



DEMOCRATIZING THE **DEBATES**

A Report of the Annenberg Working Group on
Presidential Campaign Debate Reform

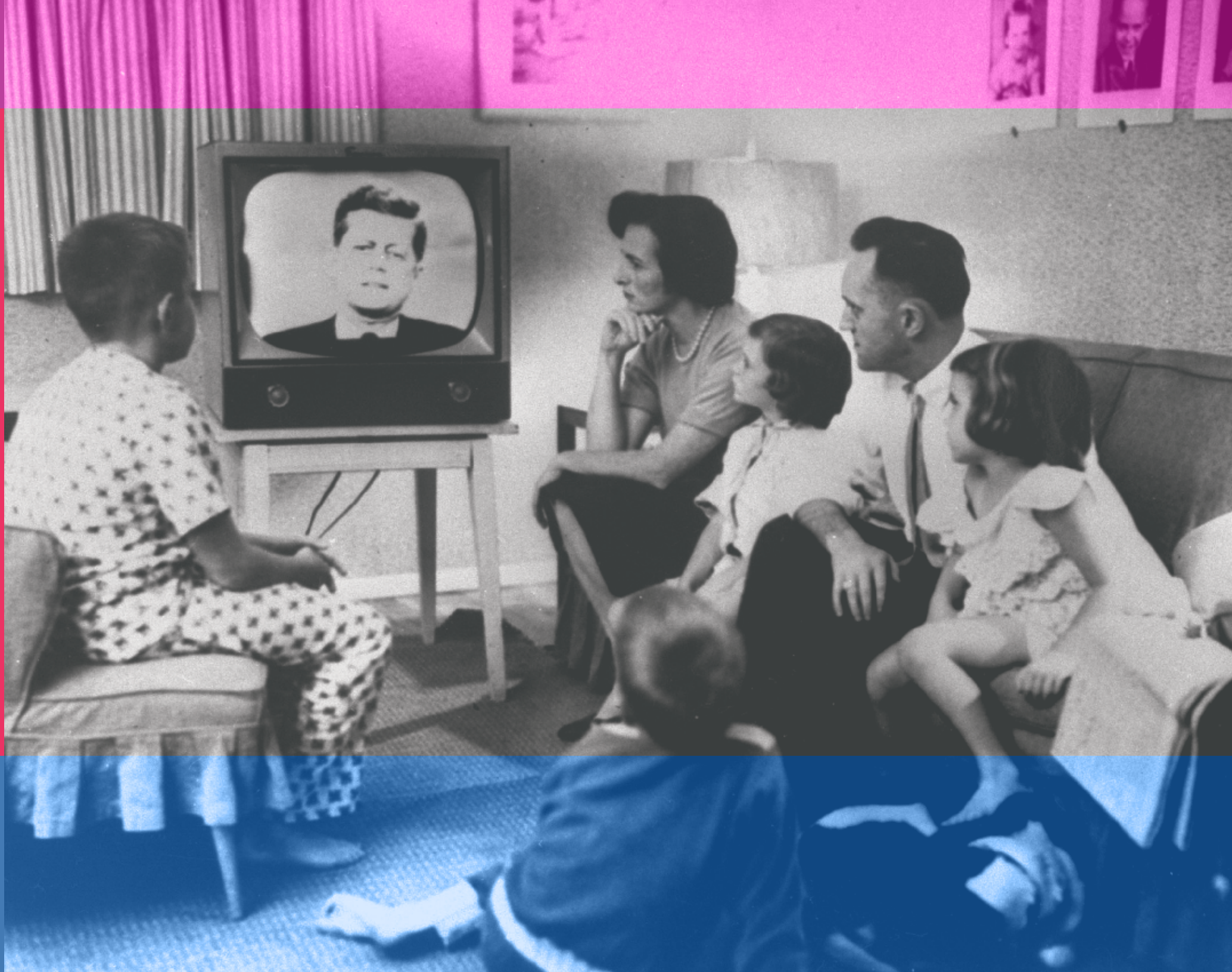


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INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUE

The Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group (for biographies of members see Appendix One) was created by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania to explore ways to increase the value and viewership of presidential general election debates, taking into account the ways in which the rise of early voting, the advent of social media, establishment of new media networks, changes in campaign finance, and the increase in the number of independent voters have altered the electoral environment.¹ It would be difficult to overstate the significance of these changes.

- When general election presidential debates emerged in 1960, network television dominated the media landscape. In an era where 90% of television viewers watched three networks, and had few other choices, the “roadblocked” debates commanded the available air space.
- When the Republican and Democratic political parties formed the Commission on Presidential Debates in 1988 (for a history of debate sponsorship see Appendix Two), there was no Internet or vote by mail, and “early” voting was primarily absentee balloting with significant restrictions.
- In 1988, there was no Fox News, no MSNBC, no Univision or money spent by the campaigns on cable advertising (and no digital on which to spend).
- In 1988, there were no Super PACs and by today’s standards the levels of campaign-related “issue advertising” and “independent expenditures” were small. In a number of past decades, campaign acceptance of federal financing imposed limits on spending.

Since 1960, transformational shifts in television viewing – the plethora of cable channels, Internet streaming, and other methods of viewing video content – have dramatically eroded the power of the “roadblock.” Nielsen data show that the percent of U.S. TV households viewing the debates has declined from 60% in 1960 to about 38% in 2012.² Additionally Hispanic media now attract substantial audiences. In both the July sweeps of 2013 and 2014, the number one network among both those 18-49 and those 18-34 was Univision.³

In today’s environment, traditional media are working to adapt to a world in which digital content is increasingly a primary source of “news” for many Americans.⁴ Moreover, the fastest-growing block of voters in the country considers itself non-aligned⁵ and not represented by the major political parties who originally formed the Commission on Presidential Debates. The new “news” is often delivered in 140 characters, and a voter’s most trusted information source is often a “friend” from Facebook. Voting is conducted earlier and earlier, by mail and in-person. Super PACs and other funding organizations play an increasing role.

Those who organize debates and those who participate in and watch them generally share the view that overall: these exchanges should be informative and not “canned”; the topics should be wide-ranging and relevant to voter choice and interest; and the vice-presidential as well as the presidential candidates should be heard. The Working Group agrees. But while in recent campaigns the debate process has

incorporated more open formats, and moved from the traditional timed answers and strict structures, in general it has changed very little since 1992, when the single moderator and town hall formats were adopted. Very few “television programs” have succeeded with a format that is more than two decades old.

Yet, these quadrennial events remain important. Not only do they continue to attract a larger viewing audience than any other campaign event or message, but also, consistent with past data, a 2014 survey conducted by Peter D. Hart and TargetPoint Consulting for the Working Group found that “Presidential Debates” were a top source of information in helping voters with their decisions and deemed the “most helpful” by a plurality of respondents. However, the proportion viewing debates is not as large as it once was or as it could or should be. Although Nielsen data reveal that the numbers viewing broadcast and cable debates have increased in every election year since 1996, the proportion viewing debates on TV and cable is down from the 1992 level.⁶ Importantly, a Nielsen study commissioned by the Annenberg Public Policy

Center reveals that although viewership numbers have increased somewhat since 1996, the largest growth is among those aged 50-64,⁷ a cohort socialized in an earlier media era.

At the same time, substantial numbers fail to watch an entire debate or multiple ones. Across the 2004-2012 election years, a plurality of debate viewers watched only a single debate⁸ (See also Appendix Three). In particular Nielsen analysis confirms that:

In 2012, 20.2% of viewers 18 or older watched at least some of one debate, 16.2% watched at least some of two debates, 15.3% watched at least some of three debates and 14.9% watched at least some of all four debates. Across all debates, those who viewed at least some of one averaged 35.1 minutes of viewing time, those who watched at least some of two averaged 47.8 minutes, those who viewed at least some of three averaged 66.1 minutes and those who viewed at least some of four averaged 172.5 minutes of viewing time.⁹

There is no question that debates have a unique capacity to generate interest in the campaign, help voters understand their choices in the upcoming election, forecast governance, and increase the likelihood that voters will cast a vote for the preferred candidate rather than primarily because of opposition to the opponent. With needed reforms, presidential general election debates can do a better job of meeting these goals and can also increase the level and amount of viewership; without change, the proportions viewing debates may decline further and the levels of viewership among two important constituencies – the young and Hispanics – stagnate.

Hempstead, NY - October 15, 2008: Senator McCain and Senator Obama participated in the third of three presidential debates, which focused on the economy and domestic policy. The candidates were seated at a table with moderator Bob Schieffer.



THE GOAL OF REFORM: DEMOCRATIZING THE DEBATE PROCESS

Reform of the presidential debates should be accomplished by re-shaping formats, emphasizing candidate accountability, better aligning debates with the changing attitudes of the electorate, and modifying the debate process and timing.

Overall, the effect of the desired changes is a democratization of the debate process. To this end, and as discussed at length in this Report, the Working Group recommends:

Expanding and Enriching Debate Content

- Increase direct candidate exchanges and otherwise enhance the capacity of candidates to engage each other and communicate views and positions;
- Reduce candidate “gaming” of time-limited answers and create opportunities to clarify an exchange or respond to an attack;
- Enlarge the pool of potential moderators to include print journalists, university presidents, retired judges and other experts;
- Use alternate formats for some of the debates, including a chess clock model that gives each candidate an equal amount of time to draw upon;
- Expand the role of diverse media outlets and the public in submitting questions for the debates; and
- Increase the representativeness of audiences and questioners at town hall debates.

Broadening the Accessibility of the Debates

- Embrace social media platforms, which are the primary source of political information for a growing number of Americans, and facilitate creative use of debate content by social media platforms as well as by major networks such as Univision, Telemundo, and BET, by providing unimpeded access to an unedited feed from each of the cameras and a role in framing topics and questions; and
- Revise the debate timetable to take into account the rise of early voting.

Improving the Transparency and Accountability of the Debate Process

- Eliminate on-site audiences for debates other than the town hall and, in the process, reduce the need for major financial sponsors and audiences filled with donors;
- Publicly release the Memorandum of Understanding governing the debates as soon as it is signed;
- Require the moderators to be signatories to the MOU to ensure compliance with the agreements about rules and formats; and
- Clearly articulate the standards required of polls used to determine eligibility for the debates.

Expanding and Enriching Debate Content

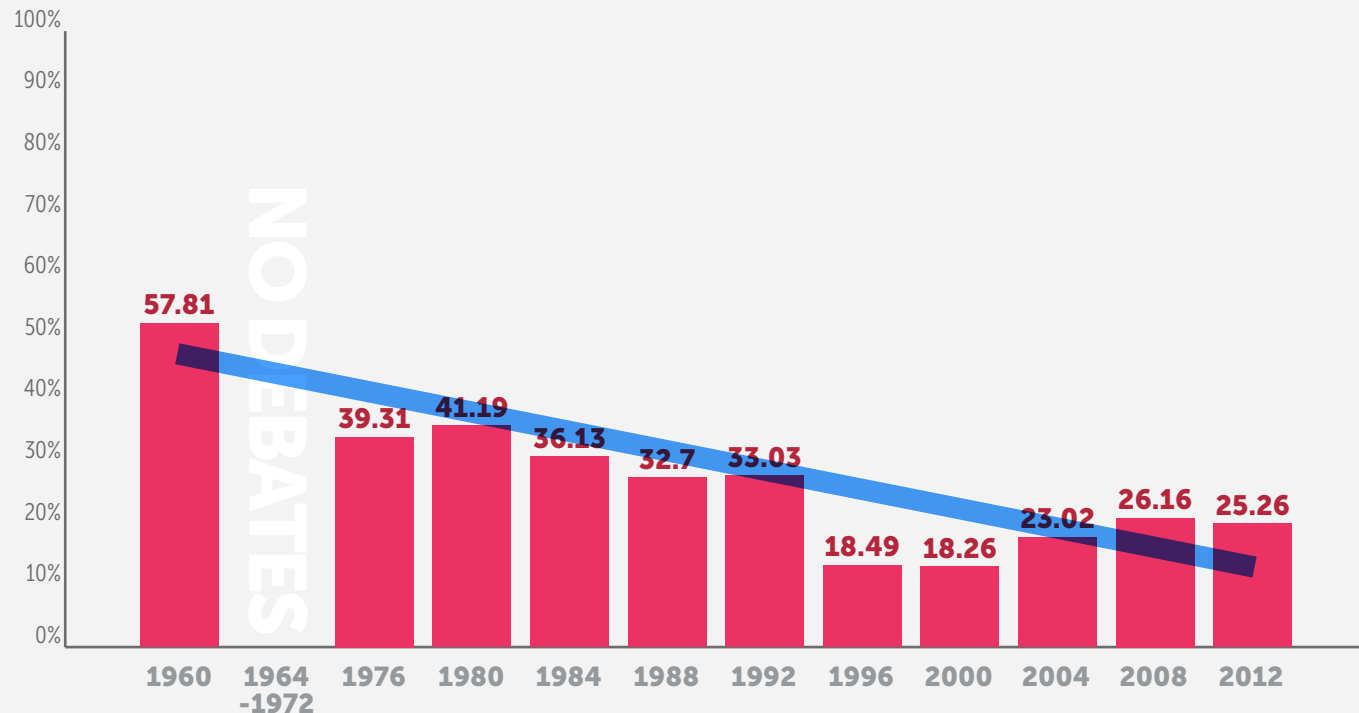
The proportion of the electorate viewing debates is substantially lower than it once was (see also Appendix Four).

Moreover, debates are not giving voters as substantive an understanding of the candidates as they might. Candidates and their party representatives view them as a hybrid of Sunday morning interviews and gladiatorial clashes, and express frustration with the constraints the joint press conference structure imposes on their ability to communicate their positions, priorities and core

political messages, and clarify distinctions between or among the candidates.

The Working Group believes that debate formatting needs to be rethought. There are several contributing reasons. Across the past half century of scholarship on debates, scholars have noted how format limitations “have made it difficult for audiences to see the ‘real substance’ of the candidates’ positions and policies”.¹⁰ These same formatting conventions “not only thwart sustained discussion of serious issues, but also encourage one-liners and canned mini-speeches”.¹¹

Figure 1. Average percent across all debates of voting age population that watched the presidential and vice presidential debates on television.



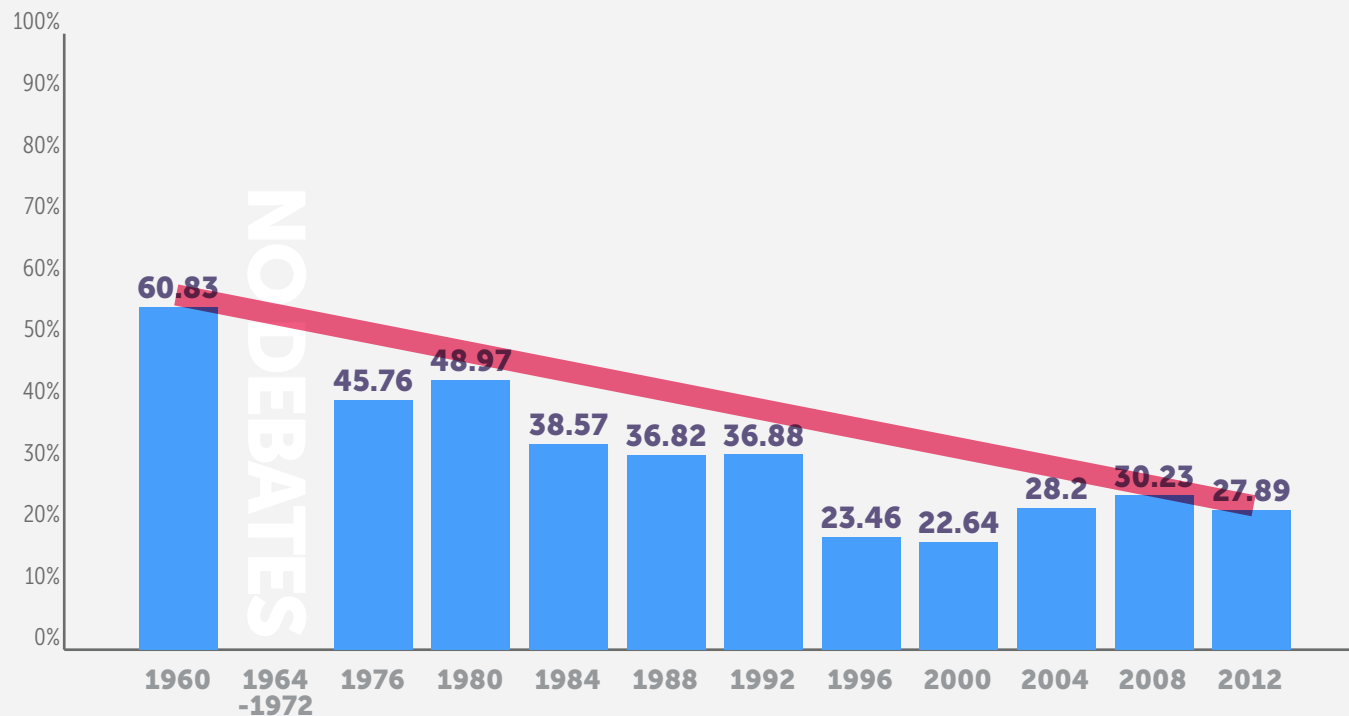
Data on total viewership for debates from the Commission on Presidential Debates Archive: <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=debate-history>; Total voting age population data from the Federal Election Commission: <http://www.fec.gov/pages/htmlto5.htm>

Looking back at the 1960 debates is a striking exercise that offers a model for considering reforms in the current structure for the Working Group. With eight-minute opening statements and longer answer times, both personalities and positions were clearer and more compelling. The highly moderated format we have today has produced shorter answers, but the result has been less substance and more equivocation. At the same time, strict time allotments treat all questions as equally important and encourage candidates to use all of the allocated time as well: if the candidates try to respond at greater length, they appear to “filibuster;” if they abbreviate their responses, they convey lack of interest or knowledge. In any case, the short-answer

format rewards those who resort to clever quips and sound bites.

Because it believes that the general format has calcified over 52 years, and especially the past 20 years, when innovation has largely stopped, the Working Group has adopted two fundamental goals for evaluating alternatives: (1) The voters should learn more about who the candidates are, what they stand for and what they would do in office, and (2) The candidates themselves should be responsible – and therefore accountable – for the quality of their performance. With a candidate-centric format, success or failure rests on the individual candidates’ shoulders.

Figure 2. Percent of voting age population that watched the most widely viewed debate on television.



Data on total viewership for debates from the Commission on Presidential Debates Archive: <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=debate-history>; Total voting age population data from the Federal Election Commission: <http://www.fec.gov/pages/htmlto5.htm>



St. Louis, MO - October 2, 2008: Democratic supporters watch the televised debate between Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Biden and his Republican counterpart Sarah Palin at the Social Hollywood. Vice presidential nominees Palin and Biden clashed at their crucial vice presidential debate.

Rethinking Formats for Debates

Many of the Working Group's recommended format changes have been proposed before. In one major study, respondents who had participated in "Debate Watch," a voter education program involving tens of thousands that was originally associated with the Commission on Presidential Debates, favored "something closer to a Lincoln-Douglas debate with less intrusion from the moderator. This would include cross-examination by the candidates, opening and closing statements...a limited number of topics per debate, different topics in each debate, more flexible time limits that would allow for more depth of analysis and clearer comparisons and contrasts between or among positions while avoiding discussion of a topic from a previous question during a subsequent topic, rules that allow the moderator to keep the candidates

on the topic..."¹² That work noted as well that "many participants expressed a belief that cross-examination would improve the debates by making candidates more spontaneous and by providing viewers with better information and bases for comparison. One of the major criticisms of the existing formats was that they did not produce enough interaction between the candidates..." Because the Annenberg Working Group agrees with many of these sentiments, its members recommend retention of the town hall, the addition of two new formats—the chess clock model and the reformed standard model—and a re-evaluation of the roles of the press and moderator.

Alternative Formats

At the core of the Working Group chess clock format is an idea that has been circulating for more than two decades. The seventh recommendation of the 1986 Institute of Politics-Twentieth Century Fund Report also known as the Minow report (see Appendix Two) read: "The use of journalists as questioners should be eliminated in favor of allowing the candidates the opportunity of questioning each other."

The "Chess Clock" Model. Under this model, each candidate is allotted approximately 45 minutes of speaking time. Eight topics with equal blocks of time are provided. Anytime a candidate is speaking, that candidate's clock visibly counts down. To take control of the floor, a candidate simply hits the chess clock. No answer, rebuttal or question may exceed three minutes. The hard time stops are agreed upon; when a candidate runs out of total time, he or she has exhausted the right to speak. Remaining time at the end of the moderator-proposed topics can be used for a closing statement.

In the chess clock model, the candidates, not the moderators, would be responsible for follow-up. As discussed below, reform of the standard model would have the moderator enforce time limits and raise topics culled from a variety of sources. The moderators would not be tasked with asking follow-up questions; instead, candidates would be expected to challenge incomplete and nonresponsive statements by the opposing side.

The topics would be drawn from a pool of submissions from broadcast, print and social media, and from the general public, vetted by an editorial committee formed perhaps of representatives of leaders of the presidential libraries, presidents of major public and private universities, or the heads of major public libraries. The selection filter is the question, "What will a President face while in office – and how is he or she likely to respond?"

Under this model, candidates can choose to go into greater detail on matters of greater importance to them; they are not compelled to pad time on others.

The Reformed Standard Model. Under the reformed standard model, there would be no chess clock and the time would be allocated between the candidates on the more traditional understanding: e.g., one minute for response, 30 seconds for rebuttal. The changes would otherwise remain the same as in the chess clock model in two respects: the role of the moderator and the source of the questions. Two additional features, giving candidates more flexibility to rebut or clarify and the opportunity to prepare statements on some topics in advance, would be added to increase their opportunity to engage the opponent and feature central points of their agendas.

This first, which involves allocating to each candidate two "points of personal privilege" in congressional

terms, or "challenge flags," allows each candidate to exercise two 90-second opportunities to deviate from the format and make a statement. This allows each to clarify a previous response or respond to an attack when the formal format would by rule (if enforced) preclude it.

The second additional feature would call for each candidate to be given two different topics ahead of time. Each may prepare a four-minute response; the other candidate, also supplied with the topics in advance, has equivalent time to offer a counterstatement, rebut, and cross-question the first candidate. Alternatively, in advance of one of the debates, each candidate would select two topics with two additional ones decided by the moderator through the reformed process recommended in this Report, and two by some form of social media ballot.

Town Hall Debates

The town hall format is an important feature of presidential debates. Although the first presidential debate of 2012 drew the largest number of viewers, the town hall “had a higher rating and held viewers’ attention longer.”¹³ The town hall would follow roughly the same format as used in recent years, but with, again, the adjustment in the role of the moderator, who would enforce process requirements and time limits, but would not have a role in asking follow-up questions or supplement the roster of questions posted by the citizen-participants. The town hall debate should include no live audience other than the citizens who are the participants in the town hall, and who ask the questions. The questioners should be selected from undecided voters in battleground states and not, as has occasionally been the case in the past, from communities in less competitive jurisdictions that do not offer the same desirable diversity of views. The set should be designed to minimize the physical

“traffic” both between the candidates and between the questioners and the candidates, allowing for an orderly and clear progression of debate exchanges.

Re-evaluating the Role of the Press and Moderators

At the request of the Annenberg Working Group, in March 2014, Peter Hart convened five focus groups in Denver involving individuals who voted in 2012 and reported having watched some or all of one or more 2012 presidential general election debates.¹⁴ “The single largest criticism of the debates centers on the inability of moderators to do their job,” concluded Hart. “Some participants perceive some moderators to be biased and ruining the fairness of the debate. Others complain that the moderators either do not have the skills to control the candidates or to call them on ‘non-answers.’”

Table 1: 2012 Debate Moderators—Concerns About Complaints
By Age (Extremely/Very Concerned Combined)

	18-34 (A)	35-49 (B)	50-64 (C)	65+ (D)	Total
The moderators tend to play favorites, giving one of the candidates the edge	32% ^{BCD}	43% ^A	44% ^A	44% ^A	41%
The moderators tend to lose control of the debate and the candidates interrupt one another and go over the time limits	29% ^D	27% ^{CD}	36% ^B	42% ^{AB}	33%
The moderators overstep their boundaries and inject themselves in the debate process	23% ^{CD}	32%	33% ^A	35% ^A	30%
The questions moderators pose are not the right questions on the important issues	26%	27%	30%	33%	29%

A,B,C,D=statistically significant at 95% confidence level (p<.05). For a fuller explanation, see note on Appendix Three.

“Please tell me whether you are extremely concerned, very concerned, just somewhat concerned, or not at all concerned about each of the following complaints. If you have not noticed this complaint, just say so.”

The national survey conducted for the Working Group by Hart reinforces concerns about the role of the moderator.

The Working Group raised an additional set of concerns. In recent years, the moderator has been a television journalist, and more often than not a current or former anchor of a major network news program. When a network uses a debate as an opportunity to showcase its broadcasting talent and enhance its brand, the somewhat arbitrary selection of moderators from a maximum of four networks in a world now populated by many more than that creates a competitive advantage for the selected outlet. One result of all of this is that the debates can take on the appearance of marketing opportunities for the network whose reporter or anchor is moderating. Moreover there is pressure on the campaigns to push for or accept certain moderators for debates. Also of concern is the fact that moderator selection is not a transparent process.

The format changes recommended by this group would address many of these concerns by focusing the role of the moderator on moderating.

A review of press coverage surrounding the 2012 general election confirms that the moderators – their performance, the reactions to their performances, perceived tilts toward one candidate or another – have become an integral part of the presidential debate story. This attention to the role of the moderator stems in part from two aspects of the role which raise the question of whether these debates are best moderated by individuals in their role as journalists or, moderated by an individual whose sole responsibility is ensuring that the debate process works well. The Working Group favors the latter. The criticisms of debate formats as joint news conferences or joint Sunday show-type interviews reveal the inherent tension in the role of



Richmond, VA - October 15, 1992: Democratic candidate AR Gov. Bill Clinton (foreground) making point as rivals GOP Pres. Bush & Independent candidate TX businessman Ross Perot listen, in 2nd presidential debate.

journalists acting in their capacity as journalists while also performing as moderators.

At present, in the debates other than the town hall, the moderator decides which questions are asked, or which topic areas are covered, with as much or as little input from the public or other journalists as he or she wishes. This can result in questions that advance the news agenda more than public understanding of the candidates, their plans and position on issues. Press



St. Louis, MO - October 11 1992: Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton (center), U.S. President George Bush (right) and presidential candidate Ross Perot (left) answer questions at the athletic center at Washington University during the first of four U.S. presidential debates.

control of content and pursuit of “follow-up” can create an interview or Sunday show dynamic in which the candidate is engaged with the moderator, as opposed to the other candidate. Candidates end up preparing to debate the moderator as well as their opponent(s).

Consistent with our belief that the debates should be a forum for the views of, and exchanges between, candidates, the Working Group recommends the following areas for reform:

Development of Questions: The debates should employ a more formal process of soliciting topics and questions both from the general public through a variety of platforms as well as from a broad group of knowledgeable experts that would include print as well as broadcast journalists. The questions could be curated by a group, potentially made up of directors or members of boards of presidential libraries and

major public libraries, or public and private university presidents, with the moderator responsible for framing the questions. This reform would invite greater diversity, and give both the public and a broader representation of the press corps an opportunity to identify topics and questions that the debate should cover.

We believe that a full third of the questions by the moderator in the debate should be obtained from non-news sources. On an individual level, this change gives voters and politically interested Americans greater opportunity to shape the debates. Involving the audience, however, demands participation that enhances the debate viewing experience. Audience participation should be much more than a novelty – it should contribute to the greater dialogue and provide a meaningful way to participate. Moreover, audience participation has the potential to help direct conversation and reaction before and after the debate and in the process increase interest. If well structured, a high level of interaction between the public and the people running for president furthers our goal of helping Americans make the most informed choices.

Expanding Pool of Potential Moderators: Television networks argue that live, televised events can be effectively moderated only by experienced broadcast journalists. The challenge of moderating the debate, with the producer giving guidance in the moderator’s ear, is real – trying to make sure time is allocated fairly, that the order of responses is correct, and that the candidates’ focus shifts as needed to different topic areas. Moreover, there is a belief that journalists offer an informed perspective that ensures that important topics are covered and candidates answer the questions asked.

However, as noted, a moderator’s control of content and pursuit of “follow-up” can create an interview or Sunday show dynamic in which the candidate is

engaged with the moderator, as opposed to the other candidate.

With a more limited role for the moderator, there is no reason that the potential moderator pool could not be broadened to once again include print journalists as well as other persons of stature such as university presidents, retired judges, historians, and others with demonstrated credibility— as was proposed at the birth of the televised debates in 1960. This also would address the diversity issue. In the past, debate moderators have not reflected the diverse makeup of the country.

Adopting a More Inclusive, Transparent Selection

Process: The current process of choosing moderators is not transparent. We recommend that a designated group, again potentially made up of presidential library heads and board members, develop an initial list and that the campaigns select a moderator from that list. While the system may produce one moderator who would facilitate more than one debate, we would strongly suggest using different moderators for different debates to add variety and increase public interest.

The Question of the Criteria for the Inclusion of Minor Party or Independent Candidates

Over the course of the presidential debates, there has been limited independent or minor party candidate participation. In 1980, independent candidate John Anderson was included in the first debate (although Democratic nominee and incumbent President Jimmy Carter declined to participate). In 1992, independent candidate Ross Perot participated in all of the presidential debates, but was not invited to the debates four years later. Those are exceptions to the

general pattern that presidential debates feature only the two major party candidates.

The Commission on Presidential Debates administers a two-part test for inclusion of candidates: (1) Any candidate included must have the ability to be elected in the general election by qualifying for ballot inclusion in states adding up to at least 270 electoral votes, and (2) Any candidate who passed the ballot test must reach at least 15% in independent national surveys in the period leading up to the debates.

Whether they identify themselves as independents or non-aligned or just refuse to state a preference, one of the significant changes in American elections since the Democratic and Republican parties formed the Commission in 1987 is the growth of those who call themselves non-aligned voters in this country.

As important is the fact that 50% of those in the millennial generation, now ranging in ages from 18-33, described themselves as political independents in March 2014.¹⁵

Given this reality, and the fact that the independent/ non-aligned candidates have succeeded in winning statewide races over the past decade, the Working Group discussed whether the time has come to revisit the standard for including candidates. It heard views on this topic from advocates of liberalized standards for the inclusion of independent candidates, including from those arguing for a guaranteed invitation for at least one independent candidate regardless of the person's standing in the polls and electoral viability. It has been argued that the rules should take account of the possibility that through inclusion in the debates an independent candidate could build the potential for victory that he or she did not have at the outset.

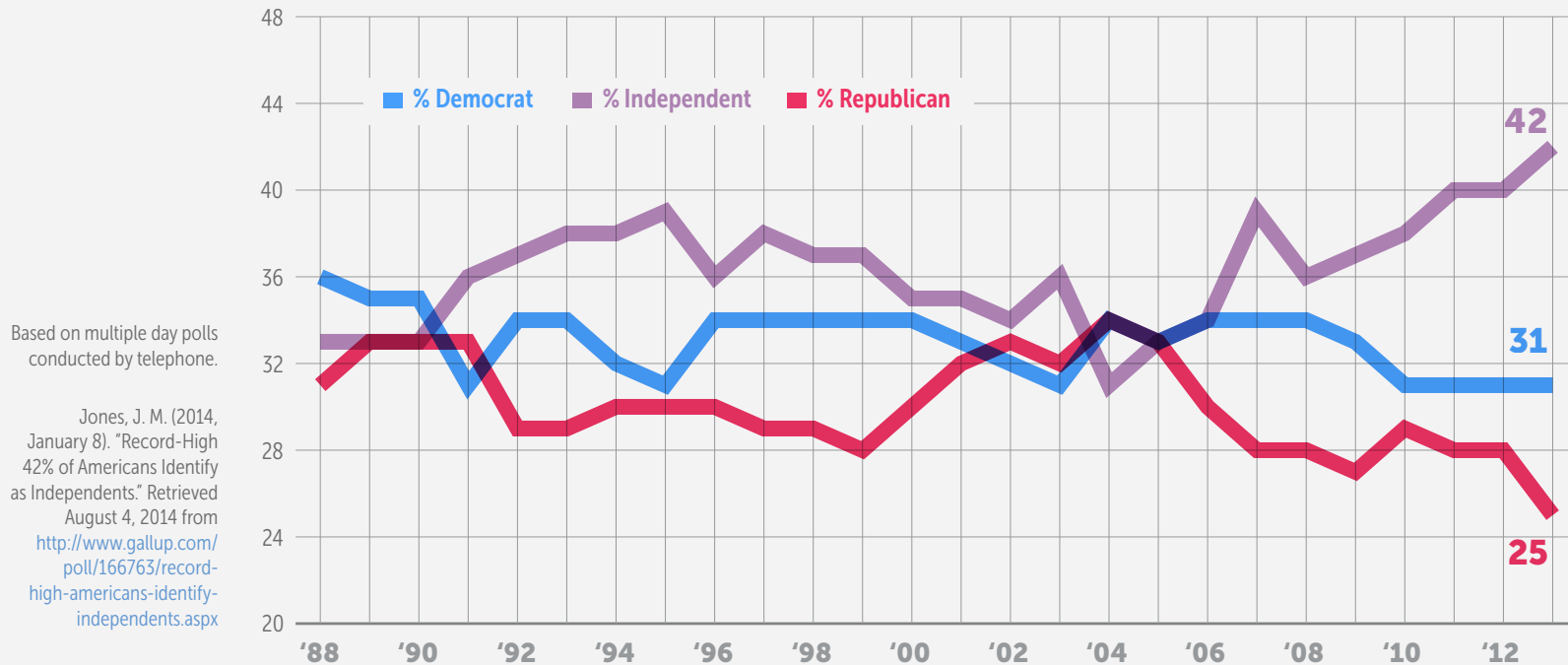
There is support in both the focus groups and in the survey for a lower entry threshold. Where 41 percent of those surveyed favor the status quo, 47 percent oppose limiting “the debates to the two major party candidates unless a third-party candidate can exceed 15% in the polls.” The survey asked which of two statements came closer to the respondent’s view:

Statement A: The rules for a third-party candidate inclusion should be relaxed so that it is easier for them to be part of the debate. Even if it is unlikely that they will win the presidency, it would make the major candidates respond to their ideas.

Statement B: The rules for a third-party candidate inclusion should not be changed, because the third-party candidates take away from the central purpose of listening to and watching the two people who are most likely to become the president.

In response, 56 percent said the rules should be relaxed while 28 percent said they should not be changed. Fifteen percent offered no opinion or did not know. Similarly, respondents in Hart’s focus groups favored “making it easier to allow third-party candidates in on the debates.”

Figure 3. Party Identification, Yearly Averages, 1988-2013



Based on multiple day polls conducted by telephone.

Jones, J. M. (2014, January 8). "Record-High 42% of Americans Identify as Independents." Retrieved August 4, 2014 from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx>

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In discussing alternatives for the American election, the Working Group examined the current 15% threshold for inclusion, measured by public opinion polling, coupled with qualification for the ballot in enough states to win a majority of the Electoral College. It considered the balance to be struck between ensuring a diversity of views, and giving voters the opportunity to consider the views of the candidates—the major party candidates—with the highest likelihood of being elected. On this question, there was not a consensus on the best solution.

The Working Group concluded that the debate must remain principally an exchange of views for the benefit of voters who are faced with a choice of a potential president, and that therefore the debaters should have by a fair measure a realistic chance of winning the election. But the Group could not arrive at a consensus and has not therefore made a recommendation for a modified standard.

However, a majority of the Working Group agreed that the selection criteria now in place should be replaced with a structure that, in addition to demonstrated capacity to win a majority of electoral votes, would involve; a) lowering the threshold for the first presidential debate to 10%, b) raising it to 15% for the second; and then c) increasing it to 25% for the third and final debate. This process would facilitate inclusion of third-party or independent voices at the outset of the debate schedule, while requiring a showing of expanded support as the campaign—and debate period—continues. These proposed changes respond to the argument that independent candidates have to clear too high a hurdle in the first instance, and if given a greater chance at the outset to participate, may be able to build support.

Because standing in polls plays a critical role in determining eligibility for debate participation, the Working Group does believe that it is important that the standards required of polls used to determine eligibility are clear; the number and identity of the polls on which the decision will rely are announced in advance; the survey question that will be used to assess eligibility is disclosed in advance; and answers are provided in advance to such questions as: What happens if a candidate falls below the polled threshold but is nonetheless within the margin of error?

Broadening the Accessibility of the Debates

The Internet has produced increased democratization in the political process. Almost overnight, information became available from a variety of sources, not just the major networks, and opened a platform to the average person for voicing opinions and sharing news and coverage.

Without the ability to predict the media technology that will shape the future, the path to increased consumption of debates is clear: eliminate the points of friction that keep voters from being able to access the debate on their platform of choice.

Debates have failed to keep up with the evolving digital viewing habits of the American public. At the same time, social media have altered the ways in which the public consumes the debates. The May 2014 survey conducted by Hart found that “When young people do watch debates, they are significantly more likely to actively follow the debate through social media platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook. More than a quarter (28%) of 18-34 year olds and about a fifth (19%) of 35-49 year olds said they both watched and actively followed the 2012 debates on social media platforms. Significantly fewer older adults reported such activity (12% 50-64 year olds and 8% of 65 and older).” Broadcast and cable networks play an essential role, but the shifting media habits of the American electorate – characterized by the expanding number of cord-cutters and off-the-grid segments – are noteworthy, and by

2016, the shift to digital media consumption will be even more pronounced.

We would recommend embracing this changing media landscape by providing full access to debate content on a flat, universal feed developed according to predefined, public technical standards and shared with media companies and individuals alike. We would also complement a common feed with clean, succinct, accessible data and analytics. In the Hart survey, 55% of the public surveyed and 69% of those 18-34 support streaming debates over the Internet on external outlets simultaneously as the debate is going on. Doing so frees campaigns and media providers to focus on what matters: creating valuable debate experiences for the voters.

To facilitate these changes, technological infrastructure should provide a level playing field for competition and innovation. Universal access is ideal for this purpose. Flexible and adaptable, this foundation will allow the market to develop media delivery models and offerings that suit viewers of different ages and habits.

Digital content providers deserve a central role in setting these universal requirements. Even though we don’t know what those will look like in 2016, let alone 2020 or 2024, if debates are to stay relevant, they must adapt to the variety of viewing habits and technologies in use.

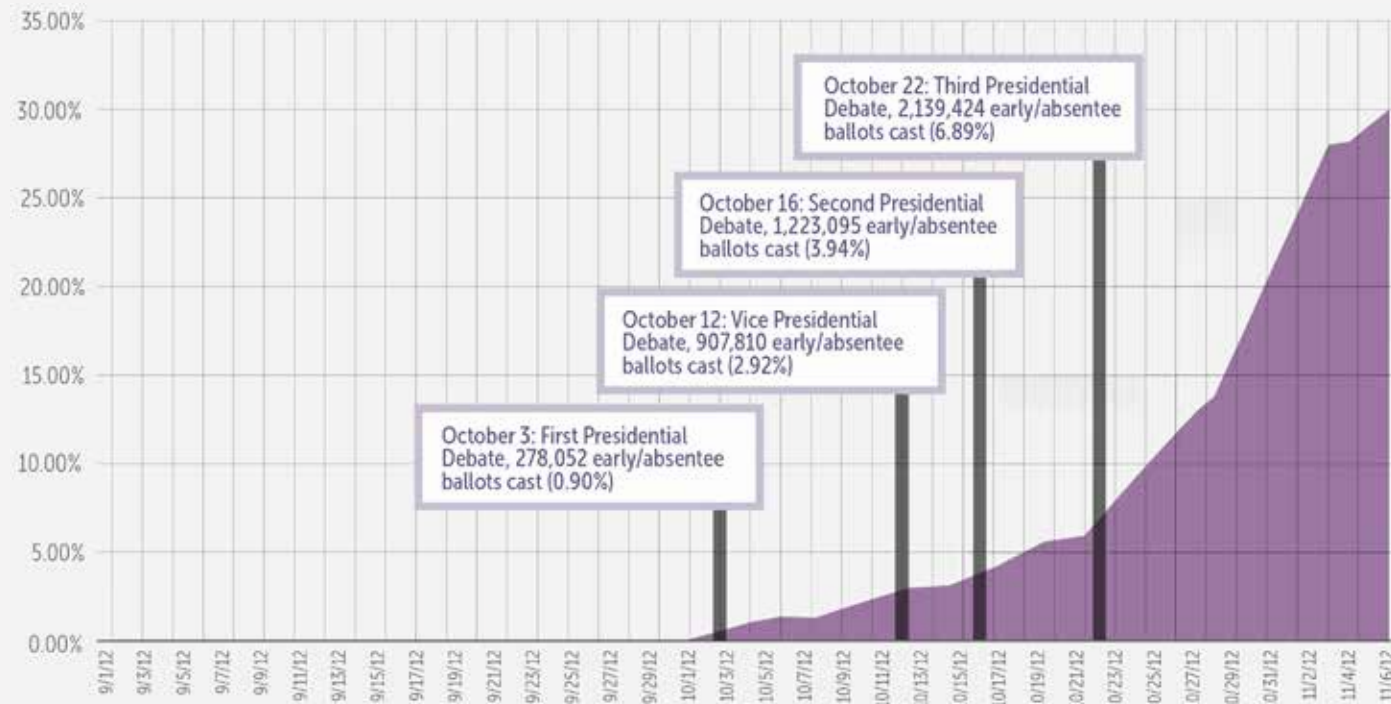
An election comes down to the millions of individual decisions made by voters. The voters—not broadcasters, media providers, or networks—ought to determine how, where, and when debate content is used. Open, universal access to debates, with meaningful content presented in a relevant way, can help ensure the continuing viability of the presidential debates well into the future.

Revising the debate timetable to take into account the changes in voting behavior since 1988, particularly early voting. Because the fall calendar of an election year includes the Summer Olympics, Major League Baseball's post-season, and the Jewish high holidays, the challenges confronting presidential debate schedulers are significant. When party conventions are held in late August or early September, the schedule is compressed even more, with the result that debates often cluster into the month of October.

Importantly, the increase in early and no-excuse absentee voting means that October debates occur

after balloting has actually begun. In 2012, the percentage of voters who cast ballots before Election Day was 31.6%, according to a Census Bureau study. The affected proportion of the electorate is large. Thirty two states currently allow early voting. Washington and Oregon conduct all of their voting by mail before Election Day. The earliest early voting currently occurs 45 days before Election Day (in South Dakota and Idaho). While the data indicate that only a small percentage of voters voted prior to the first debate in 2012 (0.90%), a more significant number cast their ballots before the third debate (6.89%) (see chart below). Figure 4 shows that the number of absentee and early

Figure 4. The percent of absentee and early voting by date from 8 battleground states in the 2012 Presidential Election



States included: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Data come from Catalyst Absentee/Early Voting daily reports.

voters increases rapidly day by day in the last two weeks before the election, which reduces the appeal of having a debate closer to Election Day. Moreover, all of the active duty military and their families living abroad vote absentee well in advance of Election Day.

Since fundraising and university logistics dictate that the Commission pick dates and sites over a year in advance of the election, there is currently no flexibility built into the debate schedule. However, there is precedent for increasing flexibility in scheduling. In 1996, the four Clinton-Bush-Perot debates were held outside of the Commission's announced schedule over a nine-day period.

In response to increased early voting and the important role the debates play in informing voters about the candidates, the Working Group recommends that:

- The first debate should be scheduled mid-September to give military families and voters who participate in early voting the opportunity to see at least one debate before casting their votes. Sixty-three percent of the respondents in the Hart survey favored moving the first debate to early September before early voting begins.
- The "debate season" of three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate should occur in a window of 19-25 days. The decision on the final schedule for the debates should be set by July 1 of the election year.
- On-site audiences should be dispensed with to eliminate the need for booking sites far in advance and provide greater flexibility in timing and location.

Improving the Transparency and Accountability of the Debate Process

The Memorandum of Understanding

Since the presidential debates are an event held for the benefit of the public, they should be structured to meet basic standards of transparency and accountability. The adjustments necessary to achieve these goals are neither complicated nor controversial.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) negotiated by the candidates settles various terms and conditions of the debate (for a synthesis of MOU content, see Appendix Five). In the past, these MOUs have not been made routinely available to the press and public. Because it works out details specific to a given venue and addresses concerns important to the campaigns (e.g., a riser for shorter candidates, whether a candidate can take or bring notes), the MOU is an agreement important to the debate process.

Upon signing, the MOU negotiated by the candidates should be made available to the press and public. The MOU should be posted to the website that the Group recommends be maintained to provide supplemental information about debate topics and to facilitate citizen engagement.

In addition, all the key participants in the debate, including the moderator, should sign the MOU. It makes little sense to have the candidates negotiate understandings that must be enforced by a moderator who is not a party to the agreement. In the past, the moderators, as representatives of the media, have declined to sign the MOU out of a desire to protect their role as journalists who are expected to keep their distance (and objectivity). The Working Group has

recommended reforms to address this conflict in role, proposing changes in the role of moderator and in the role of the press generally. In the proposed model, journalists who serve as moderators are working as moderators, not journalists, during the debate: they have agreed to perform the task as a public service, not as an act of reporting. While reporting is unquestionably an act of public service in other contexts, in this one, it presents the live and demonstrated risks discussed in the testimony to the Working Group. While under these proposals members of the press would remain available for selection as moderators, the Working Group concludes that the person who wishes to be a moderator should only do so on the condition that he or she signs the MOU.

Reducing the Debate “Spectacle” and its Cost

The debates have become an extravaganza, elaborate in design and costly. Hosting universities construct temporary buildings or retrofit spaces not just to create a debate venue, but also for spin alleys, candidate holding rooms, surrogate viewing areas, press filing centers, staff work spaces, and ticket distribution. Streets are closed and transportation systems developed to accommodate the movement of Secret Service motorcades and hundreds of audience members to and from the debate site. A television studio is built in the debate hall; technology is installed to give media and the campaigns access to communication systems. Thousands of media, campaign staff, surrogates, and audience members travel to the site. In the hours prior to the debate, corporate sponsors provide food and entertainment for an audience comprising policy makers and influentials. In years past, the debate site supported not just the audience in the hall but also the crowd that gathers for



the events surrounding the debate and the surrogates representing the campaigns before and after the debate and available to “spin” the media.

Substantial private funding is needed for a spectacle on this scale. With the private financing comes product promotion and the spending for corporate branding and “goodwill.” How these arrangements are reached, and on what terms, should be a matter of general public interest, but little information is provided or known. Although the overall cost of producing this extravaganza is high, little of it is directly necessary for the main event.

All that is necessary for a presidential debate is a stage for the candidates and a mechanism to transmit their words and images to the public. Other features of current debates including the spin room, the audience, the beer tents, and the locked-down university campus

St. Louis, MO - October 17, 2000: Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush (center) answers a question during his town hall style debate with Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore (center, right) at Washington University

contribute to a spectacle that distracts from the main purpose of the event: the discussion of the major issues among the candidates for president.

No Spin Alley. Other costs now typical of the debate process have become less necessary and useful than in the past. For example, with the rise of social media, the value of “spin alley” has diminished as the senior campaign voices are more likely to use email or Twitter to engage the press both during and after the debate. These changes substantially lessen the need for an elite facility where chosen political spinners and credentialed journalists gather in person to engage in a tired ritual.

No In-Person Audience. The presence of the in-person audience not only raises questions about the seamliness of its composition but its presence carries risks as well. Once the debate begins, despite warnings to remain silent, audience reaction can and has affected the impressions of those viewing at home (See Appendix Five). Laughter, cheers or jeers also magnify moments and distract attention from the substance of the statements made by the candidates. Although it is sometimes said that these eruptions are primarily a problem for primary debates and have been rare in general election debates, there is no reason to *assume* that this good fortune will last. After all there have been audible audience responses in general election debates: examples include audience reaction to President Reagan’s answer to a question about his age and the response to the exchange between Senators Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle over any comparison of the latter with President John Kennedy. Even one such episode is too many.

Some argue that the presence of a live audience provides positive energy that can bring the best performances out of the candidates. However, the presidential debates that are routinely put forth as the

most consequential and substantive ones, the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, were held in a TV studio with a very small on-site audience.

There is ample precedent for using a television studio for political debates. In addition to the 1960 debate, the 1976 Carter-Ford presidential debates and the 2010 United Kingdom general election debates were held in studios. Television studio debates are routine for gubernatorial and senatorial elections.

Moreover, as discussed earlier, the audience creates the need for a large logistical footprint that increases the cost of the overall production and raises transparency and accountability issues.

Some point to the presence of students from the host university in the audience as justification. However, the percentage of the audience made up of students relative to donors is small. There are more cost-effective ways to involve students in civic education (generally) and debate education (specifically) than staging a onetime, multimillion-dollar event on campus.

CONCLUSION:

The Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group has presented this analysis and related recommendations in the service of Presidential debates that reflect major changes in our electorate, politics and media. More can and should be done to enrich their content, enlarge their audience and improve upon their accessibility. The members of the Working Group are confident that while views about the particulars will vary, there is likely near-unanimity about the vital importance of Presidential debates and, therefore, of the need to ensure that they continue to answer the needs of the voters who have watched and listened to them, and to draw into our political process those who have not.

QUESTION:

VIEWER COMMENTS

**What did you think of the
presidential debate?**

CALL FROM:

Indianapolis, Indiana

APPENDIX ONE

PROCESS

Held on September 26-27, 2013 — the 53rd anniversary of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate — the Working Group's first meeting focused on debate topics, the format of the debates, moderators, timing and number of the debates, negotiations with candidates, audiences and interactivity, and debate sponsorship. Its second meeting, on November 8, 2013, concentrated on the role of media in future presidential debates and the logistics involved in producing them. The meeting included discussion with social and legacy media representatives and with those who have handled logistics for campaigns in recent debates. In the third session on December 16, 2013, the Working Group heard from scholars who have studied third-party candidacies as well as from individuals urging alternative criteria for inclusion of third-party candidates in debates. Convened in Cambridge, Md., in early February 2014, the fourth meeting reviewed what had been learned and identified research required to address unanswered questions. On March 27-28, 2014, the fifth meeting, which like the first, second and third was held at the Annenberg Public Policy Center in Philadelphia, focused on the logistics involved in producing debates, the ways in which social media might be harnessed to increase the value and viewership for debates and the role of non-legacy networks. The group focused on financing models and on understanding the costs involved in alternative models of debate production. Shifting to the West Coast for its sixth session May 11-13, 2014, the group met with executives from major social media organizations to explore ways to increase audience interaction with debates and debate content. During its seventh session June 18-19, 2014, the Working Group discussed the drafting of this report.

The Working Group also:

- *discussed the history and value of presidential debates with Newton Minow, who played an indispensable role in the institutionalization of presidential debates.
- *met with broadcast and cable network representatives as well as with the director of the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), Janet Brown, and separately with CPD co-chairs Mike McCurry and Frank Fahrenkopf.
- *convened a group of debate scholars to assist the Working Group in evaluating debate formats.

To support the work of the group, the APPC commissioned a Nielsen study of viewership patterns in and across debates, a series of focus groups on debates conducted by Peter D. Hart, and a survey of public attitudes about debates also conducted by Hart along with TargetPoint Consulting. Annenberg doctoral student Eunji Kim synthesized the content of the debate memoranda. APPC senior researcher Bruce Hardy synthesized NAES data on close following of debates and with Jamieson conducted a series of experiments on the effects of the immediate audience's cheers and laughter on the home audience's perception of the candidates. Kim and Hardy analyzed fall-off patterns in viewing within and across debates. Annenberg researchers Jennifer Isaacman and Deborah Stinnett identified differences in questions asked by those in town halls and journalists, and Jamieson synthesized the scholarly literature on debates' importance and effects.

Working Group Biographies

Robert Barnett

Robert B. Barnett is a senior partner at Williams & Connolly in Washington, D.C. He has worked on nine national presidential campaigns, focusing mainly on debate preparation. In addition to playing a role on the Democratic Party's debate preparation teams in 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012, he played the role of George H.W. Bush in practice debates with Geraldine Ferraro in 1984, Michael Dukakis in 1988, and practice debated Bill Clinton more than 20 times in 1992. In 2000, he played the role of Dick Cheney in practices with Joe Lieberman and in 2004 with John Edwards. In 2000 and 2006, he assisted Hillary Rodham Clinton with her Senate debate preparations and helped prepare her for 23 presidential primary debates in 2008. He assisted Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

Robert Bauer

Bob Bauer represented President Obama's re-election campaign in 2012 before the Commission on Presidential Debates and in negotiation with the Romney campaign of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Presidential nominees. As a specialist of politics law, Bauer has represented the Obama campaign and others on legal requirements governing candidate debates, including the rules of the Federal Election Commission and the Internal Revenue Service.

Joel Benenson

Joel Benenson, CEO of Benenson Strategy Group, has been President Obama's pollster since his first run for the White House. Benenson is a former journalist whose career in polling has focused on the values and language of working and middle class voters. He was a member of Obama's debate prep team through all 23 primary debates in 2008 and all six general election debates President Obama participated in, as well as Vice President Biden's team in both elections. He has also been on prep teams for several Governor and U.S. Senators.

Charles Black

Charles R. Black is Chairman of Prime Policy Group. Black is best known as one of America's leading Republican political strategists. He served as senior advisor to both President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush. In 1990, Black served as chief spokesman for the Republican National Committee and served as a principal public spokesman for President Bush in the 1992 presidential campaign. He served on President George W. Bush's 2000 and 2004 campaigns as a volunteer political advisor and surrogate spokesman. Most recently he served as the senior political advisor to Senator John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign. As part of his involvement in nine presidential campaigns, Black has served as a debate negotiator and candidate preparer in four presidential campaigns. He has provided advice to those playing those roles in four other presidential campaigns.

Rick Davis

Rick Davis has been involved in local, national and international political campaigns since 1976. His first presidential campaign experience was for then-former Governor Ronald Reagan in 1979. During President Reagan's re-election in 1984, Davis managed the delegate selection process during the primary and among other duties during the general election he directed logistic support for the debate team during the presidential debates. In 1988 and 1992 as a part of the George Bush Presidential campaign Davis served in a number of roles including helping to manage the support and logistics (spin room) for the presidential debates. In 1996, as Deputy Campaign Manager for Senator Bob Dole's Presidential campaign, Davis served as one of the debate negotiation team members chaired at that time by Governor Carol Campbell. Davis' duties as Deputy Campaign Manager included overseeing all debate planning, candidate preparation and on-site management. In 2000 and 2008 Davis served as Senator John McCain's National Campaign Manager. In the later campaign he oversaw all debate negotiation, candidate preparation, media and logistics.

Anita Dunn

As White House Communications Director and senior advisor to President Obama's presidential campaign, Anita Dunn directed conventional and new media communications strategies, as well as research, speechwriting, television booking, presidential events, and cabinet affairs press. Dunn has worked for a wide range of elected officials and candidates across the United States, including working for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee as Communications Director from 1987-1990 under Senator John Kerry and then-Senator John Breaux; leading Senator Bill Bradley's political and communication teams from 1991-1993; serving as a consultant to the Democratic Senate Caucus in 1995, and again in 1999, during the impeachment trial of President Clinton; and working as then-Senate Majority Leader Senator Tom Daschle's Communications Director in 2001. She has worked with a wide range of Democratic Party officials including Senator Evan Bayh, Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, and Congressman John Dingell.

Ben Ginsberg

Benjamin Ginsberg, a partner at Jones Day, has represented the campaigns of Mitt Romney and George W. Bush before the Commission on Presidential Debates and in negotiations with their general election opponents of debate rules. He represents numerous political candidates and parties, members of Congress and state legislatures, Governors, corporations, trade associations, vendors, donors and individuals participating in the political process. In 2012 and 2008, he served as national counsel to the Romney for President campaigns. In 2004 and 2000, Ginsberg served as national counsel to the Bush-Cheney presidential campaigns; he played a central role in the 2000 Florida recount. He advises on election law issues, particularly those involving federal and state campaign finance laws, government investigations, ethics rules, Internal Revenue Service issues impacting the political process, redistricting, communications law, and election recounts and contests.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson

Kathleen Hall Jamieson is the Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication and Walter and Leonore Annenberg Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Political and Social Science and the International Communication Association. She is the author or co-author of 18 books including: *Packaging the Presidency* (1984), *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate* (1988); *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (1997); and *Presidents Creating the Presidency* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). With Kate Kenski and Bruce Hardy, Jamieson wrote *The Obama Victory* (Oxford, 2010), winner of an American Publishers Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence (PROSE Award) in government and politics and the ICA outstanding book award. She was a member of the IOP-Twentieth Century Fund Taskforce on reform of debates convened by Newton Minow in 1986 (see Appendix Two).

Ron Klain

Ron Klain has served as Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff to the Vice President. In this capacity, he directs the staff in its various activities in support of the Vice President's agenda. Klain also advises the Vice President on a wide array of policy and political matters. He was appointed to this position in November 1995. He previously served in the Clinton administration from January 1993 to February 1995. First, as Associate Counsel to the President, he directed judicial selection efforts for the White House. In this capacity, he also led the confirmation teams for high-profile nominees such as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Attorney General Janet Reno. Later, Klain served as Counselor and Chief of Staff to Attorney General Janet Reno. As such, he advised Reno on numerous legal and policy matters, and coordinated the administration-wide effort to craft and win passage of the President's Crime Bill, and the ban on semi-automatic assault weapons. Prior to joining the administration, Klain served in the Clinton/Gore Campaign, as Washington Issues Director and as a Domestic Policy Specialist on the Campaign's Debate Preparation Team. After serving on the Debate Working Group from September 2013 to September 2014, Klain resigned on October 23, 2014 upon being named Ebola response coordinator for the Obama Administration.

Zac Moffatt

Zac Moffatt was the Digital Director for Mitt Romney for President, where he managed a department of over 150 with a budget of over \$100 million. The digital department was responsible for the campaign's digital strategy: online advertising, social media, email marketing and online fundraising. Before joining the Mitt Romney campaign, Moffatt and Michael Beach founded Targeted Victory, a full service interactive advertising agency. It has quickly grown to serve over 170 federal and national clients including the Republican National Committee, Marco Rubio for Senate and FedEx. Prior to founding Targeted Victory, Moffatt served as the Deputy Director for Statewide efforts at Freedom's Watch, the Director of Political Education for the Republican National Committee and the Victory Director for the Maryland Republican Party for Governor Robert Ehrlich and Senate candidate Michael Steele.

Beth Myers

Beth Myers has a long history of involvement in public issues and campaigns. Most recently, she was Senior Advisor for Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign, and Campaign Manager for his 2008 presidential race. Before that she served as Chief of Staff through all four years of the Romney governorship. She previously worked as a litigation associate at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld LLP in Dallas, Texas. Starting on the 1980 Reagan campaign, Myers has worked for a slew of candidates. Working for Market Opinion Research, she developed and implemented GOTV campaigns in California, Texas, Massachusetts, Louisiana and Missouri. In 2008 and 2012, she participated in debate prep with Governor Mitt Romney for over 30 primary debates, and in 2012 she managed the debate preparations for Governor Romney's three general election debates.

Neil Newhouse

Neil Newhouse is a partner and co-founder of Public Opinion Strategies, a national political and public affairs research firm, and was named Pollster of the Year by the trade publication Campaigns and Elections for its work in the 2002 election cycle. Newhouse was chief pollster for the 2012 Romney for President Campaign and involved in Governor Romney's 2012 debate prep. He also worked on George W. Bush's re-election campaign. Newhouse has worked in public opinion research for more than 25 years, directed the research for thousands of individual projects and has experience in every aspect of opinion research. During the 2008 election cycle, Newhouse was the Republican partner for the NBC News/Wall Street Journal polls and he has twice been named as one of the Money 20 political consultants in the country who make a difference. Newhouse has won praise from both sides of the political aisle, having worked on numerous Gubernatorial, Senate and Congressional campaigns. He was described by Pennsylvania Democratic Governor Ed Rendell as one of the most respected pollsters in the country and recruited by Senator Joe Lieberman to provide polling and strategic guidance in his successful 2006 Independent bid for U.S. Senate in Connecticut.

Jim Perry

Jim Perry served as an advisor to Governor Mitt Romney during preparations for his 2012 general election debates. He has helped numerous candidates prepare for debates including former Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, for whom Perry also served as Deputy Chief of Staff and Policy Director. Perry currently is an investment banker at Morgan Stanley.

Joe Rospars

Joe Rospars is the founding partner and creative director of Blue State Digital. For both the 2008 and 2012 campaigns, Rospars was President Barack Obama's principal digital strategist and advisor, overseeing the digital integration of the unprecedented fundraising, communications, and grassroots mobilization effort. The digital arm of the campaign provided the backbone of design and branding both online and off and engaged a record-breaking number of Americans through mobile, social, video, and web platforms. Prior to the Obama campaigns, Rospars led Blue State Digital's work with Governor Howard Dean, from the founding of Democracy for America to Dean's historic 50-state strategy and the 2006 election victories.

Michael Sheehan

Michael Sheehan has been a member of the Debate Prep team for every Democratic Presidential and Vice Presidential Candidate since 1988. He has also prepared numerous Democrats for their Congressional state-wide debates. For the Obama and Clinton administrations alike, he has coached Inaugural Addresses, States of the Union, prime time addresses, and press conferences. One of America's leading communications trainers and strategists, his expertise embraces every format and every forum whether media interview, major speech or high-stakes Q&A. His ability to help people communicate at the highest possible level was dubbed by New York Magazine as "the Sheehan effect."

Stuart Stevens

For 25 years, Stuart Stevens has been the lead strategist and media consultant for political campaigns such as those of Senator Rob Portman, Senator Roy Blunt, Governor Haley Barbour, Governor Tom Ridge and President George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. Most recently, Stevens was lead strategist for Governor Mitt Romney's 2012 primary and general election presidential races. Beginning his political career in his native Mississippi, Stevens worked on Thad Cochran's campaigns.

APPENDIX TWO

SPONSORSHIP

1960 Debates:

In February 1959 in the Lars Daly case, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruled that newscasts were covered by the equal time provisions of Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934. Congress responded by amending Section 315 to exclude bona fide newscasts, regularly scheduled interviews, programs, and on-the-spot reporting of bona fide news events. That initial piece of legislation did not include debates. On June 27, 1960, Congress passed a joint resolution (S.J. 207) temporarily suspending the “equal time” provision for the 1960 presidential and vice presidential candidates. As CBS president Frank Stanton noted, “At midnight November seventh we automatically reverted to the equal time provision of Section 315 of the Communications Act, as revised, which, by requiring broadcasters to give equal time to all candidates of all parties including splinter groups and faddists, for all practical purposes outlaws broadcasts of face-to-face meetings” (in Kraus, 1962, p. 66).

Shortly after being nominated, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy accepted the networks’ invitation to appear in “The Great Debates.” Each saw an advantage in debating. For Kennedy, the debates were an opportunity to dispel the notion that he was too young and inexperienced to be president; for Nixon, the debates seemed an opportunity to showcase his skills both as a television performer and debater. NBC board chairman Robert W. Sarnoff emphasized that the Kennedy-Nixon debates:

Do not represent a donation of free time to the candidates. They are rather an exercise of broadcast journalism in which the candidates have agreed to appear within a framework calculated to stimulate a dignified, genuinely informative airing of their views, and to test those views against each other.

Details concerning the 1960 debates were “worked out in protracted negotiations—twelve meetings in all—between representatives of CBS, NBC, ABC, and the Mutual Broadcasting System, and advisors to the candidates,” note Minow and Sloan (1987, p 12). “The sponsorship of the individual debates was determined by lot...” (Minow and Sloan, 13).

1976 Debates:

Behind in the polls, in his convention acceptance address incumbent Republican Gerald Ford challenged his Democratic opponent, Jimmy Carter, to debate. The challenger accepted. As a result, for the first time in history an incumbent debated a challenger. A vice presidential debate was held as well. Because the FCC's 1975 Aspen decision held that debates not sponsored by a broadcaster were "bona fide news events," the 1976 presidential debates were able to be sponsored by the League of Women Voters. Despite reservations, the League acceded to candidate demands that there be no reaction shots of the audience. Reliance on a press panel to pose questions was widely criticized by reporters and academics as was the fact that the League had permitted the candidates to decide the rules under which the debates would occur.

1980 Debates:

The 1980 debates were also sponsored by the League, which proposed the same schedule as 1976: three presidential and one vice presidential debate. With John Anderson running as an independent, the League set criteria to determine eligibility to participate in debates that included passing a 15% threshold in public opinion polls and sufficient ballot eligibility to be elected. When the incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter refused to participate in a debate with Anderson, a League-sponsored debate between Anderson and Republican party nominee Ronald Reagan was held on September 21. By contrast it was vice presidential nominee George H.W. Bush and not vice president Mondale who refused to participate in a vice presidential debate with Anderson's vice presidential nominee Patrick Lucey. After Anderson fell below the League's threshold for eligibility, a Carter-Reagan debate was held on October 28, a week before the election. The fledgling cable network CNN included Anderson in the debate by giving him the opportunity to respond to the questions offered to Carter and Reagan. Again the League acceded to the demands of the candidates. So for example, the panelists for the Carter-Reagan debate were selected by joint agreement of the two campaigns.

1983: A Twentieth Century Fund Task Force concluded: "The public is not well served when debates are negotiated in the heat of the fall campaign and when the candidates' tactical advantages become more central to the negotiations than the public interest" (In Minow and Sloan, 35).

1984 Debates:

Although the FCC had altered the Aspen rule to permit networks to sponsor debates, the League retained that franchise in 1984, sponsoring two presidential and one vice presidential debates.

1985: On November 26, 1985, Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk, the chairs of the two major parties, issued a "Memorandum of Agreement on Presidential Candidate Joint Appearances" which declared that "to better fulfill our parties' responsibilities for educating and informing the American public and to strengthen the role of political

parties in the electoral process, it is our conclusion that future joint appearances should be principally and jointly sponsored and conducted by the Republican and Democratic National Committees.”

1985: In February 1985, the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown formed a 40 person bipartisan Commission on National Elections co-chaired by Robert Strauss and Melvin Laird. Issued in April 1986, the Commission report endorsed the Fahrenkopf and Kirk memorandum and recommended that the two major political parties institutionalize debates by forming an organization responsible for running them and by securing the commitment of their respective candidates to participate in them.

1986: In 1986, the Harvard Institute of Politics-Twentieth Century Fund formed a 30 person study group chaired by Newton Minow.

In December 1986, Minow, who had played a key role in televised U.S. presidential debates throughout their history, convened a conference to evaluate 10 of his recommendations to improve the functioning of presidential debates:

1. Quadrennial presidential debates should be institutionalized.
2. The Democratic and Republican parties should make firm commitments to future presidential debates as an important contribution to the public interest.
3. The Democratic and Republican parties should establish a bipartisan Presidential Debates Organization now to administer the 1988 debates.
4. The Presidential Debates Organization should have an Advisory Committee composed of a broad, diverse group of public citizens.
5. The Presidential Debates Organization should set the time, number, and location of presidential debates for the 1988 campaign well in advance, preferably in 1987.
6. At least three presidential debates, and one vice presidential debate, should be scheduled. The debates should begin immediately after Labor Day and should conclude by the third week of October.
7. The use of journalists as questioners should be eliminated in favor of allowing the candidates the opportunity of questioning each other.
8. The question of third-party candidates should not undermine the goal of institutionalizing debates between the Democratic and Republican party candidates. (That question can be considered, in all its complexity, in the context of a guaranteed minimum of debates between the major party candidates.)
9. To insure third party access, other avenues, such as free television time for candidates, should be explored and adopted.
10. As in 1960, Congress should suspend Section 315 of the Federal Communications Act for presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 1988 election.

1987: On February 18, 1987, the chairs of the two major political parties formally announced the existence of a 10 member Commission on Presidential Debates which they would co-chair. The Commission was established to sponsor vice presidential and presidential debates.

1988 Debates: Both the League of Women Voters and the Commission on Presidential Debates announced dates for fall 1988 debates. When the League rejected the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding that the campaigns handed to both the Commission and the League, and the Commission agreed to its terms, the Commission became the sponsor of the two presidential and one vice presidential debate of 1988. Of particular concern to the League was the absence of the chance for follow-up questions.

APPENDIX THREE YOUNGEST GROUP LEAST LIKELY TO WATCH MOST OF DEBATE

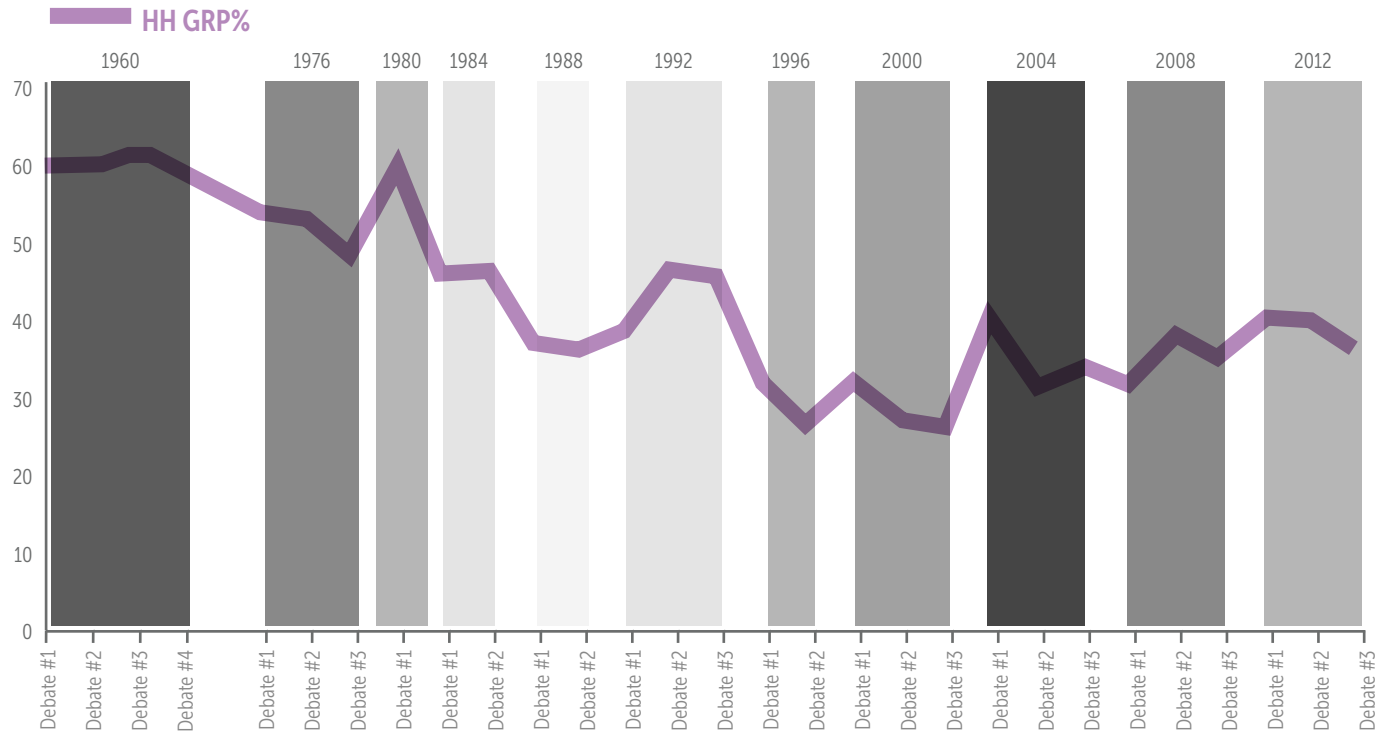
2012 Debate Viewing—Length

By Age (Among Debate Viewers) (N=892)	18-34 (A)	35-49 (B)	50-64 (C)	65+ (D)	Total
All/Most (collapsed)	75% ^{BCD}	88% ^A	85% ^A	89% ^A	84%
Whole debate	42% ^D	41% ^D	45% ^D	59% ^{ABC}	46%
Most of the debate	33% ^B	47% ^{AD}	39% ^D	30% ^{BC}	38%
Some/a little (collapsed)	25% ^{BCD}	11% ^A	15% ^A	11% ^A	16%
Just some of the debate	21% ^{BCD}	7% ^A	12% ^A	10% ^A	13%
Just a little of the debate	4%	4% ^D	3%	1% ^B	3%

A,B,C and D represent each age category, respectively. The letter placed beside a data point means that the referent age category is statistically different from the data point age category. "A" refers to 18-34, "B" refers to 35-49, "C" refers to 50-64, and "D" refers to 65+. For example, if there is a letter "C" next to a number under the 18-34 category (A), then that means that the difference between the number in the C category and the A category is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$).

When you watch the debate do you usually watch the whole debate from the beginning to end, most of the debate, just some of the debate, or just a little of the debate? Data from survey conducted by Peter D. Hart and TargetPoint Consulting. Survey conducted May 15-May 21, 2014. Margin of Error +/- 3.28%.

APPENDIX FOUR 1960-2012 HOUSEHOLD RATINGS TRENDS: PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES



Prepared for: Annenberg Public Policy Center
Source: Nielsen Npower

Note: HH GRP%= The sum of HH ratings for all telecasts of the particular debate

APPENDIX FIVE

ELEMENTS IN MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING

Focus of Debates

From 1988 to 2012, the debates concentrated on two broad issue areas: domestic policy/economic policy and foreign policy/national security.

In 2012, the Committee announced specific topics under each issue (not mentioned in MOU) area prior to the debate. For the first presidential debate on domestic policy, topics included economy, health care, the role of government, and governing. For the third presidential debate on foreign policy, they included America's role in the world, war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Israel and Iran, Middle East and terrorism, and rise of China.

Format of Debates

Opening/Closing:

General agreement

- (1) No opening statement by candidate (Exception: 1996)
- (2) A closing statement that does not exceed 2 minutes
- (3) Order determined by a coin toss

Change over time

- (1) The length of a closing statement: 2 minutes (1988-2004) vs 90 seconds (2008)
 - a. In 2012, whether closing statement for the third presidential debate would be 90 seconds or 2 minutes was resolved by a coin toss.

Props & Notes:

General agreement

- (1) Neither candidate shall be permitted to carry in notes or any other materials
- (2) Moderator must interrupt if a candidate uses a prop (2000, 2004)
- (3) Neither candidate may reference or cite any specific individual sitting in a debate audience (2008, 2012)

Neither film footage nor video footage in a debate may be used publicly (1988)

Exception

In 1988, the MOU did not categorically prohibit the use of excerpts. Instead it stipulated that excerpts not be used out of context or in a false or deceptive manner.

Order of Questioning:

General agreement

- (1) The same question is to be asked of each candidate and the order then reversed.
- (2) The order of questioning is determined by a coin toss.
- (3) The winner of a coin toss shall have the option to take the first or second question. The order of closing statement is determined by reversing the order.

Apportioning of Time:

A moderator is responsible for all time limits and shall interrupt when a candidate exceeds the permitted time limit.

Specific time segments were agreed to in 2008 and 2012.

- 2008: 9 nine-minute segments
(2 minutes for each candidate + 5 minutes for open discussion)
- 2012: 6 fifteen-minute segments
(2 minutes for each candidate)

Direct Address/Questioning:

In general direct candidate-to-candidate questioning has been banned. Exceptions are made for rhetorical questions. In 2008, this agreement was in force only in the second presidential debate (town hall).

Town Hall Audience Questions:

General agreement

- (1) A moderator shall exercise full authority to select the questions from the audience and expand discussion

Change over time

- (1) Earlier debates allowed moderator to ask brief follow-up questions to clarify.
- (2) Audience is asked to submit questions to the moderator prior to the town hall debate (since 2000).

(3) Prior to the debate, campaigns will be told the method used to select the citizens in the town hall (since 2000).

(4) Moderators are asked not to "coach" the questioners (since 2008).

Exception

In 2008, the moderator used questions submitted on the Internet, which constituted 1/3 of the total questions.

Press Panelist Format (Only applicable to 1988 and 1992):

Besides having a moderator, the presidential debates in 1988 and 1992 had a press panelist format in which selected panelists asked questions of candidates.

General agreement on panelist selection

Each side submits 6 to 10 panelists. When 2 or more possible panelists are agreed upon, these names will be submitted to the Commission which will select one panelist from each list. For the third panelist, the Commission submits a list of 10 possible panelists to each side and then picks one from mutually agreed upon panelists. Each debate will have different panelists.

Panelists were drawn from following institutions.

1988 First Presidential Debate:

Atlanta Constitution, the Orlando Sentinel, ABC News

Second Presidential Debate:

ABC News, Newsweek magazine, NBC News

1992 First Presidential Debate:

The Boston Globe, ABC News, Freedom Forum

Third Presidential Debate:

Reuters, CNN, United Press International

The press panelist format was abandoned after the 1992 debate.

Moderators

Moderator selection rule:

In general each side submits 1-2 possible moderators. When each agrees upon at least 1 possible moderator from the other's list, the name will be submitted to the Commission which will then select moderator for mutually accepted candidate (1988, 1992, 1996).

Candidates have agreed to follow the Commission's recommendation (since 2000).

Number of moderators:

Different moderators for each debate (1988, 1992, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2012)
One moderator for three presidential debates (2000)

Moderator role:

General agreement

The moderator will open the program, monitor length of answers, identify each topic before the questions are asked and ensure that questions are balanced.

Change over time

The 2008 and 2012 MOUs stipulate that the moderator shall not ask the candidates for a “show of hands” or make similar calls for response.

Exception

- (1) The moderator was expected to ask follow-up questions during the second presidential debate. (1992)
- (2) The moderator shall ensure that candidates address at least 16 questions. (2004)

Timing and Debate Locations

The number of days between the debate and the election day (unit: days)

	1st Presidential Debate	2nd Presidential Debate	3rd Presidential Debate	Vice Presidential Debate
1988	44	26	N/A	34
1992	23	19	15	21
1996	30	20	N/A	27
2000	35	27	21	33
2004	33	25	20	28
2008	39	28	20	33
2012	34	21	15	26
Average	34 days	24 days	18 days	29 days

Debate Locations

	Presidential Debates			Vice Presidential Debate
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	
1988	Winston-Salem, NC	Los Angeles, CA	N/A	Omaha, NE
1992	St. Louis, MO	Richmond, VA	East Lansing, MI	Atlanta, GA
1996	Hartford, CT	San Diego, CA	N/A	St. Petersburg, FL
2000	Boston, MA	Winston-Salem, NC	St. Louis, MO	Danville, KY
2004	Coral Gables, FL	St. Louis, MO	Tempe, AZ	Cleveland, OH
2008	Oxford, MS	Nashville, TN	Hempstead, NY	St. Louis, MO
2012	Denver, CO	Hempstead, NY	Boca Raton, FL	Danville, KY

Number of Debates

Except for 1960 when there were four presidential debates and 1988 and 1996 which had two presidential debates, there have been three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate.

Audience and Interactivity

Audience question

Changes in managing audience questions

1992	No specific limitation on audience questions
1996	Moderator is permitted to ask brief follow-ups to clarify ambiguous questions from audience

Restrictions Added Since 2000

2000	(1) Follow-up questions from audience are prohibited (2) Audience shall submit their questions to the moderator before the debate
2004	If any audience member poses a question or makes a statement that is different from the one that the audience member earlier submitted to the moderator, the moderator will cut off the questioner
2008	The moderator shall not ask follow-up questions or comment on questions asked by audience

Audience instruction

Audience is asked not to applaud or participate by any means other than silent observation except as provided by the agreed upon rules of the town hall debate

Audience selection in town hall debate

(1) A certain number of uncommitted voters would be selected by

An independent research firm (1992, 1996, 2000)

Gallup Organization (2004, 2008, 2012)

(2) The number of people in audience

Approximately 250 people (1992, 1996)

Approximately 100-150 people (2000, 2004, 2008)

APPENDIX SIX

AUDIENCE REACTION STUDIES

The only major published study of general election debate audience reactions showed that they are able to affect viewers' perceptions of a candidate. In four experiments testing the impact of audience reaction on viewers' rating of the candidates' debate performance and traits, Fein, Goethals, and Kugler¹⁶ found consistent effects. APPC studies conducted for the Working Group confirm these findings.

Overall Design of the Studies

Participants for the APPC study of the effects of audience reaction in debates were recruited from Amazon's crowd sourcing platform Mechanical Turk which is a web service run by Amazon.com designed to crowd-source Human Intelligence Tasks (HIT). Participants were randomly assigned to condition (around 300 respondents per condition) and either exposed to the actual debate clip with no editing, a clip with debate reactions edited out in a way that looked and sounded natural, or a control/baseline condition with no debate material. To orient those in the control condition to the post-test questions, after exposure all participants were shown a screen shot of both candidates with their names superimposed on their pictures.

Although we randomized conditions, we note that samples collected from Mechanical Turk are not entirely representative of the general U.S. population. So, for example, the demographic profile of the sample (Table 1) shows that the sample is younger, more male, less Black, more Asian, less Hispanic, more highly educated, and more left leaning politically than the general U.S. population. This distribution is consistent across the samples of the two studies reported here and other published studies evaluating Mechanical Turk.

Experiment 1

The first experiment used the 1984 Reagan/Mondale debate clip noted earlier in which Reagan dismissed concerns about his age.

Trewhitt: Mr. President, I want to raise an issue that I think has been lurking out there for 2 or 3 weeks and cast it specifically in national security terms. You already are the oldest President in history. And some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall yet that President Kennedy had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuban missile crisis. Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?

Reagan: Not at all, Mr. Trewhitt, and I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience.

Prolonged audience laughter and applause

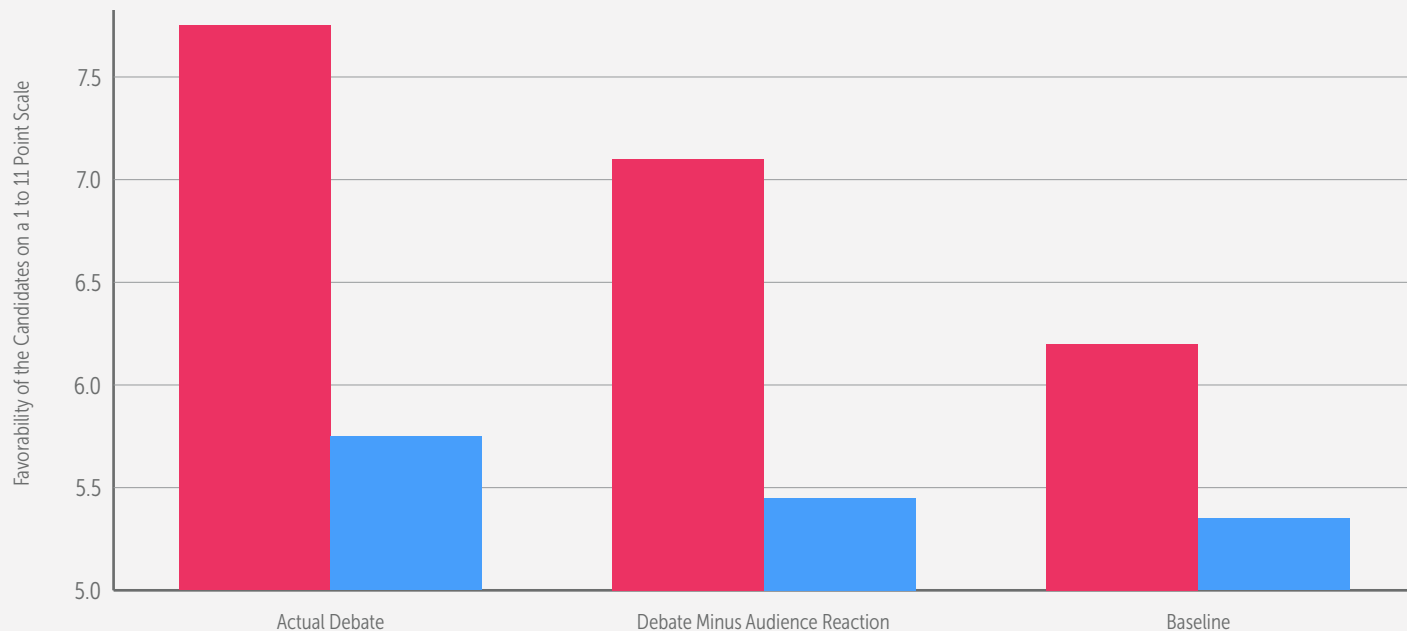
Reagan: If I still have time, I might add, Mr. Trehitt, I might add that it was Seneca or it was Cicero, I don't know which, that said, "If it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the young, there would be no state."

Trehitt: Mr. President, I'd like to head for the fence and try to catch that one before it goes over, but I'll go on to another question.

Participants randomized to the first condition were shown the clip in its entirety including the audience laughter. Those randomized to the second condition saw the same clip with the audience laughter edited out. (The video faded out after Reagan said "youth and inexperience" and faded back in before he said "it was Seneca.") Those randomized into the third condition were not exposed to any of the debate clips.

After viewing the clips the respondents were asked to rate the favorability of the candidates on a one (very unfavorable) to eleven (very favorable) scale. Figure 1 charts the results of audience reaction on the favorability of the candidates. Exposure to the debate clip with the full audience reaction significantly affected the favorability

Figure 1. The impact of debate audience reaction on the favorability of Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale



of both candidates compared to baseline. As one would expect, the impact is much greater for Reagan than for Mondale.

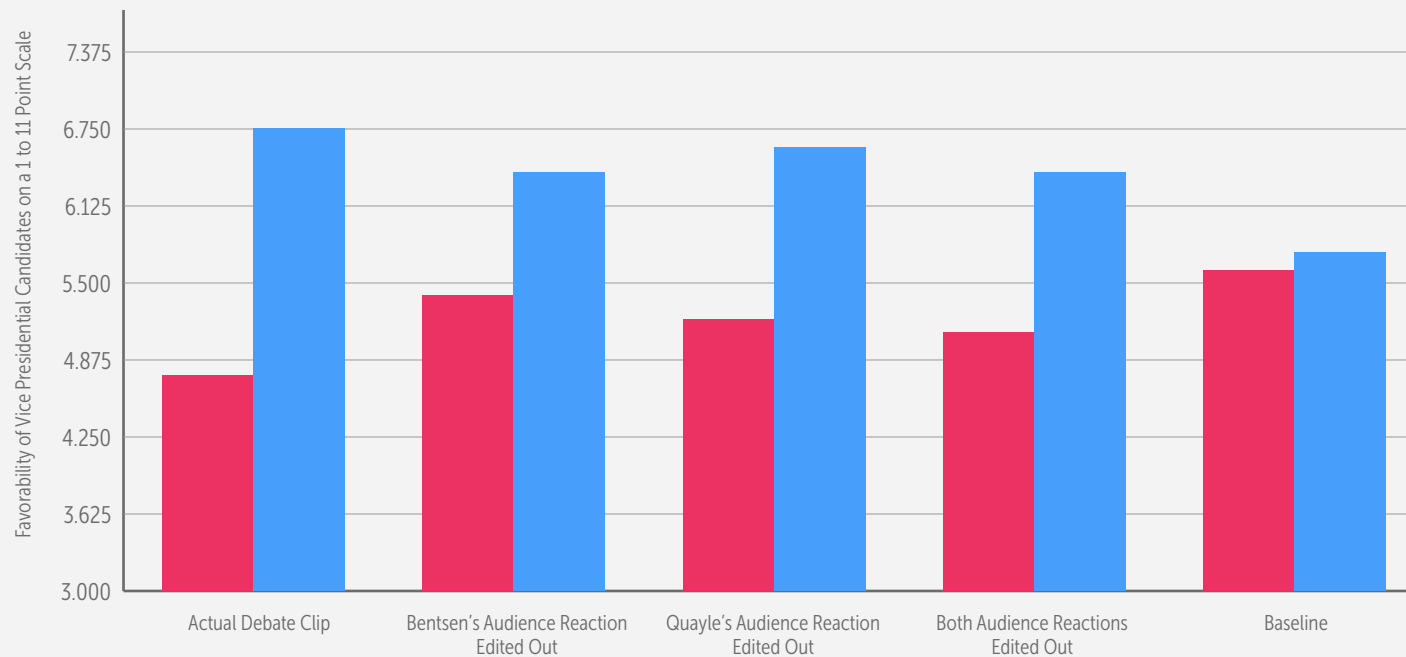
Experiment 2

The stimulus for our second experiment is an exchange from the October 5, 1988 debate between Republican Vice President Nominee Dan Quayle and Democrat Lloyd Bentsen:

Dan Quayle: I have far more experience than many others that sought the office of vice president of this country. I have as much experience in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency. I will be prepared to deal with the people in the Bush administration, if that unfortunate event would ever occur.

Judy Woodruff: Senator Bentsen.

Figure 2: The impact of debate audience reaction on the favorability of Dan Quayle and Lloyd Bentsen



Bentsen: Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy. (Prolonged audience shouts and applause) What has to be done in a situation like that is to call in the -

Woodruff: (To audience) Please, please, once again you are only taking time away from your own candidate.

Quayle: That was really uncalled for, Senator. (Audience shouts and applause)

Bentsen: You are the one that was making the comparison, Senator - and I'm one who knew him well. And frankly I think you are so far apart in the objectives you choose for your country that I did not think the comparison was well-taken.

The design of this experiment is similar to the first but with five conditions instead of three: Condition 1 is the actual clip with no edits, condition 2 edits out the audience reaction to Bentsen, condition 3 edits out the reaction elicited by Quayle, condition 4 edits out the reactions to both candidates.

Audience reactions had a significant impact on the favorability and perceptions of the candidates (Figure 2). Those in the baseline condition rated Bentsen only slightly more favorably than Quayle while the difference in ratings in the full clip condition is a little over 2 scale points. When the reaction to Bentsen is edited out, his favorability drops and Quayle's increases. When the reaction to Quayle's is edited out in condition 3, his ratings are lower than in condition 2 but higher than condition 1 suggesting that this audience response had a negative effect on reception of the Republican vice presidential nominee. All differences are statistically significant.

NOTES

1. Chaired by Anita Dunn and Beth Myers, the Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group included: Robert Barnett, Bob Bauer, Joel Benenson, Charles Black, Rick Davis, Benjamin Ginsberg, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ron Klain, Neil Newhouse, Zac Moffatt, Jim Perry, Joe Rospars, Michael Sheehan and Stuart Stevens (for bios and a description of the meetings held by the Working Group, see Appendix One).
2. "General Election Debates: 1960-2012." Presentation by Josephine Holz to the Annenberg Debate Working Group – December 16, 2013 - slide 17
3. Nielsen, NPM, 7/3/14-7/30/14, Mon-Sat 8-11p/Sun 7-11p/A18-49 (000), A18-34 (000). See <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2014/07/31/univision-is-the-1-network-for-the-second-consecutive-july-sweep-among-both-adults-18-49-and-adults-18-34/289148/>. Retrieved August 4, 2014.
4. A 2014 American Press Institute study found that "Among smartphone owners, 78 percent report using their device to get news in the last week. Seventy-three percent of tablet owners use their device to get news. And people with more devices tend to enjoy following the news more...Fully 4 in 10 Americans say they got news in the last week from social media, through platforms such as Twitter or Facebook." <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/personal-news-cycle/>. Retrieved August 4, 2014. An October 2013 Pew survey reported that "Overall, about half of adult Facebook users, 47%, "ever" get news there. That amounts to 30% of the population." <http://www.journalism.org/2013/10/24/the-role-of-news-on-facebook/>. Retrieved August 4, 2014
5. Jones, J. M. (2014, January 8). "Record-High 42% of Americans Identify as Independents." <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx>. Retrieved August 4, 2014.
6. Nielsen report commissioned by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, "General Election Debates: 1996-2012 Dec 9, 2013, p.7.
7. Nielsen report commissioned by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, "General Election Debates: 1996-2012 Dec 9, 2013, p.4.
8. Nielsen report commissioned by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, "General Election Debates: 1996-2012 Dec 9, 2013, p.4.
9. For across time viewership data, see Appendix Three.
10. Edward Hinck, *Enacting the Presidency: Political Argument, Presidential Debates, and Presidential Character* (Westport: Praeger, 1993).
11. David Zarefsky, "Spectator Politics and the Revival of Public Argument," *Communication Monographs* 59, no. 4 (1992): 412.
12. Diana Carlin, Tammy Vigil, Susan Buehler, and Kelly McDonald, *The Third Agenda in U.S. Presidential Debates: DebateWatch and Viewer Reactions, 1996-2004*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2009, 706. Kindle edition.
13. Nielsen report commissioned by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Watching Presidential Debates Live VS. Time-Shifted" Addendum. 03.2014. p. 4
14. Two of the groups were conducted among whites (one younger group and one older group); two with Hispanics (one younger voter session done in English with a Spanish moderator and the other done with older voters in Spanish); the fifth group was conducted among a cross section of all age groups and mixed races.
15. Pew Research and Social Demographic Trends (2014 March 7) "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends." Available at: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood>
16. Fein, S., Goethals, G. R., & Kugler, M. B. (2007). Social influence on political judgments: The case of presidential debates. *Political Psychology*, 28(2), 165-192.

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