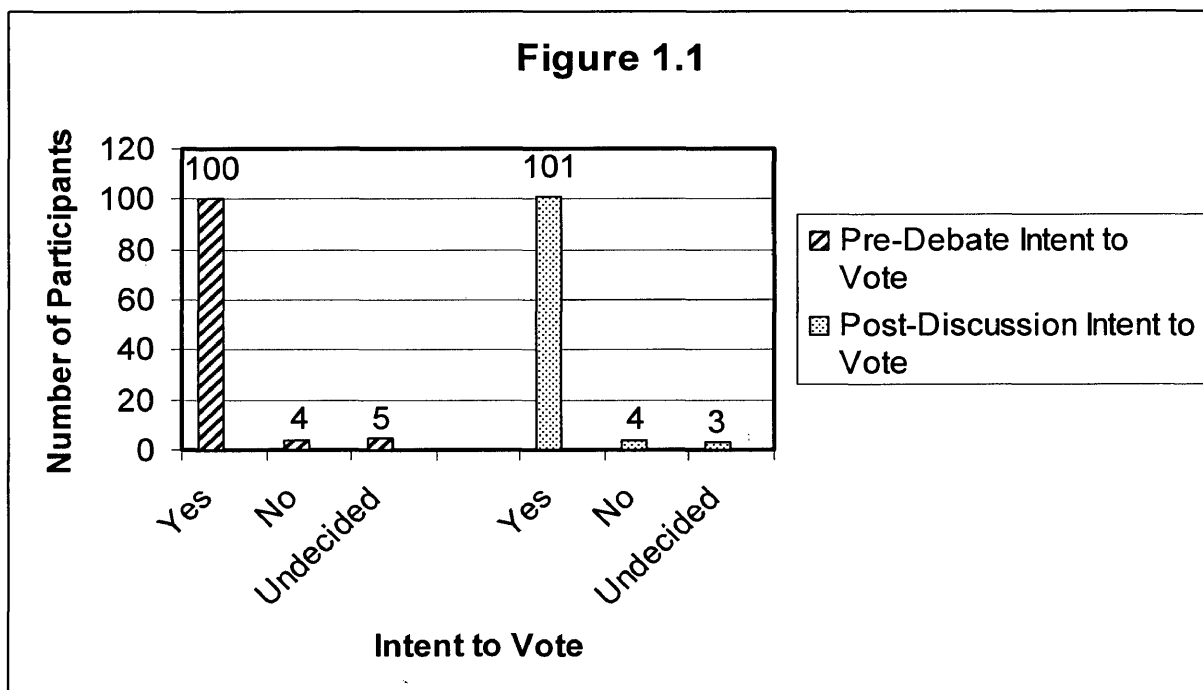


Figure 1.2
Shift in Pre-Debate Intent to Vote to
Post-Debate Intent to Vote

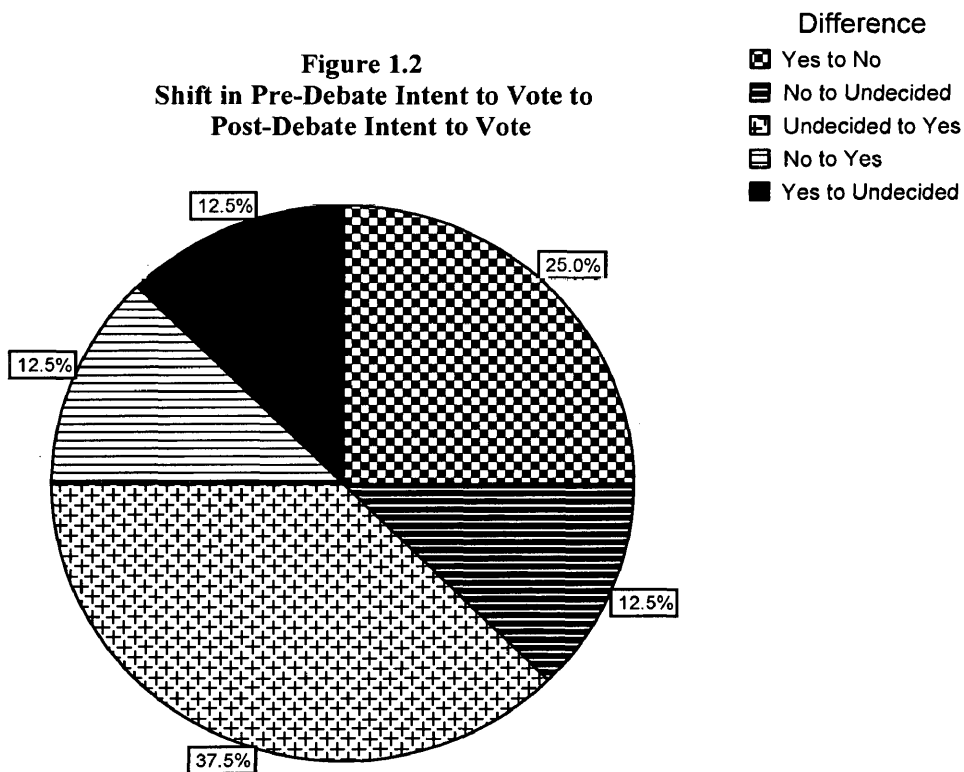


Figure 1.3
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	51.9800495	4	1.39277E-10
Likelihood Ratio	22.46338266	4	0.000162041
Linear-by-Linear Association	28.4865804	1	9.43502E-08
N of Valid Cases	109		
a	8 cells (88.9%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .15.		

Research Question 2 (RQ2):

Does watching a formal presidential debate impact viewers' knowledge level of the candidates, attitudes toward the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates?

When prompted by the statement “the debates taught me something new about one or more of the candidates,” respondents indicated their level of agreement. In the SPSS program, frequencies of each response revealed the statistical impact watching the debate had on participants' knowledge. Respondents answering that they strongly agree/agree with the statement totaled 70% (86 participants). Those disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement totaled 18% (22 respondents), while 8% (10) had no opinion.

When asked to complete the scale in relation to the statement “the debates reinforced my attitudes about one or more candidates,” 72.4% (89 respondents) answered that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. 7.3% of participants (9) said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Those who marked no opinion totaled 16.3% (20 respondents).

In the final component of RQ2, participants responded to the statement, “the debates caused me to evaluate one or more candidates differently than prior to the debate.” 44% of respondents (54) answered strongly agree or agree to the previous statement. Of those who answered the survey, 31% (38 participants) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, while 19.5% (24) chose no opinion in relation to the statement.

Research Question 3 (RQ3):

Does watching a formal presidential debate change candidate voting preference of viewers?

In RQ3, Chi-Squared was used as a means of analysis. Looking at the variables, pre- and post-debate voting preference as well as the pre-debate candidate affiliation and post-debate candidate affiliation, it was concluded that there is a significant relationship between the pre- and post-debate tests. The significant level for both Chi-Squared analyses was .000 (Figure 2.3), with 98 participants (84.5%) saying they had a candidate preference after the debate (Figure 2.1), compared to the 92 (79.3%) who claimed a preference prior to watching the presidential debate (Figure 2.1).

In addition, of the respondents who answered this question pre-debate, 31 participants (34%) preferred George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, 53 participants (58%) preferred John Kerry and John Edwards, five participants (6%) chose the Ralph Nader and Peter Camejo ticket, and two participants (2%) chose “other” (Figure 2.4). Whereas after the debate, 32 respondents (35%) preferred Bush/Cheney, 54 respondents (59%) favored the Kerry/Edwards ticket, three respondents (3%) chose Nader/Camejo, and two respondents (2%) selected “other” as their choice (Figure 2.4).

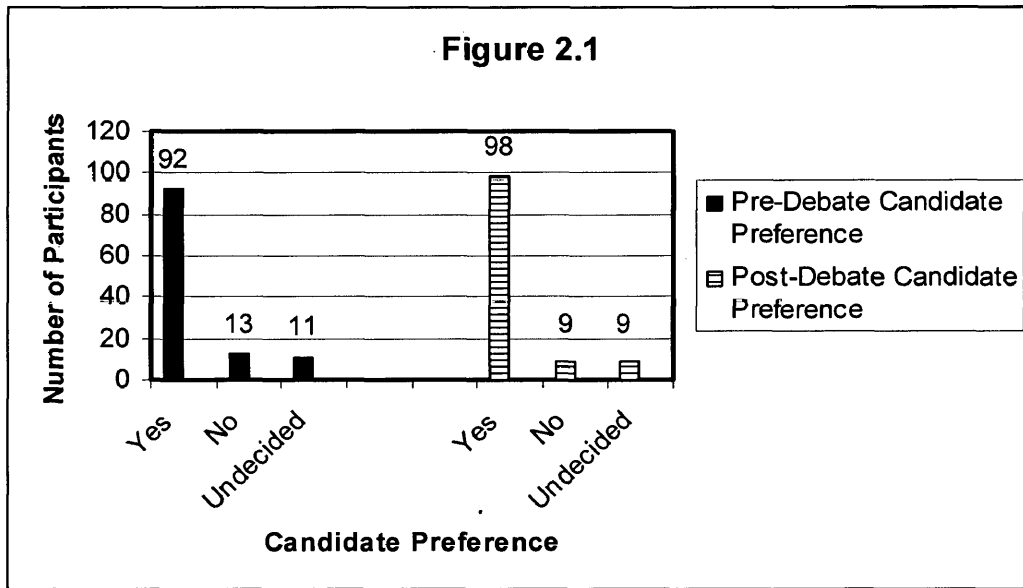


Figure 2.2
Shift in Pre-Debate Candidate Preference to Post-Debate Candidate Preference

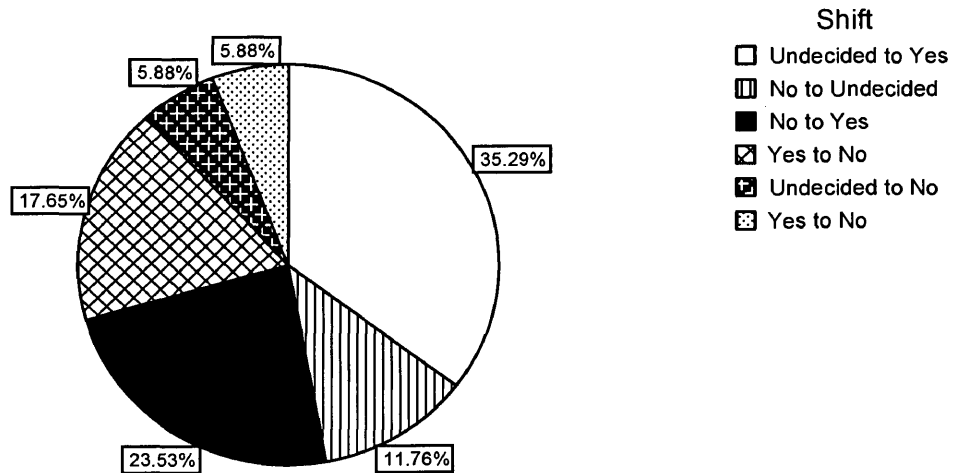
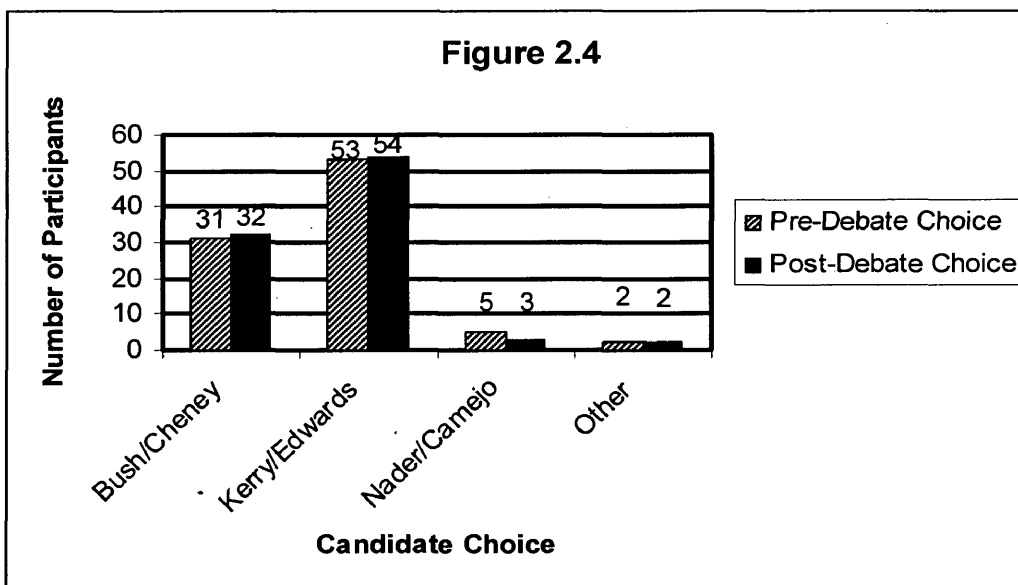


Figure 2.3
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	62.83226366	4	7.36052E-13
Likelihood Ratio	41.92784356	4	1.72661E-08
Linear-by-Linear Association	27.81503088	1	1.33485E-07
N of Valid Cases	116		
a	4 cells (44.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .85.		



Research Question 4 (RQ4):

After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion increase likely intent to vote?

The Chi-Square analysis of RQ4 showed that the relationship between the post-debate intent to vote and post-discussion intent to vote was significant. With a significance of .000 (Figure 3.3), 58 respondents (54%) answered that they agreed or strongly agreed that the debates made them more likely to vote, compared to the 49 respondents (46%) who said that the discussions made them more likely to vote (Figure 3.1). Those who disagreed with the statement totaled 31 participants (29%) after both the debate and the discussion (Figure 3.1). For this survey question, 18 respondents (17%) answered no opinion at the post-debate portion of the survey, whereas 27 respondents (25%) answered no opinion after the discussion portion of the survey (Figure 3.1).

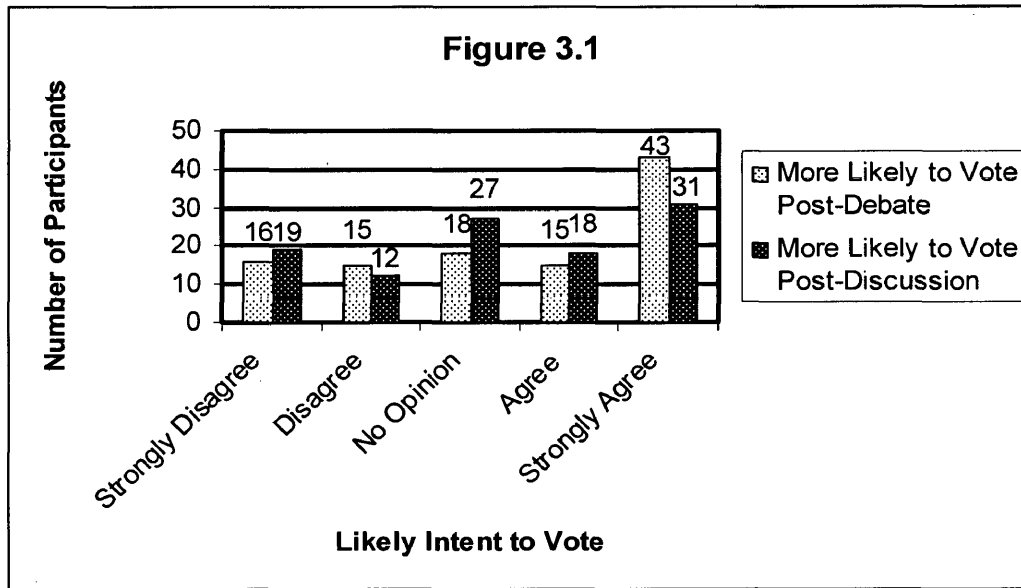


Figure 3.2
Shift in Post-Debate Likely Intent to Vote to
Post-Discussion Likely Intent to Vote

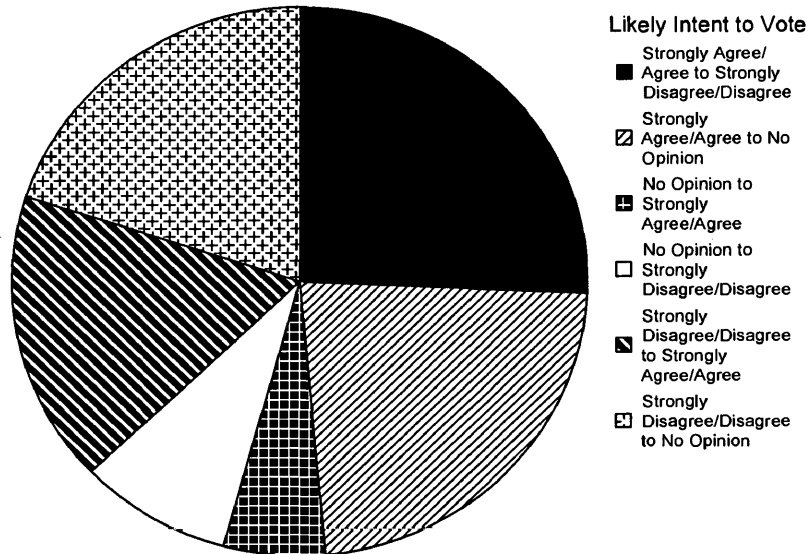


Figure 3.3
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	88.61895629	16	4.49064E-12
Likelihood Ratio	83.28656672	16	4.23149E-11
Linear-by-Linear Association	27.83238702	1	1.32293E-07
N of Valid Cases	107		
a	20 cells (80.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.68.		

Research Question 5 (RQ5):

After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion impact viewers' knowledge level of the candidates, attitudes toward the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates?

To analyze RQ5, the researcher used univariate ANOVA as a means of analysis. Through this test, it was determined that participating in post-debate discussion has a .002 significance when looking at the impact on viewers' knowledge level of the candidates (Figure 4.1), .000 significance on the attitudes towards the candidates (Figure 4.2), and .019 significance in how participants evaluate the candidates (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.1
Post-Discussion New Information Obtained About Candidates

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	24.01400511	4	6.003501277	4.455517942	0.002306
Intercept	603.5407556	1	603.5407556	447.919729	1.76E-39
PostA	24.01400511	4	6.003501277	4.455517942	0.002306
Error	140.1327839	104	1.347430614		
Total	1288	109			
Corrected Total	164.146789	108			
a	R Squared = .146 (Adjusted R Squared = .113)				

Figure 4.2
Post-Discussion Reinforced Attitudes About Candidates

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	47.86831193	4	11.96707798	11.66211685	7.97E-08
Intercept	289.5013617	1	289.5013617	282.1238998	5.29E-31
PostD	47.86831193	4	11.96707798	11.66211685	7.97E-08
Error	103.641122	101	1.026149723		
Total	1616	106			
Corrected Total	151.509434	105			
a	R Squared = .316 (Adjusted R Squared = .289)				

Figure 4.3
Post-Discussion Caused Participants to Evaluate Candidates Differently

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	18.67486753	4	4.668716882	3.097344342	0.018899
Intercept	883.5042217	1	883.5042217	586.138948	7.59E-44
PostE	18.67486753	4	4.668716882	3.097344342	0.018899
Error	152.2402268	101	1.507328978		
Total	1143	106			
Corrected Total	170.9150943	105			
a	R Squared = .109 (Adjusted R Squared = .074)				

When prompted, “the discussion has taught me something new about one or more of the candidates,” 80 respondents (73%) answered that they agree or strongly agree with the statement, while 19 participants (17%) answered that they disagree or strongly disagree with the same statement. Ten respondents (9%) chose “no opinion” to describe their feelings about the previous statement. Of those assessing the statement, “the discussion has reinforced my attitudes about one or more candidates,” 80 participants (75%) answered strongly agree or agree, whereas seven respondents (6%)

chose disagree or strongly disagree and 19 participants (18%) opted for “no opinion.” In the final component of RQ5, 51 participants (48%) answered that they strongly agree or agree with the statement, “the discussion has caused me to evaluate one or more candidates differently than prior to the debate,” whereas 33 participants (31%) preferred the disagree or strongly disagree option, and 22 respondents (21%) decided on “no opinion.”

Research Question 6 (RQ6):

After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion change voting preference of viewers?

When determining if participating in group discussion changes the voting preference of viewers, the results were a significance level of .000 for both candidate preference and candidate affiliation (Figure 5.2 and 5.4). It was determined using crosstabulation that 94 respondents (89%) had a candidate preference after the debate; however, after the discussion, the number decreased to 91 (86%) (Figure 5.1). Those who answered “no” to having a candidate preference stayed the same, with six responses (6%) on both the post-debate and post-discussion survey (Figure 5.1). The respondents that chose “undecided” on the survey totaled six (6%) at the post-debate survey and nine (8%) on the post-discussion candidate preference survey (Figure 5.1).

As for candidate affiliation, on the post-debate survey, 33 respondents (35%) chose the Bush/Cheney ticket, 57 participants (60%) opted for Kerry/Edwards, and three participants (3%) picked Nader/Camejo (Figure 5.3). The post-discussion survey

showed that 34 participants preferred Bush/Cheney (36%), 56 respondents (59%) Kerry/Edwards, and Nader/Camejo stayed the same with three participants' (3%) preference (Figure 5.3).

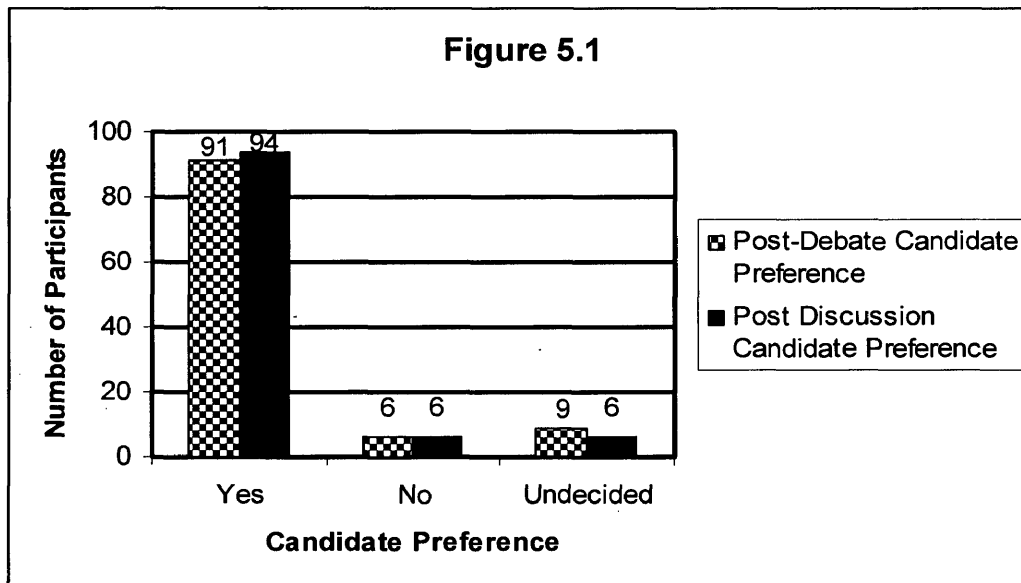


Figure 5.2
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	280.5882353	9	3.39566E-55
Likelihood Ratio	155.1719867	9	7.46804E-29
Linear-by-Linear Association	91.51329236	1	1.10845E-21
N of Valid Cases	95		
a	12 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .04.		

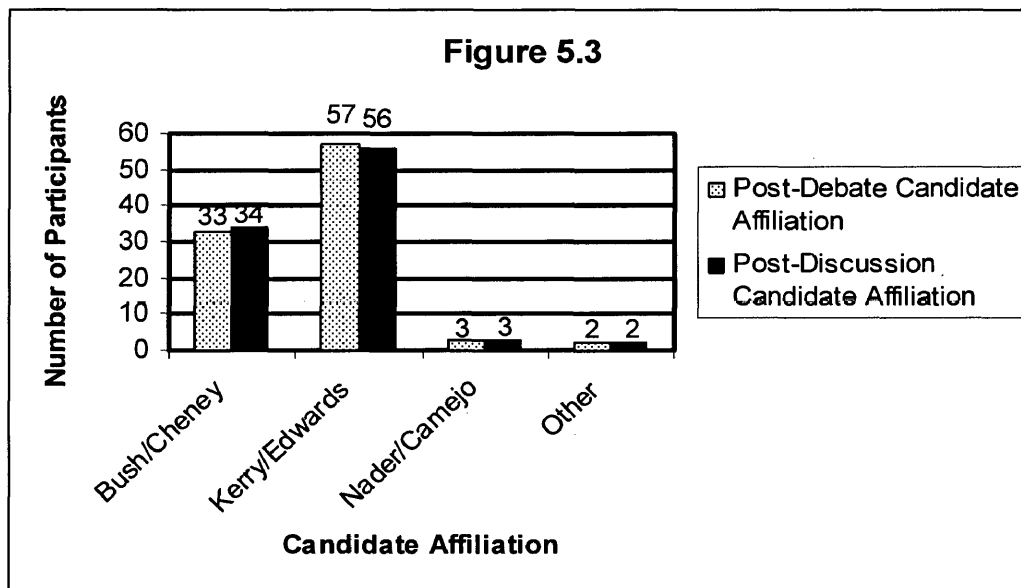


Figure 5.4
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	280.5882353	9	3.39566E-55
Likelihood Ratio	155.1719867	9	7.46804E-29
Linear-by-Linear Association	91.51329236	1	1.10845E-21
N of Valid Cases	95		
a	12 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .04.		

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

Research Question (RQ1):

Does watching a formal presidential debate increase likely intent to vote?

Reinforcing findings by Sears and Chaffee (1979), results of this study indicate that there is a significant relationship between watching a formal presidential debate and voters' intent to vote. Despite the fact that the percentage of respondents reporting a likelihood of voting increased by only one percent, this change is still important. The impact that one percent of the populous has on the outcome of the national election can literally determine a candidate's fate.

To better understand this change, it is essential to look at why it occurred. First, it is important to examine the impact of voter learning on viewers' likely intent to vote. Unfortunately, many do not vote if they feel they are too ignorant. Since debates give knowledge to viewers, voters feel more comfortable making decisions after viewing them. As stated by Lanoue and Schrott (1991) and Jamieson (1987), by simply having the ability to compare candidates side by side, many viewers are able to gain clarity on political issues as well as on candidates themselves. This in turn increases their comfort level with their knowledge about the nominees, allowing them to feel more prepared and less ignorant when making a voting decision.

Another obvious answer lies in the ability of debates to increase voter education, which in turn serves as a stimulus for motivation of viewers to vote. Through

this gathering of knowledge, voters gained a vested interest in the ability of each candidate to represent their interest on issues that concerned them. If, while watching the debate, a viewer became strongly opposed to a particular candidate and their stance on prominent issues (such as the war in Iraq) then the motivation to keep that candidate out of office may have compelled the voter to cast their ballot in the 2004 presidential election. Whereas, prior to watching the debate, the viewer might not have realized that they were vehemently opposed to the candidate's position on the war in Iraq; therefore, they were less likely to vote due to lack of a vested interest on this issue. This is especially imperative for those not planning to vote in the election. Likewise, if a viewer supported a candidate's stance on U.S. involvement in Iraq, they could be equally motivated to vote. To clarify this further, if a voter wanted George W. Bush to remain in office because he or she agreed with the president's stance on foreign policy, that voter might be moved to action based upon firmer resolve to secure his victory.

A third component to consider, is that approximately five percent of the DebateWatch attendees were not fixed on their voting behavior prior to the start of the debates. For this undecided population, watching the debate could have ignited the desire to participate in civic engagement. At this time, it is not known why this group is unsure of voting. It could be because they have low political knowledge levels, they are unsure of the political process, or they want to ensure that they have a firm ground to base their decision on; the list of potential reasons are vast. As suggested by Miller and MacKuen (1978), for those waiting to decide whether they are going to vote (based on

information gathering), the debate suffices as the catalyst for this, encouraging voters not only to vote, but also helping them decide for whom to vote.

After exploring reasons why the change in likely intent to vote occurred, the impact of the increase will be analyzed. Ultimately, the slight accrual in the number of participants shifting from not intending to vote to intending to vote is significant in that this small sample is representative of the national election. In fact, presidential elections have been decided by smaller percentages of voters. In the 2000 presidential race between Al Gore and George W. Bush, the winner came down to less than one percent of the popular vote (FEC, 2000). In six states (Florida, Iowa, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin) the electoral vote was decided by popular votes that had a difference of one percent or less (FEC, 2000). The 2004 election between Kerry and Bush was decided by approximately 2% of the popular vote (FEC, 2004). It is apparent that even a small number of votes have the ability to impact an election. It is safe to say that every vote counts and that the debate's impact on voters' decision-making process is monumental when the presidential race is considered to be close.

Research Question 2 (RQ2):

Does watching a formal presidential debate impact viewers' knowledge level of the candidates, attitudes toward the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates?

In exploring the three separate components of this question, the results will be discussed further. First, in regards to debates impacting viewers' knowledge level of the candidates, respondents agreed that by watching the debate they learned something new

about one or more of the candidates. Whether this learning involved how a candidate displayed frustration or happiness, how quick-witted they appeared, or their stance on foreign policy, the bottom line is that viewers were learning about their potential choice. Through information gathering, voters are able to make decisions. The more information gathered, the more likely voters are to develop opinions and stand by those opinions. It can be argued that if 70% of participants indicated they learned something new, the majority were not fully informed (prior to the debate) of each candidate's stance on the foreign policy issues covered in the debate, allowing for the retrieval of new information. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) agree, explaining that debates convey policy stances, party distinctions, candidate personalities, and presidential vision. The results of this question do not indicate a change in mindset, but rather the potential the debates have to enlighten viewers.

Secondly, the research question addresses the impact of debates on viewers' attitude toward candidates. With the majority of participants (72.4%) agreeing to the debate's reinforcement of their attitudes about the candidates, it is evident that, although learning occurred to some extent, participants were already familiar with the candidates. Respondents had previously developed opinions about the candidates prior to attending the DebateWatch event. As Sears, Freedman, and O'Connor (1964) suggest, the results are due to the fact that those who already have political knowledge watch debates to cheer on their candidate choice, while those with less information watch to gain knowledge. With the candidates remaining consistent on their platforms, there was little room to show inconsistencies on major issues. Therefore, it is evident that the

candidate's performances helped to solidify their positions among viewers who already had opinions. In addition, those attending the debate watch are most likely already interested in politics not to mention the debates. Therefore, we can conclude that they have already developed attitudes about the candidates because they were familiar with them.

Looking further into the notion that candidates perform, it becomes apparent that the media plays a major role in the relationship between the electorate and their constituents. Typically, the only contact between candidates and the electorate is the media. Therefore candidates' use of the media to develop their preferred image directly impacts the viewers' perceptions of the candidates. Ultimately, if the media creates an image of a candidate through its use of agenda -setting, and in turn the candidate portrays the image in the debate, viewers will have no choice except to confirm that their attitudes of the candidates were correct.

The final component of research question two looks to audience evaluation of candidates. Results reveal the smallest difference between those who agreed and disagreed with the statement "the debates cause me to evaluate one or more candidates differently than prior to the debate." Once again evaluation does not necessarily equate to changing ones mind. Nonetheless, viewers are able to see candidates in a new light after viewing the debate. This confirms the results of an earlier study by Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert (2001) who concluded that "watching a debate can influence the perceived importance of certain factors as well as ...alter impressions of candidates" (p. 292). Because this was the first time that 99 percent of this study's participants had

seen the candidates go head to head in a verbal exchange of ideas, there was an opportunity for the debaters to appeal to the logic of viewers, while creating a strong affinity between themselves and potential voters.

Research Question 3 (RQ3):

Does watching a formal presidential debate change candidate voting preference of viewers?

As stated previously, when the debate viewing began, the majority of viewers had already decided who would receive their vote. After watching the debate, this number increased. This shows us that some of those who had no preference or were undecided were able to make a decision after watching the debate. During the campaign season, voters have few opportunities to see candidates in situations where they can be compared simultaneously. Debates allow this to happen. For some, this moment adds clarity to the entire decision-making process. Jamieson (1987) reiterates this point when explaining that debates allow viewers to see candidates in an unscripted communication environment. Candidates expressing their views on pertinent issues without the interpretation of others, allows viewers to evaluate the candidates by themselves.

In addition to noting an increase in the number of respondents with a candidate preference, it is also important to note that there was a change in voter preferences. After the debate, the number of voters intending to vote for the Bush/Cheney ticket and Kerry/Edwards ticket increased. There was, however, a decrease in the number of voters intending to vote for the Nader/Camejo ticket. This could be due to the lack of

representation in the debate. In order for Nader to participate in the presidential debates he had to score at least a 15% average base of support in five national polls by the time the first debate took place (Miller, 2004). With Nader unable to participate in the presidential debate due to only having half of the needed support, viewers were unable to clearly evaluate his stance on the issues in comparison to that of the other candidates. If Nader had been in the debate, the outcome would likely have been different.

A larger shift in candidate preference was not likely to occur due to the previous results, which suggest that voters' attitudes are reaffirmed, not necessarily altered. Sears and Chaffee (1979) note that although there was a shift in voting intentions and evaluation of the candidates, the net voting intentions remained constant. This explains that while change occurred, it was not representative of a large shift. With reinforcement of attitudes, it can be concluded that those who changed their opinion about who to vote for were most likely either supporters of Nader/Camejo or they were part of the undecided group.

Research Question 4 (RQ4):

After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion increase likely intent to vote?

Results reveal a decline in the number of participants intending to vote after participating in the group discussion. This could be largely due to the fact that while watching the debate, viewers are reaffirming their attitudes and acquiring knowledge about the candidates. The increase in knowledge and attitude reinforcement enables

voters to make their own decisions. With this newfound power, voters do not have to rely on others for information, therefore reducing the opportunity for outside sources to impact the decision making process.

Had participants not watched the debates, group discussions about the presidential nominees might have had a greater impact. If a person does not see the debates, he or she may be more likely to seek information so that they are more prepared for making a voting decision. To clarify, if a person knows information about the nominees' stance on nuclear proliferation, for example, he or she may be less likely to go to others for knowledge acquisition as he or she has information on the topic. However, they may be more likely to give out knowledge about the candidates' stance on nuclear proliferation when participating in the discussion because they feel that their knowledge will be useful in helping those less informed to make a decision.

In addition to empowering the voter, it is important to examine the structure of the group discussion. Some individuals are less likely to contribute to group discussion, especially with people they do not know well. If there is less discussion, there is less opportunity for it to make an impact. In addition, some groups or group members may have been less persuasive, more quiet, or less interested in participation than others. Some groups may have included many undecided voters, others none. Some groups may have been politically homogeneous, others politically heterogeneous. These factors could be contributing to a lack of significant change when looking at the effects of group discussion on the participants' intent to vote.

Research Question 5 (RQ5):

After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion impact viewers' knowledge level of the candidates, attitudes toward the candidates, and evaluation of the candidates?

The first component of research question five examines the impact group discussion had on the viewers' knowledge level of the candidates. Carlin and McKinney (1994) explain that focus groups aid in voter learning. This can be seen through the group discussions at the DebateWatch event. Once again, the impact of the discussion rests largely on the participants involved in the discussion and its quality versus quantity. In order for impact to take place, the respondents had to participate in the discussion. During the post-discussion, questions were raised about participants' political involvement, expectations for the debates, how the debates influenced attitudes, what issues covered in the debate were important, and what issues should have been covered by the candidates in the debate. At the minimum, these questions were thought provoking. Even the shortest group discussion would involve someone offering an opinion about the topics. Through the sharing of information, respondents would learn others' perspectives on issues, highlights of the candidates from others' perspectives, and most importantly opportunities to rethink the debate they had just watched. As the conversation evolved and the debate was discussed in greater detail, information that may have been overlooked or forgotten was likely to be revisited, giving participants the prospect of learning something new from the discussion that they otherwise might have overlooked. It could be argued that those disagreeing with the

statement that they learned something new from the group discussion were most likely the discussion leaders. Those controlling the conversation typically would have the most information, therefore would be less likely to gain new knowledge from the encounter.

In reference to the second component of research question five, most respondents (n=80) agreed that the discussion reinforced their attitudes about the candidates. With this in mind, it is obvious that although an exchange of information occurred, most participants had their minds made up about the candidates prior to participating in the discussion. If a voter is absolutely certain in his or her assessment of a given person, it is not likely to change due to a discussion within a group of strangers.

Finally, when considering the impact group discussion has on the viewers' evaluation of candidates, it is imperative to look at reasons why 48% of participants agreed that the discussion helped with their evaluation of the candidates. Because the DebateWatch participants were randomly divided into groups, the probability that they were with both strangers and people with differing political ideologies was high. During discussions, participants were redebating issues that were covered by the presidential candidates in order to get their own views across. People were exposing personal feelings about the issues and their importance. The discussions were controlled by the participants' use of both ethos and pathos, opening the gate for persuasion. Although participants may not have been completely persuaded to change their minds about their candidate preferences, it is evident by the 51 respondents who answered that they agree

the discussions caused them to evaluate one or more of the candidates differently, that people were listening to each other's opinions.

Research Question 6 (RQ6):

After viewing a presidential debate, does participating in post-debate discussion change voting preference of viewers?

There were a number of people whose voting preferences decreased after participating in group discussions, they moved from having a preference to being undecided. The reasons for this are twofold: First, the participants were constantly acquiring knowledge. In each survey it was established that the majority of participants felt that they were learning something new about one or more of the candidates. The acquisition of new knowledge led viewers to reevaluate their preferences, leaving the door open to make a new choice after leaving the DebateWatch event.

Secondly, with the abundance of learning that occurred, it can be concluded that conflicting information surfaced. The inconsistencies in information made viewers who had a preference, but not a strong preference, doubt their opinions. This is also true for an individual's specific candidate preference. Those who had a preference, but were not set on their choice, were influenced by the events.

Ultimately, all of this suggests that the debates and discussion have a profound impact upon the election. Through the power of communication the candidates have the ability to teach, persuade, and connect with voters. The debates have proven to be a venue where candidates can spread new and/or unknown information about who they

are and where they stand on the issues. If candidates utilize the power of this open forum to the fullest, they could ultimately control the outcome of the election by persuading voters that they are the best choice for the next Commander in Chief.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Implications

The results of this study reaffirmed the researcher's assumptions of this thesis. Debates do have the ability to influence voter's intent to vote as well as their acquisition of knowledge. It was also shown that group discussion following the debates has an impact on viewers. One-way analysis of variance as well as Chi-Square showed significant relationships of each variable tested.

A primary goal of this study was to confirm the effect that debates have on viewers as well as group discussion's potential to affect voters after viewing a debate. Surveys were distributed to participants inquiring about their voting behavior. An analysis of the responses through the use of quantitative methods, yielded positive results as to the effects that debates have on viewers.

This study confirmed what many scholars already stated: Debates do matter. They have the ability to decrease the knowledge gap, contribute to candidate evaluation, and, most importantly, encourage voting among the small portion of undecided voters. This study also went one step further, by contributing new information about the link between group discussion and presidential debates. Following the suggestion made by Carlin and McKinney (1994) to survey participants after group discussion and examine their level of understanding about candidates as well as their commitment to vote, it has been concluded that group discussion also matters. Combined with debate viewing, the group discussion also contributes to voter learning.

Limitations

Several limitations to this study do exist. The first is a narrow demographic sample. Since the survey was conducted at a Midwestern university, the population was composed of predominately Caucasian participants ranging from 18-25 years in age. This sample, though representative of the Midwestern University population, is not a clear representation of the nation's voting population.

Secondly, in order to increase awareness among different demographic groups, particularly the elderly and non-white participants, more event advertising should have taken place. Additional advertising may have helped increase the study's sample size. Involving a more diverse community would have helped to increase awareness about the debates, as well as increase the likelihood of educated and non-educated voters' participation in the study.

Furthermore, survey administration should have been more closely monitored to insure that participants filled out the surveys at the correct times and without discussion from those around. Additionally, surveys should have been collected from all participants, even if they chose not to stay for the discussion. This information would have been useful in more accurately determining voting behavior.

Also, in order to have a clearer understanding of viewers' voting intention, a fixed-alternative question should have been included on the post-debate survey asking voters if they plan to vote in the 2004 election. Although this question was included on the pre-debate and post-discussion survey, it would have been useful to researchers if the mid-survey question was added. Having this knowledge could have demonstrated

which had a larger effect on viewers' intent to vote: the debate, the discussion, or neither.

Finally, more in depth training was needed to ensure consistency among the group discussions. Making sure that moderators were trained to keep on task and cover more information regarding decision-making processes and candidate platforms could have proven to be useful in this study. Encouraging more participation among a variety of group members would have led to a more diverse discussion. In addition, analyzing the tape recordings of the group discussions could have proven useful in adding a qualitative element to this study.

Future Research

The current study serves as a base for many studies to come. Future research should delve deeper into the reasons behind the results found in this study. First, researchers should examine why undecided voters are uncertain about who they should vote for, as well as their reasoning for contemplating voting at all. Although researchers have looked at the area of undecided voters previously, it appears to be an untapped research area when looking at undecided voters and Presidential debates. Learning how the "undecideds" make decisions could ultimately lead to a new televised debate format where candidates specifically target undecided voters by presenting a great deal of new information and covering what the public considers to be the most important topics.

In addition, some research on the presidential debates should take a more qualitative approach. To understand the reasoning behind the answers marked on a

survey, researchers should conduct interviews so that clearer conclusions can be drawn. More specifically researchers need to study how debates achieve effects (The Racine Group, 2002). The field of political communication needs to discover the answers to the questions they are asking about the debates, not reveal more questions that need to be answered. Through interviewing participants, it would be beneficial to discover why voters make the decisions they make when it comes to voting behavior. More specifically, what type of knowledge are viewers learning from the debates? Is this acquisition issue centered or is more focused on character? Additionally, attitude reinforcement takes place during the debate, but what kinds of attitudes are being reinforced? Finally, discovering how people evaluate candidates can help to expose new ways for formatting the debates, presentation of participants, and the value the debates hold for the public. Without this deeper understanding, debates will continue on the same path, only influencing one percent of the population instead of the ten percent waiting to be persuaded.

After discovering how debates achieve their effects another logical area for future research is to examine the characteristics of a good campaign debate and then further the research by deciding how this information is useful to altering campaign strategies (The Racine Group, 2002). After researchers are successful at determining the components of a lucrative debate in the eyes of viewers, this knowledge will become a powerful tool in campaign strategies. Having this information can help debates to have a greater impact on viewers' knowledge levels, attitudes, evaluations, and intent to vote.

Finally, in regards to group discussion, one of the most beneficial studies that could be conducted would compare a control group to a group that is exposed to news commentators and another group composed of individuals who have the potential to influence the group based on their relationship with each other. This type of research would look closely at the status and importance of those influencing the group to determine how much the media actually sways the public opinion polls.

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**National Communication Association
DebateWatch 2004
Participant Questionnaire**

Part I – Pre-Debate Watch

Please complete this section **before** the debate begins.

Which debate are you watching and discussing?

1st Pres 2nd Pres 3rd Pres Vice Pres

1. How did you first learn about DebateWatch

TV Friend/Colleague
 Newspaper Radio
 Info in library School/Teacher
 CPD website
 Other internet source _____
 Other _____

2. How many DebateWatch groups have you attended, including this one?

1 2 3 4

3. Please rank your **top three** sources of campaign information, with #1 being your most useful.

Nightly network news (ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, MSNBC, PBS etc.)
 Weekday or evening talk shows (Nightline, Larry King Live, Hannity & Colmes, etc.)
 Sunday talk shows / special news shows (This Week, Face the Nation, Meet the Press, etc.)
 Local newspaper
 National newspaper (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, etc.)
 Commercial news radio
 National Public Radio
 Internet
 Debates
 Direct mail from candidates, parties, organizations or interest groups
 Other _____

4. What has been the frequency of your exposure to campaign coverage over the past six to eight months?

Regular (Daily/Weekly)
 Three to four times per month
 Once per month or less
 Began following regularly within the past two months
 Began following regularly within the past month
 Have followed irregularly/sporadically prior to the debates

5. Age (Please check one)

Under 18 18-25 26-40 41-55 Over 55

6. Sex

Male Female

7. Occupation _____

8. Ethnicity (Please check the most appropriate box)

- White (non-Hispanic) International Student / Non U.S. Resident
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Multiracial

9. Political Party Affiliation (If unaffiliated, please indicate):

10. State: _____

11. Before watching the debate, do you have a candidate preference?

- yes no undecided

12. If yes to number 11, who is your candidate preference?

- Bush/Cheney Kerry/Edwards Nader/Camejo
- Other

13. Do you plan to vote in the 2004 presidential election?

- yes no undecided

Stop here until after the debate

Part II – Post-Debate

Complete this section **after** the debate.

14. Please evaluate the debate itself by responding to the statements below on the following scale.

1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – No opinion 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

A. The debates taught me something new about one or more of the candidates.

1 2 3 4 5

B. The debates taught me something new about one or more issues.

1 2 3 4 5

C. The debates clarified my understanding of one or more candidate's position on an issue or issues.

1 2 3 4 5

D. The debates reinforced my attitudes about one or more candidates.

1 2 3 4 5

E. The debates caused me to evaluate one or more candidates differently than prior to the debate.

1 2 3 4 5

F. The debates helped me to decide for whom to vote, or helped firm up my decision.

1 2 3 4 5

G. The debates gave me ideas to discuss in the group.

1 2 3 4 5

H. The debates made me more likely to vote.

1 2 3 4 5

I. The debates are a valuable voter education tool.

1 2 3 4 5

J. I will watch future debates.

1 2 3 4 5

K. The debates increased my interest in following the remainder of the campaign more closely.

1 2 3 4 5

15. After watching the debate, do you have a candidate preference?

yes no undecided

16. If yes to number 15, who is your candidate preference?

Bush/Cheney Kerry/Edwards Nader/Camejo
 Other

Stop here until after the discussion

Part III – Post-Discussion

Complete this section **after** the group discussion

17. Please evaluate the post-debate discussion by responding to the statements below on the following scale:

1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – No opinion 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

A. The discussion taught me something new about one or more of the candidates.

1 2 3 4 5

B. The discussion taught me something new about one or more issues.

1 2 3 4 5

C. The discussion clarified my understanding of one or more candidate's position on an issue or issues.

1 2 3 4 5

D. The discussion reinforced my attitudes about one or more candidates.

1 2 3 4 5

E. The discussion caused me to evaluate one or more candidates differently than prior to the debate.

1 2 3 4 5

F. The discussion helped me to decide for whom to vote or helped firm up my decision.

1 2 3 4 5

G. The discussion helped me understand why others view the candidates or issues differently than I do.

1 2 3 4 5

H. The discussion made me more likely to vote.

1 2 3 4 5

I. DebateWatch is a valuable voter education tool.

1 2 3 4 5

J. I will participate in future DebateWatches.

1 2 3 4 5

K. The discussion increased my interest in following the remainder of the campaign more closely.

1 2 3 4 5

L. The information discussed in the debates differed from that presented by news media.

1 2 3 4 5

18. After participating in the discussion, do you have a candidate preference?

yes no undecided

19. If yes to number 18, who is your candidate preference?

Bush/Cheney Kerry/Edwards Nader/Camejo
 Other

20. Do you plan to vote in the 2004 presidential election?
___yes ___no ___undecided

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return your questionnaire to the group facilitator.

Suggested facilitator questions

The following questions are designed to stimulate discussion. Feel free to add your own. It is not necessary to ask all of the questions.

1. Why did you decide to participate in DebateWatch?
2. What role does politics play in your everyday life?
3. What were your expectations of the debate? Were they met?
4. What did you learn about the candidates or issues that you did not know prior to viewing the debate?
5. Did the debate influence your attitudes about the issues or the candidates?
6. Were there any issues of interest that were not discussed during the debate?
7. Were there any issues raised that you considered irrelevant or unimportant?
8. How do debates compare with other campaign information sources (e.g. news, ads, speeches, conventions, call-in shows, online resources, etc.) in helping you learn about the candidates and the issues?
9. What are your reactions to the debate format (i.e. time limits, moderator, citizen participants, questions)?
10. If you could change one future about the debate format, what would it be? Why?
11. Will this debate and discussion influence the way you vote?
12. How will participating in DebateWatch affect the way you read, watch, or listen to news of the campaign?
13. How will it affect the way you discuss the campaign at work, home, etc.?

Use this question for the vice presidential debate:

14. Do you think vice presidential debates are useful? What can be done to make them more useful?