Political Knowledge and Exposure to the 2012 US Presidential Debates: Does Debate Format Matter?

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ABSTRACT Extant literature shows a positive link between presidential debates and political knowledge, with findings strongest for low-information voters. Considering presidential debates continue to retain a mass audience, they fulfill an invaluable civic function. Less clear is whether knowledge effects hold across debate formats and agenda topics. Using an experimental method that exposes a sample of undergraduate students to the 2012 US presidential debates, this article explores variance in knowledge effects across formats and topics. We find citizens can learn about issues and candidates but debate format and agenda topics may mediate the effects. We discuss the broader democratic implications of these findings and directions for future debate research.

Mediated presidential debates serve as one of few remaining campaign events with a mass audience. Extant research indicates exposure to debates improves voter knowledge. Less clear is whether these findings hold across debate formats and agenda topics. To date, scholars seldom account for format and agenda topics when testing debate effects. To address this, we propose the following research questions: (1) Do knowledge effects vary according to the particular debate subjects are exposed to? (2) Is variance in knowledge linked to differences in debate format or agenda topics?

Using an experimental method during the 2012 US presidential debates, we test whether debate exposure improves knowledge across debate formats and agenda topics. The findings indicate that citizens learn about issues and candidates but effects are conditional, meaning format and agenda topics may influence voter learning.

INFORMING THE ELECTORATE: THE ROLE OF DEBATES IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Studies have found that exposure to televised presidential debates improves voter knowledge—even among less politically sophisticated viewers (Druckman 2003; Lang and Lang 1978). Scholars have consistently cited a positive relationship between debate exposure and issue-specific political knowledge (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003; Holbrook 1999; Miller and MacKuen 1979). These effects hold for primary and general election debates and across viewer demographics (Benoit and Hansen 2004; Holbrook 1999).

Although isolating the effects of a single campaign event over time poses methodological challenges, knowledge effects, nonetheless, occur at the peak of the campaign cycle—weeks or days before the election. Exposure also results in indirect knowledge effects; debate viewing increases consumption of campaign news (Cho and Choy 2011). Debates mitigate the effects of a widening knowledge gap, meaning low information voters have the most to gain from exposure (Holbrook 2002; Lanoue 1992; McLeod, Bybee, and Durall 1982). Debates also bring clarity and reinforcement to vote choice (Cho and Ha 2012; Lanoue 1992; Schrott and Lanoue 2013). Debates are further legitimized by the strong link between knowledge and efficacy (Benoit, McKinney, and Stephenson 2002; Dolan and Holbrook 2001; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). What's more, debates may hold even greater value in today's competitive media environment as shifting news values increase the infotainment focus of campaign news coverage (Cohen 2008; Prior 2005).

WHY FORMAT MAY AFFECT KNOWLEDGE

US presidential debates are shaped by differences in agenda topics (i.e., domestic policy vs. foreign policy) and format. Town hall formats solicit questions directly from the audience and set a mixed policy agenda. Designed to make the process more inclusive, the town hall format transfers responsibility for the debate agenda from the press to the public. This agenda-setting transfer yields observable differences in debate content.

Analyses of presidential debates demonstrate a press debate agenda unreflective of the public agenda (Benoit and Hansen 2001; Jackson-Beeck and Meadow 1979). These findings are unsurprising

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considering that profit-driven pressures depress policy content in campaign coverage (Dunaway 2008). When the public has access to candidates, they address a wider scope of policy issues (Just et al. 1996; Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco 2000). Furthermore, knowledge effects are found only for issues actually set in the debate agenda (Zhu, Milavsky, and Biswas 1994).

The general election presidential debates follow one of three agenda topics: domestic policy, foreign policy, and the mixed agenda (via town hall format). These topics are of interest because voter knowledge of domestic policy issues far exceeds that of foreign policy matters (Almond 1960; Bennett 1996). Considering these distinctions between domestic policy, foreign policy, and mixed-agenda debates, we propose the following research questions: (1) Do knowledge effects vary according to the particular debate subjects are exposed to? (2) Is variance in knowledge linked to differences in format or agenda topics?

METHOD

Using an experimental method, we explore these questions in the context of the 2012 US presidential elections. Our convenience sample (*N=81*) of undergraduate students from[1] a large southern university uniquely captures a group of voters—young voters (*M = 19.1*) and primarily female (69%) voters—who are less politically knowledgeable and engaged than other segments of the electorate (Delli Caprini and Keeter 1996). The sample leans conservative, scoring a mean of 3.69 on a 5-point ideology scale; 53% identified Republican, 12% Democrat, and 35% independent. Participants were assigned to one of three treatment groups: (1) the October 3 domestic policy debate (D1); (2) the October 16 mixed agenda/town hall debate (D2); and (3) the October 22 foreign policy debate (D3).

Subjects in all treatment groups watched the debates in their entirety, live on the same network: NBC. The controlled environment simulates a typical debate viewing experience. Participants were arranged in a group setting, provided with food, and allowed to engage in (silent mode) text messaging. Participants were prohibited from discussing the debate or questionnaires. Participants received identical pretest and posttest questionnaires measuring political knowledge specific to the 2012 presidential campaign; the knowledge indexes included questions pertaining to policy issues and candidate stances. Pretest questionnaires were administered immediately before the debate went live. Participants remained at the experiment location from the start of the pretest questionnaire through the full debate and posttest questionnaire; participants did not have access to any other news media leading up to the posttest questionnaire and were not exposed to any pre- or postdebate coverage.[2]

Campaign knowledge (α = .66) is measured as a 10-item index inclusive of five domestic policy and five foreign policy questions. Domestic policy questions were taken from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012 Campaign Knowledge survey; foreign policy questions were adapted from a *Washington Post* article outlining key platforms of both candidates. The 10-point index highlights key policy distinctions between Obama and Romney (see Appendix). For a more nuanced analysis, we parse out separate domestic (α = .61) and foreign policy indexes (α = .41) from the full index because previous literature suggests Americans know far less about foreign policy issues (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). To enhance the precision of our inferences and provide greater confidence that our findings do not result from unbalanced samples, we also include a regression model accounting for a number of covariates (see table 4).[3]

RESULTS

Difference in Means

Consistent with prior research, debate exposure did improve aggregate levels of political knowledge (see table 1); however we find inconsistent effects when we examine the data more closely. Posttest domestic policy knowledge levels (*M* = 3.77, *SD* = 1.27) marginally declined from the pretest measure (*M* = 3.79, *SD* = 1.33), although the effect was not statistically significant. Posttest foreign policy knowledge gains (*M* = 2.14, *SD* = 1.19) from the pretest measure (*M* = 1.45, *SD* = 1.19), in contrast, were sizable and statistically different. Thus, knowledge effects from exposure are found for foreign policy issues, $t(80) = {}_{+}5.53$, $p < .01$.

Looking across individual debates (see table 2), we find no significant effects for the October 3 domestic policy debate (D1). For the October 16 mixed agenda/town hall debate (D2) we see no effect on domestic policy knowledge but find modest gains in foreign policy knowledge $t(25) = {}_{+}2.78$, $p < .05$. Further evidence that overall knowledge effects are driven by gains in foreign policy learning rather than domestic issues, we find more substantial overall knowledge effects for the October 22 foreign policy debate (D3), $t(22) = {}_{+}5.62$, $p < .01$. Interestingly, exposure to the foreign policy debate also yielded an up-tick in domestic policy knowledge, $t(22) = {}_{+}2.29$, $p < .05$; however, overall knowledge effects were primarily limited to the foreign policy index, $t(23) = {}_{+}6.31$, $p < .01$.[4]

Thus, overall knowledge effects of debate exposure appear to be a product of foreign policy learning and exposure to the foreign policy debate.

Regression Models

The first model examined the full knowledge index, demonstrating that exposure to the October 22 foreign policy debate

Table 1

Knowledge Difference of Means (full sample)

	N	PRE MEAN	POST MEAN	MEAN	SD	95% CI LOWER	95% CI UPPER	T	DF
Full Index	80	5.24	5.92	+.68	1.54	+.33	+1.02	+3.95**	79
Domestic Index	80	3.79	3.77	−.01	.91	−.21	+0.18	−0.12	79
Foreign Index	81	1.45	2.14	+.69	1.12	+.44	+0.94	+5.53**	80

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

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(D3) was a strong predictor of overall campaign knowledge acquisition, $\beta = .29$, $p < .05$. However, we find no significant effects resulting from exposure to the first two debates. Thus, overall knowledge effects of debate exposure appear to be a product of foreign policy learning and exposure to the foreign policy debate. In parsing out the Domestic Policy Index and the Foreign Policy Index, we find that none of the general election debates increased domestic policy learning. Once again, however, we find that exposure to the October 22 foreign policy debate (D3) is a strong predictor of foreign policy knowledge acquisition, $\beta = .39$, $p < .01$ (see table 3).

Inclusive of a number of covariates, our final three regression models reinforce our findings (see table 4). We find that the foreign policy debate (D3) performs as a strong predictor of overall knowledge acquisition, $\beta = .36$, $p < .01$. Because no effects are found for the domestic policy index, we find that knowledge gains are largely confined to foreign policy issues resulting from foreign policy debate exposure, $\beta = .44$, $p < .01$.

Table 2

Knowledge Difference of Means by Debate Type

	N	PRE MEAN	POST MEAN	MEAN	SD	95% CI	95% CI	T	DF
Full Index									
D1:Domestic policy	31	5.45	5.48	+.03	1.19	−.41	+0.47	+0.15	30
D2: Mixed/town hall	26	5.15	5.65	+.50	1.52	+.11	+1.11	+1.66	25
D3: Foreign policy	23	5.01	6.79	+1.71	1.48	+1.01	+2.33	+5.62**	22
Domestic Index									
D1:Domestic policy	31	3.83	3.71	−.13	.99	−.49	+.23	−.72	30
D2: Mixed/town hall	26	3.81	3.65	−.15	1.01	−.56	+.25	−.78	25
D3: Foreign policy	23	3.71	4.00	+.29	.62	+.03	+.55	+2.29*	22
Foreign Index									
D1:Domestic policy	31	1.61	1.77	+.16	.73	−.11	+.43	+1.22	30
D2: Mixed/town hall	26	1.34	2.00	+.65	1.19	+17	+1.13	+2.78*	25
D3: Foreign policy	24	1.37	2.79	+1.42	1.10	+.95	+1.88	+6.31**	23

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Political Knowledge OLS Regression Models

	FULL INDEX			DOMESTIC INDEX			FOREIGN INDEX		
VARIABLE	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
(Constant)	5.484	.352		3.710	.230		1.774	.203	
D2:Mixed/town hall	.170	.521	.040	−.056	.341	−.021	.226	.300	.089
D3:Foreign Policy	1.308	.533	.298*	.290	.349	.105	1.017	.307	.391**
R^2		.080			.013			.130	
F		3.381			0.525			5.826	

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Table 4

Political Knowledge OLS Regression Models (w/Covariates)

	FULL INDEX			DOMESTIC INDEX			FOREIGN INDEX		
VARIABLE	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
(Constant)	2.21	.760		1.516	.521		.797	.526	
Conservative	−.310	.132	−.177*	−.145	.092	−.132	−.161	.094	−.152
Gender	.228	.345	.054	−.075	.228	−.028	.165	.256	.064
Race	−.504	.413	−.092	−.442	.283	−.128	.014	.302	.004
D2:Mixed/town hall	.501	.337	.118	.077	.228	.029	.336	.247	.131
D3:Foreign policy	1.565	.333	.364**	.353	.226	.131	1.146	.242	.442**
General Knowledge	.267	.144	.154	.061	.096	.056	.256	.104	.245*
Pre-knowledge level	.663	.077	.716**	.696	.077	.746**	.499	.101	.501**
R^2		.674			.609			.530	
F		21.22			16.03			11.61	

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

While citizens learn from presidential debates, these findings suggest effects are conditional rather than uniform. Thus, the democratic benefits of debates are perhaps overstated or confined to specific topics or formats. Future research should place greater emphasis on identifying conditions that foster learning outcomes. Two of the three 2012 general election debates were ineffective in improving learning. Moreover, little domestic policy learning transpired across debates. Although this null finding may result from a small sample size, future research should continue testing this relationship considering that citizens place a high value on economic and social issues (Carlin et al. 2008; Patterson 1980; Hillygus and Henderson 2010).[5]

For those scholars disheartened by levels of public knowledge on foreign policy issues, our results offer some optimism. While Americans are largely disinterested in public affairs programming, particularly foreign affairs, they learn about these issues when exposed to debates focused on a foreign policy agenda. Our findings on foreign policy

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learning are both substantive and significant. These results are worth heeding attention to for two reasons: (1) the infrequency in which debates are reserved for foreign policy and (2) the ongoing discourse on whether to hold foreign policy debates.[6] We find that foreign policy debates are not only beneficial but perhaps more so than domestic policy debates.

Because town hall debates are more reflective of public information needs, one may assume they are more informative; however, town hall moderators have adopted a more active role in setting the agenda by interjecting with their own questions. When press moderators weave their own questions into the town hall debates, less time is devoted to the public agenda. This is one possible explanation for the lack of knowledge effects found for the October 16 town hall debate (D2). Our results suggest that agenda topic is more influential in improving public knowledge than debate format.

An explanation for these foreign policy knowledge findings perhaps lies in ceiling limitations. We know Americans bring less foreign policy expertise to the table (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The media also devote more coverage to domestic issues than foreign policy (Wells and King 1994). Citizens may learn more from foreign policy debates simply because they hold lower baselines of knowledge. Because our study is limited to a single election and a convenience sample, we should temper these findings. In providing treatment to live debates we enhance external validity at the cost of internal validity. Thus, replication is necessary before making more definitive inferences. Despite limitations, this study justifies increased research of debate formats and agendas.

Debate exposure increases knowledge—but only on policy matters raised in the debate (Zhu, Milavsky, and Biswas 1994). Foreign policy agendas possibly contain more policy discourse. Regardless, varying knowledge effects across debate topics are worth further examination because they serve an educational purpose beyond the scope of election news (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988). Presidential debates are a source of campaign information with tremendous civic potential. As format evolves, scholarship must keep pace. This study provides a preliminary step in demonstrating that learning from debates is conditional. The next phase of research should identify conditions of learning by parsing out effects across formats and agendas. The more media coverage emphasizes the horserace, strategy, and tactics of elections over more substantive topics, the more crucial debates are in informing voters on policy matters. ■

NOTES

1. The racial breakdown of the sample is as follows: 78% Caucasian, 10% African-American, 5% Latin American/Hispanic, 3% Asian and 3% mixed race.
2. One of the limitations here is that the delayed reaction to the debate may not be the same as the immediate reaction (see Lang and Lang 1978). Alternatively, we avoid the measurement problems cited by Prior (2012) involved in self-reported measures of debate exposure.
3. Our covariates include a variable for general political knowledge using a four-item index ($\alpha = .45$) adapted from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) as well as a covariate for pre-debate knowledge levels for each model's respective knowledge index (e.g. full index, domestic policy, and foreign policy). Interest in politics, or motivation (Chaffee 1978), ideology, race, and gender also served as covariates in our models. Political efficacy, campaign news consumption, and media trust were initially included but bore no statistically significant influence on campaign knowledge and were later omitted.
4. Diversions concerning education and the economy during the Oct. 22 foreign policy debate may explain the unexpected bump in domestic policy knowledge. See www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/romney-obama-spar-over-ed_n_2003999.html
5. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 81% of Americans say the presidency should primarily focus on domestic issues, while 9% say the presidency should primarily focus on foreign policy. See http://www.people-press.org/2012/01/23/public-priorities-deficit-rising-terrorism-slipping/
6. For ongoing debate over holding presidential foreign policy debates, see http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/10/22/we-shouldnt-have-a-foreign-policy-debate/; http://themonkeycage.org/2012/10/22/why-the-foreign-policy-debate-matters/

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APPENDIX: Knowledge Measures

2012 Domestic issues measures

1. Which presidential candidate is pro-life, that is, supports restricting access to abortion in most cases? (Obama, **Romney**, Both, Neither).
2. Which presidential candidate has expressed a desire to repeal healthcare reform legislation? (Obama, **Romney**, Both, Neither).
3. Which presidential candidate supports allowing many illegal immigrants who were brought to the US as children to remain in the country? (**Obama**, Romney, Both, Neither).
4. Which presidential candidate opposes allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally? (Obama, **Romney**, Both, Neither).
5. Which presidential candidate supports raising taxes on income over $250,000? (**Obama**, Romney, Both, Neither).

2012 Foreign issues measures

1. Which presidential candidate has promised to increase spending on missile defense? (Obama, **Romney**, Both, Neither).
2. Which presidential candidate supports NATO's plan to withdraw combat forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014? (Obama, Romney, **Both**, Neither).
3. Which presidential candidate has called Palestinian statehood a priority? (**Obama**, Romney, Both, Neither).
4. Which presidential candidate has called Russia "our number one geopolitical foe"? (Obama, **Romney**, Both, Neither).
5. Which presidential candidate offended British officials when he suggested London was not prepared to host the 2012 Olympics? (Obama, **Romney**, Both, Neither).

Note: correct answers in bold type face.

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