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## The rules of engagement : what formats, moderators, and news values tell us about the content of electoral debates

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THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: WHAT FORMATS, MODERATORS,  
AND NEWS VALUES TELL US ABOUT  
THE CONTENT OF ELECTORAL DEBATES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by

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## ABSTRACT

U.S. democracy is one of the most inclusive in the world, yet levels of political knowledge and engagement remain markedly low. Moreover, the news media's coverage of elections inadequately informs and engages the public. These shortcomings underscore the importance of campaign events like electoral debates – events that are designed not only to educate the public but also to provide the public a more active role in the electoral process. Journalistic news norms and values wield tremendous power over campaign news agendas – including post-debate coverage – but the extent to which they influence debate agendas remains unclear. Given what we know about patterns of campaign news coverage, a closer look at mediated debate agendas is warranted.

To date, no comprehensive data on debate agendas exist. With a unique sample of debate questions spanning 52 years of electoral campaigns – including general election, primary, and state-level debates – this content analysis is the first of its kind to examine the debate agenda over time and across electoral contexts. This dissertation determines not only the extent to which news norms and routines influence electoral debate agendas but also the conditions (e.g. rules, formats, moderators, question sources) predictive of particular debate questions. In short, this study provides the first systemic insight into what influences the debate agenda and why we should care about the questions posed to the candidates.

The findings presented herein suggest that debates are considerably more policy-driven than campaign news coverage; however, content and tone of agendas vary according to format rules, moderator characteristics, and question source. I find that local journalists offer a more substantive and less attack-driven agenda than members of the national press corps; that, contrary to expectations, nonprofit journalists are actually less substantive than commercial press

in the debate questions they generate; and public influence through town hall formats does little to help nor hinder the substance of debate agendas. These findings are discussed in a broader democratic context, and the research presented herein offers organizers of these events best practices for future debates and recommendations for preserving their relevance and substance.

## CHAPTER 1

### EMPTY ELECTIONS: THE PROBLEM WITH CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

U.S. democracy is one of the most inclusive in the world, yet the electoral process is met with tepid enthusiasm at best. For those subscribing to normative conceptions of democracy, these are troubling times indeed. Scholars have cited low levels of political engagement, knowledge and efficacy among the electorate. Compared to other Western democracies, levels of knowledge and electoral engagement remain markedly low (Fishkin, 1991; Putnam, 2000; Patterson, 2003). What's more, low levels of voter knowledge persist across recent decades, despite increasing education and expanding sources of public affairs news (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Paralleling these trends, scholars have also found that the news media's coverage of elections inadequately inform and engage the public (Patterson, 1994; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). These findings underscore the importance of campaign events like electoral debates – events that are designed not only to educate the public but also to provide the public a more active role in the electoral process.

Journalistic news norms and values wield tremendous power over campaign news agendas – including post-debate coverage – but the extent to which they influence debate agendas remains unclear. Given what we know about patterns of campaign news coverage, a closer look at mediated electoral debates is warranted. To date, no comprehensive data on debate agendas exist. The following research aims to not only illuminate the nuances behind mediated electoral debate agendas but also identify determinants of both superficial question content and substantive, policy-driven content. With a unique sample of debate questions from general election, presidential primary, vice-presidential, and state-level debates spanning 52 years of electoral campaigns, this content analysis is the first of its kind to examine the debate agenda over time and across electoral contexts.



The intent of this dissertation is to determine not only the extent to which news norms and routines influence electoral debate agendas but also the conditions (e.g. rules, formats, moderators) predictive of specific debate content characteristics. In short, this study provides the first systemic insight into what influences the debate agenda and why we should care about the questions posed to the candidates.

### **An Introduction to the Problem**

McChesney (1997) has stated that a healthy democracy demands “an effective system of political communication, broadly constructed, that informs and engages the citizenry, drawing people meaningfully into the polity” (p. 5). Habermas’s (1962) democratic ideals call for a knowledgeable, engaged, and active citizenry. While the news media shoulder the burden of informing and engaging the public, trends in campaign coverage leave much to be desired. Research attributing civic malaise and ignorance to the declining quality of campaign news coverage is vast and empirically-grounded. Extant literature suggests electoral politics are plagued by three key problems: 1) A woefully uninformed electorate; 2) an electorate largely disinterested in politics; and 3) and superficial campaign news coverage. Several scholars (Epstein, 1973; Patterson, 1994; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997 etc.) contend that the first two problems of knowledge and disengagement are strongly connected to the third: the manner in which the news media cover elections. Just how poorly does the news media perform when it comes to covering campaigns? According to some scholars, the news performance is nothing short of abysmal.

First, campaign coverage is growing increasingly negative and hostile (Sabato, 1992; Patterson, 1994; Thompson, 1995). Although exacerbated in today’s more competitive information environment, news professionals have had a long-standing love affair with negative

campaign narratives. Epstein (1973) explained that journalists are simply more interested in “electoral pragmatics” (e.g. strategy, tactics) and the competitive aspects of politics over issues and policy coverage. Mounting media negativity rose sharply in response to the epic public Washington blunders of Watergate and Vietnam, as Rozell (1996) characterized the 1970s as a decade marred by media “cynicism.” This negativity bias, as Patterson (1996) has referred to it as, has numerous implications for campaign coverage. Sabato (1992) has suggested hostile media prevents a number of quality candidates from running for public office; qualified candidates are deterred by the news media’s relentless pursuit of the negative. The work of Groeling and Kernell (1998) demonstrated that the news is more likely to cover negative polls over positive ones. What’s more, emphasis on negativity, strategy, and tactics muscles out more substantive campaign topics in already crowded news agenda.

Related to negativity, the press is often preoccupied with campaign issues over policy (Patterson, 1980). Thus, the adversarial behavior of candidates, attack ads, and conflict are overemphasized to heighten the drama of electoral politics. Perhaps most symptomatic of the press’s preoccupation with campaign issues is the prevalence of horserace coverage, or coverage which focuses on campaign narratives concerning who is “winning” the election. In their over-emphasis of strategic narratives, the news media provide inadequate attention to policy plans, solutions, and platforms. Perhaps even more damning, when the news media do cover policy issues they do so primarily through strategic, game-frames which convey who is leading and who is behind on a particular issue (Fallows, 1996; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000). In other words, while information concerning poll numbers, scandals, and gaffes is abundantly available to the public, policy platforms and candidate views are murkier to the average voter.

Beyond presenting obstacles for the average citizen to acquire basic candidate and policy knowledge, others also argue that the media's increased devotion to horserace frames, strategy, and tactics disengages citizens from the political process altogether (Patterson, 1994; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996/1997; Mutz & Holbrook, 2003; Forgette & Morris, 2006). In fact, the work of Valentino and colleagues has shown that strategy and tactics content not only heighten cynicism and demobilize engagement but also reduces the likelihood of information retention (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). So what is it about the U.S. press that produces such poor coverage of campaigns and elections? Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have pointed to a number of internal and external influences which work in tangent to mold media content. Many of these influences are more a product of institutional norms and routines rather than individual journalist predispositions (Breed, 1995; Sigelman, 1973; Gans, 1979). In other words, the institutional constraints and news values journalists operate within offer better insight into the content and tone reflected in today's campaign coverage.

### **Agenda-Setting, News Norms and Routines**

News norms and routines literature has demonstrated that individual level and institutional level influences can shape the content of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). While journalists may bring their own biases that influence news agendas or color story frames, there is much more empirical evidence to suggest that institutional norms and routines play a larger role in molding content than individual ones (Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1972; Weaver et al., 2007).

Industry norms and routines breed conformity and bring homogeneity to newsrooms and save precious time (Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1973; Gans, 1979). For example, objectivity norms and formulaic inverted pyramid style of newswriting simplifies events and improves the speed in

which journalists can turn around a story. The ease in which strategic campaign stories are compiled partly explains press predispositions to more superficial campaign coverage. These prioritizing routines of journalists play a role in dictating the issues and attributes rendered important by the media's agenda; these prioritizations in turn dictate to the public which issues and attributes are most worthy of campaign consideration. The need to turn stories around quickly also creates the routine of relying on institutional news sources and preferences for reporting manufactured news events that can be covered quickly and cheaply (Tuchman, 1973; Bennett, 1990; Epstein, 1973). This holds some explanatory power over the press's preoccupation with strategic horserace frames since reporting these frames requires less effort than policy-centric news stories (Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn, 2004). Moreover, the negativity in campaign coverage is partly attributed to the news value of conflict. The news value of conflict renders scandals, gaffes, and other missteps along the campaign trail newsworthy for the sheer tension they underscore. Few journalists readily acknowledge these routines, as institutional news norms and routines influence content through more subconscious means.

Sigelman (1973) described news norms and routines as a process of tacit indoctrination where journalists quickly learn how to behave and perform their job duties from a hierarchical system of rewards and punishments. Ryfe (2006) has characterized news norms and routines as "imperatives" rather than directives. In other words, news professionals are conditioned to fulfill these norms and routines by practice embedded in the trade rather than demands from on high. Over time journalists adhere to news norms and routines because there is incentive to behave accordingly; adoption of these routines are necessary to advance in the newsroom. Such advancement can come if and only if news professionals behave according to the conventions of the newsroom hierarchy – pleasing editors, managers, and publishers. According to the work of

Weaver et al. (2007), news professionals report that the news values learned through training of the trade is most influential in shaping what is (and isn't) newsworthy; they have cited a desire to appease supervising editors and managers as the second largest influencer in news criteria. Moreover, news professionals must adopt time-saving routines in response to the deadline-driven environment of the news business. These deadlines are of paramount concern in today's more competitive 24-hour news environment, often resulting in a publish first-edit later mentality.

The work of Arnold (2004), which found that conflict and drama drives news coverage of congress, has demonstrated that the routines and news values of media institutions matter insofar that they exude influence over the agenda set in the news. The seminal studies of McCombs and Shaw (1972), and Funkhauser (1973), demonstrated the agenda-setting power of the news media: issues presented in the media's agenda in turn become issues salient to members of the public. This agenda-setting function also influences which issues are deemed important by the public during campaigns, meaning the public agenda often moves in tandem with the media's election agenda (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Just et al., 1996). In other words, issues neglected by the media are less of a concern for voters than issues emphasized by the media. This relationship persists even in today's more fragmented media landscape, as scholars have also found strong agenda-setting effects for traditional media at both the individual and aggregate level (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008; Shehata & Stromback, 2013). For example, Boydston's (2013) research on the agenda-setting functions of the New York Times found that although political elite and members of the public can influence the media agenda, it is the news agenda that "significantly" affects the priorities of the public and policymakers. The news media's campaign agenda, as scholars have suggested, tends to reflect news values over the information needs of the public.

Tedesco (2000) found that the news media often mimics candidate agendas but, during an election cycle, seldom pays attention to the public agenda (Just et al., 1996). Such effects continue to influence the public affairs issues deemed important by the public; the media's campaign agenda, however, is increasingly focused on campaign pragmatics over policy. This is partly attributed to the conventions of news norms and routines but these troubling coverage trends are also attributed to difficulty in maintaining news audiences in the new media environment.

As Thomas Patterson (1994) stated, news values are simply “at odds” with political values. In part, Patterson attributes this disconnect between news values and political values to lengthy election seasons and insider journalists who, by the latter half of the campaign, find policy issues uninteresting and coverage of policy matters tiresome – even boring. Thus, news coverage grows less focused on policy matters over the course of the campaign season. These same insider celebrity journalists are also who we entrust to facilitate the discourse of presidential debates and high profile state-level debates. The work of Just et al. (1996) has shown how powerful a news media preoccupied with campaign strategy, character, and traits can be. Their research comparing the public and press agendas during the 1992 presidential campaign found that although the public agenda is policy heavy at the start of a presidential campaign, with increased exposure to media coverage of the campaign over time that agenda moves closer in sync with the news agenda; campaign strategy, character and traits concerns climb atop the public's list of priorities as election day inches forward. Even when policy issues are most salient to the public, these issues fall from the public's agenda if the press neglects to grant them adequate attention during the campaign cycle (Just et al., 1996).

But what, exactly, explains or justifies news emphasis on the superficial aspects of elections? And why would an institution designed to inform the public emphasize strategy, tactics, and traits while deemphasizing policy issues that directly affect the lives of voters? To better explain these paradoxes, we must expand our bounds of news norms and routines literature to also examine the interplay between profit-driven pressures and demand-related influences of news content (e.g. Hamilton, 2004; Dunaway, 2008/2011).

### **The New Information Environment: More is Less**

We know that in an era of media abundance, news professionals face more pressure to attract audiences. Increasing media choice exacerbates competitive pressures in the news industry, as traditional media must now compete and grapple with digital platforms of news. The market demands on the news industry do more than heighten competitive pressures; they also influence story content. Such pressures make devoting policy coverage more difficult, as journalists aim to deliver news in a more entertaining format to retain audiences and, ultimately, profits. Thorson (2005) has argued that these shifting news norms threaten the civic value of consuming news, as coverage increasingly focuses on negativity, conflict, and horserace frames. The end result is shifting characteristics in campaign news that are at odds with public interests, arguably, and certainly at odds with democratic interests. McChesney (1997) has suggested that the public agenda should drive the news but that model proves impossible for an institution beholden to corporate interests.

Sparrow (2006) stated that news norms fall under one of three umbrellas: informational, professional, and economic. In other words, journalists are not only keenly aware of the desires of their superiors but also the desires of their audiences. Moreover, economic constraints diminish press freedom as media organizations experience commercialization trends, increased

profit-driven pressures, and emerging media technology. Research has shown that as competitive market pressures increase for a news outlet, we see shifts toward softer, less substantive campaign coverage (Hamilton, 2004; Plasser, 2005; Dunaway, 2008). Hamilton's (2004) work demonstrated that the news media cater content to demographics deemed profitable by advertisers; he noted correlations linking markets with higher rates of women and young people with increasingly levels of soft, entertainment-driven news. Most often, news media offer more entertaining formats of news by adopting more interpretive styles of delivery.

More interpretive styles of reporting not only blur fact with fiction but also break down traditionally-held newsroom distinctions between entertainment and public affairs information (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). The effects of interpretive styles of reporting hold implications for the quality and substance of campaign coverage but also seem to satisfy profit pressures in a competitive media environment. In other words, infotainment is the modern newsroom's response to media abundance and audience fragmentation. The ratings chase, so to speak, plays a more definitive role in content considerations. In fact, the work of Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) has shown that market characteristics are now more influential in shaping the news than institutional forces; they found that market demand explains 20% of variance in news content. News organizations justify more superficial content by pointing to audience research. In sum, market demand is unlikely to improve the substance of the campaign information environment. Although news organizations have always had to satisfy a healthy profit and financial sustainability, the more competitive news environment heightens outlet emphasis on consumer-driven models of news production over civic-minded models. In other words, news organizations are increasingly saying "give the people what they want."



Extant research (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Mutz & Reeves, 2005) has linked negativity and sensationalism to audience appeal; therefore, strategy and tactics stories are perceived as more lucrative than policy topics. Commercial interests also explain the news emphasis of horserace coverage during campaigns, as research shows horserace content is more appealing to the public (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004). Particular ownership structures enhance competitive pressures and, subsequently, influence content. Research has shown that media organizations which function within a (publically traded) corporate ownership model produce less substantive campaign information and more negatively toned news content, as they face more profit-driven pressures than privately or independently-owned media (Dunaway, 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010). Thus, citizen-driven models of the news stand in the shadows of consumer-driven models where the news media operate under economic motives rather than civic considerations (Napoli, 1997; Underwood, 2001).

As a result of heightened profit motives, an increasing emphasis on soft news and infotainment fills air waves and column inches at the expense of policy coverage and candidate platforms (Prior, 2005/2007). An abundance of research has cited horserace coverage as the dominant narrative of campaign news coverage – a narrative known to satisfy profit-driven pressures through perceived audience appeal (McCombs, 2004; Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn, 2004). Most troubling, these less substantive frames purge policy matters from the news agenda since competing agendas trigger a “crowding out” effect (Lang & Lang, 1981). In fact, Entman (2005) contended that “profit maximization” trumps all other news values today. These more entertaining news priorities, however, come at a democratic cost.

Downs (1957) has argued that most citizens are unmotivated to learn about politics and rely on “byproduct” learning resulting from incidental exposure. Yet media fragmentation limits

the likelihood of accidental exposure to substantive campaign information (Prior, 2005/2007). A high-choice media environment means that accidental news exposure is increasingly rare, which widens knowledge and engagement gaps between those preferring entertainment programs and those gravitating to news (Prior, 2005/2007). Scholars have also noted considerable declines in news audiences post-cable (Baum & Kernell, 1999; Prior, 2007). Consequently, the media's news coverage of political campaigns now prioritizes interpretive and more entertaining content, including soft news and horserace coverage.

In satisfying the 24-hour news hole (and increasing competitive pressures) research has shown increasingly interpretive news coverage, coverage chiefly focused on gaffes, scandals, and campaign strategy in the high-choice media environment (Buchanan, 2001; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Cohen, 2008). Patterson (1994) contended that the new media environment provides the news organizations with greater authority over the electoral process, as lengthy election seasons expand the influence of journalists. But Patterson has also suggested that lengthier campaigns do little to improve the information environment; political journalists grow bored with policy issues quickly and, over time, shift the focus of elections away from policy and toward more superficial campaign issues (e.g. strategy and tactics topics). In a recent study analyzing primary coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, scholars found that horserace and campaign strategy stories accounted for nearly half of all news coverage, with online news sources yielding the highest rate of horserace and campaign strategy content at 58% (Belt, Just, & Crigler, 2012 ).<sup>1</sup> What's more, the new media environment does little to improve content diversity across outlets (Hindman, 2009; Boczkowski, 2010). For example, Belt et al. (2012)

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<sup>1</sup> According to Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, negativity and horserace frames prevailed in both the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential election. Pew finds that in the final two months leading up to the election, 53% of news coverage focused on horserace frames in 2008 while 38% of coverage did so during the 2012 election. See [http://www.journalism.org/analysis\\_report/winning\\_media\\_campaign\\_2012](http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/winning_media_campaign_2012).

found uniform campaign coverage across media not only in terms of content but also tone. In other words, the expanding information environment may yield more campaign information but not necessarily more perspectives or more substantive information.

It is also clear that candidates are facing increasing levels of media hostility on the campaign trail, with coverage more focused on gaffes, conflict, and scandal (Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1996; Cohen, 2008; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). Similarly, coverage of U.S. elections is increasingly negative and cynical (Sabato, 1992; Fallows, 1996; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Cohen, 2008; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). Although some research has attributed increased press aggression and adversarial questioning to Vietnam and Watergate (Clayman et al., 2010), much of this negativity is related to overarching trends toward more interpretive (and entertaining) styles of reporting the news (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009). Interpretive reporting styles are perhaps better suited to retain audiences in today's abundant media environment, but the press's interpretations are disproportionally focused on the negative attributes of electoral process – attributes highlighting the scheming, self-interest, and strategy of candidates for public office. This preoccupation with strategy and tactics boosts profits but also depresses political interest and heightens public cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996/1997; Forgette & Morris, 2006).

Competitive pressures and new information sources create a media environment that results in an increasing news emphasis on infotainment and less substantive content that enables – almost encourages – members the public to opt out of more informative campaign coverage. Prior's (2005/2007) work demonstrated that the public routinely experienced accidental exposure to public affairs news through the major television networks but more entertaining media options afforded through cable slashed the network news audience in half, making accidental exposure to

hard news more difficult to come by. This trend creates a substantial political engagement gap between those consuming news and those consuming entertainment media (Prior, 2007).

Nevertheless, Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) contended that debates are ideally suited for informing a public that prefers to “receive” information rather than “seek” information. It is for these reasons that political debates – perhaps the last electoral event to garner a truly mass audience – are invaluable, albeit fragile, campaign resources.

### **The Delicacy of Mediated Debates**

Since the first televised debate between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960, the influence of debates in electoral process has grown exponentially. Every U.S. presidential election since 1976 has incorporated televised debates including a vice presidential debate. Today, the two dominant parties hold anywhere up to a couple dozen primary debates per presidential contest, and they’ve become prominent in state-level elections including congressional and gubernatorial races. Unlike fragmented news campaign coverage, debates attract a collective mass audience. Moreover, exposure to these campaign events offers some meaningful effects; a significant body of literature illuminates the unique civic function of mediated electoral debates.

As addressed in Chapter 2, debate exposure is strongly linked to gains in political knowledge (Miller & MacKuen, 1979; Druckman, 2003; Holbrook, 1999; Drew & Weaver, 1991). Scholars have found positive knowledge effects in exposure to both general election debates and presidential primary debates at the aggregate level – and these effects are strongest for issue and policy specific information (Holbrook, 1999; Benoit & Hansen, 2004). What’s more, debate exposure bridges the knowledge and engagement gap noted by Prior (2007). A number of studies have suggested that knowledge effects are strongest for low-information individuals (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1982; Lanoue, 1992; Holbrook, 2002) – an important

finding considering the ability of debates to continue generating mass appeal even among those generally inattentive to and disinterested in politics. Debate exposure is also known to assist voters in decision-making either through vote choice reinforcement or, less commonly, persuasion (Fridkin et al., 2007; Wald & Lupfer, 1978; Cho & Ha, 2012; Schrott & Lanoue, 2013).

Although debates are arguably more policy focused and substantive than day-to-day news coverage of campaigns, debate question agendas are almost entirely driven by members of the press, despite their penchant for sensational news, infotainment, and campaign strategy emphases. Nonprofit professionals, policymakers, academics, business owners, and others are often absent from agenda-setting process altogether. The town hall format, introduced in 1992, does deliver a greater stake to the public by soliciting questions from a room of undecided voters. Nonetheless, single moderator and press panel formats are overwhelming more common than town hall debates and even debates inclusive of public questions are still bound by the gatekeeping powers of the media moderator. As a result, the topics of discourse in debates do not necessarily mirror the interests and information needs of the voters (see Chapter 3).

The work of Benoit and Hansen (2001) has shown that debate questions are increasingly unreflective of the public agenda. Research on debates as early as the 1960 and 1976 presidential campaigns found that debate agendas were not necessarily inclusive of the issues deemed most salient by the public (Meadow & Jackson-Beeck, 1978). This literature provides compelling evidence that media moderators neglect to satisfy the information needs of the voters. The press influence over debate content is worthy of further scholarly exploration, especially considering that the debate agenda helps shape the public agenda and that the content and tone of debate questions influence the responses of candidates (Lang & Lang, 1978; Carlin, Morris, & Smith,

2001). However, few studies sufficiently address format differences or analyze agendas across election cycles (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; McKinney & Rill, 2009). Furthermore, the proliferation of media fragmentation, diminishing news diets, and increased emphasis on infotainment renders the unique civic function of debates even more relevant today.

Beyond the media environment, a number of debate-specific evolutions are worth noting. In 1988 the nonpartisan Commission on Presidential Debates replaced the League of Women Voters as the regulatory body presiding over general election debates; in 1992 the Commission introduced the first town hall debate; in 1996 the single moderator format replaced multi-journalist press panels; and in 2007 YouTube became the first digital media sponsor of an electoral debate. These evolutions are important considering debates agendas are constrained by media influence, rules, and format distinctions that may very well influence the levels of political learning and/or engagement. At the very least, based on news norms and routines literature and market influences of the news, there's reason to believe that these rule, format, and moderating distinctions influence the agenda topics, tone of questions, and the extent to which policy matters are addressed in debates. For many, electoral debates are necessary campaign events that could stand to see improvement.

Criticisms of mediated campaign debates surfaced long before the new competitive pressures caused by increasing media choice. Former FCC Chairman Newton Minow grew increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of televised debates and their formats over the years (Minow & LaMay, 2008). Historian Daniel Boorstin (1961) claimed debates turned the electoral process into a staged spectacle. Journalist James Fallows (2008) often pointed to a dumbing down effect precipitated by sensational questions and moderator aversion to policy concerns. What's more, the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates – with those listening on the radio

asserting Nixon had won the debates while television viewers insisted Kennedy performed better – adds teeth to Neil Postman’s (1985) assertion that television in the campaign process equates to “image” politics run amuck. In fact, Postman even quipped that a “fat” candidate can no longer be elected president in the era of televised campaigns.

That being said, debates fulfill a necessary public service by providing invaluable campaign information to the public (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). Yet, the gatekeepers of the agenda are members of the press, often journalists from commercial media operating under indoctrinated news norms and routines and also under competitive market demands to make debates entertaining campaign events. Media moderators are charged with the task of facilitating educational debate discourse but also generating mass appeal and high ratings. This intersection between the news values of campaign coverage and the democratic values of the electoral process is at the core of scholarly criticism concerning mediated debates (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Benoit & Hansen, 2001; Fallows, 2008; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011) and also drives the research presented herein. In building the only dataset containing every question ever asked in a televised general election debate – along with subsamples of questions from other electoral contexts – this study provides the first systemic insight into what influences the debate agenda and why we should care about the questions posed to the candidates.

### **Scope of the Study**

We know from agenda-setting research that the public agenda often moves in tandem with the media’s agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Funkhauser, 1973). By emphasizing some issues over others, the media builds an agenda that conveys to the public which issues are worthy of attention in any given election. According to McCombs (2004), media agendas are shaped by their sources, competing media, and news norms and routines. Media agendas also persuade the

public to evaluate candidates on issues and traits rendered salient by their prominence in campaign news coverage; these agenda-setting effects extend to statewide elections as well (McCombs, 2004).

In that same vein, the debate agenda also moves the public agenda (Swanson & Swanson, 1978; Lang & Lang, 1978; Carlin et al, 2009). Thus, a policy heavy debate agenda is more likely to yield a policy-minded public. For example, those exposed to policy-framed news coverage are more likely to engage in policy-based reasoning (Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012). Debates educate and engage citizens in elections and may mitigate the policy void left by campaign news coverage from a news media more concerned with superficial narratives and profit pressures. That being said, learning cannot occur for issues absent from the debate agenda (Zhu, Milavsky, & Biswas, 1994). It is these reasons which render debate question agendas ripe for research, particularly since election-specific findings to date suggest content may vary considerably among debate formats, moderator characteristics, or other electoral variables.

Despite the fact electoral debates are not uniform campaign events, scholars neglect to fully address format and moderator variables when researching debate agendas and effects (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; McKinney & Rill, 2009). Extant literature has routinely analyzed debates through the limited lens of a single election. Scholars must stay abreast of format and media influence, particularly as new media becomes a more permanent fixture in the electoral debate process. Since the CNN/YouTube debates in 2007, digital and social media now influences debate format through sponsorship practices and new interactive affordances that provide the public with new avenues for participation. Social and digital media involvement may enhance or



alter the roles of traditional media and/or public in setting the debate agenda and renders format research even more prescient as these sponsorship opportunities go mainstream.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, a more nuanced understanding of how social and digital media influences debate content may help settle whether new media offer a more inclusive approach to democracy, as some scholars caution that technology has either heightened inequities in political participation or reinforced existing inequalities (Papacharissi, 2002; Hindman, 2009; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). As Williams and Delli Carpini (2011, p. 89) suggested, “For all its civic and political promise, the internet is better analogized to a shopping mall than a town hall.”

To date, no comprehensive data on debate agendas exist. The following research aims to not only illuminate the nuances behind mediated electoral debate agendas but also identify determinants of both superficial question content and substantive, policy-driven content. With a unique sample of debate questions from general election, presidential primary, vice-presidential, gubernatorial, and Senate debates spanning 52 years of electoral campaigns, this content analysis is the first of its kind to examine the debate agenda over time and across numerous electoral contexts. The intent of this dissertation is to determine not only the extent to which news norms and routines influence electoral debate agendas but also the conditions (e.g. rules, formats, moderators) predictive of specific debate content characteristics.

Moving forward, identifying the debate variables associated with substantive and policy-focused question content will help discern which rules, moderating characteristics, and formats are best suited for educating the electorate. These findings may bear strong implications for democracy, especially considering increased fragmentation, the diminishing likelihood of accidental news exposure/byproduct learning, and the shortcomings of campaign news coverage.

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<sup>2</sup> Facebook partnered with NBC to sponsor a primary debate in 2012; Twitter partnered with the GOP to sponsor a 2012 primary debate; and MySpace teamed with MTV and the Associated Press in a 2008 debate.

As debate criticism continues, media trust erodes, and pioneering debate formats emerge through social and digital media, this research provides best practices for journalists involved in the moderating process and assists news professionals and debate sponsors in crafting responsible debate agendas. Moreover, the results presented herein should also pique the interest of candidates and campaigns involved in the negotiating process of debate rules and formats.

According to Bennett (2011), spontaneity is the most feared campaign element for a candidate running for public office. The debate negotiating process is a complex give-and-take between two or more campaigns in an effort to mitigate spontaneity in a debate. Campaigns fight feverishly for specific rules, formats, topics – and moderators – in an effort to minimize exposure to weaknesses and display candidate strengths (Farah, 2004). To date, little is known about whether and how rules (e.g. response time or debate length), moderator characteristics, sponsorship, or formats influence question tone and content. If candidates are privy to empirical data across electoral contexts, the results presented herein may serve as a unique resource to the strategic communication goals of candidates and their campaigns. Moreover, knowledge of how journalists across media and other defining traits operate in the debate context provides campaigns better resources for predicting debate topics and tone. Thus, such research may result in more strategically-minded or better prepared candidates.

In sum, journalistic news norms and values wield tremendous power over campaign news agendas – including post-debate coverage – but the extent to which they influence debate agendas remains unclear. Given what we know about patterns of campaign news coverage, a closer look at mediated electoral debates is warranted.

## **Chapter Overview**

In Chapter 2 I introduce a historical overview of mediated debates before synthesizing the effects literature of debates, beginning with the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates to the contemporary electoral contexts of today. This chapter outlines the civic benefits of mediated debates including gains in public knowledge and political engagement in the campaign process. In Chapter 3 I synthesize existing research that offers a more critical perspective on debates in the campaign process. This chapter calls attention to flaws in existing debate structures, underscoring the power journalists wield over the question agenda while also drawing attention to scholarship demonstrating key content distinctions among formats. This chapter highlights competing interests of public vs. press debate questioners and demonstrates the need to expand debate research by including format and moderator variables to capture a more complete picture of media influence on debate content. In addition, this chapter introduces the research questions driving the analysis.

Chapter 4 details my methodological approach; I outline the stages of quantitative content analysis necessary for addressing the research questions of interest and provide sampling particulars, descriptive statistics, and briefly introduce the concepts and measures used in various regression models to test the hypotheses. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 cover four self-contained results sections of the dissertation. Each results chapter details the conceptualizations behind the variables of interest for that respective chapter, narrowly tailored literature that drives expectations and relationships, and an explanation of statistical models.

Chapter 5 examines the extent of agenda convergence transpiring by illuminating the sources cited in debate questions – and the implications these citations hold for influencing question content and tone. Chapter 6 focuses on content variables, examining determinants of

hard vs. soft news questions; and policy vs. campaign issues content. Chapter 6 addresses *tone* variables, identifying the determinants of question cynicism as well as clash and attack questions. Lastly, Chapter 8 explores the influence of social media sponsorship in electoral debates and how these debates may differ in terms of content, tone, and agenda convergence. Furthermore, this chapter draws comparisons between questions asked in the presence of the candidates and those submitted virtually via email, YouTube, instant messenger, and other digital platforms. These social media findings will serve to segue into a larger discussion on the future of debates research. Chapter 9 concludes the project by addressing the broader implications of my findings from both a normative civic standpoint and also from the perspective of strategic campaign communication. Here I also address how results may influence debate effects and offer pathways for future debate research.

## CHAPTER 2

### BEYOND ICONS AND IMAGES: THE CIVIC EFFECTS OF DEBATES

For anyone skeptical of debate influence, the October 3, 2012 meeting between President Obama and GOP challenger Mitt Romney should put any lingering doubts to rest. Perceived by many as aloof and passive, Obama lost much of the support he shored up prior to that first domestic policy debate. According to the Pew's Center for the People & the Press, Romney rode an epic wave of momentum that dead-locked the public's intended vote choice at 46% for each candidate, with Romney climbing back from a 9 percentage point deficit.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, exposure to the debate increased GOP enthusiasm for the election; the public's approval of Romney on jobs and the budget deficit eclipsed Obama for the first time, and Romney gained ground on who would best handle other policy issues. Perhaps more importantly, the public felt more informed about their vote choice as a result of viewing the 2012 presidential debates. Pew reports that 66% of those viewing the debates found them "very" or "somewhat" helpful. These same respondents noted that news coverage of the campaign was less focused on issues than in previous election years and found debate viewing a much more effective avenue for learning about the candidates and issues than political ads.<sup>4</sup> Debates are not merely powerful campaign events but also highly prevalent and visible campaign events.

Although individual news diets are highly fragmented in today's information age, debates continue to attract large audiences. In fact, in the context of presidential campaigns, they are the only campaign event that continues to attract a mass audience. Despite some concern of disinterest and declining viewership during the 1996 campaign, Nielsen reports that audience

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<sup>3</sup> "Romney's strong debate performance erases Obama's lead: GOP challenger viewed as candidate with new ideas." Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, October 8, 2012. See <http://www.people-press.org/2012/10/08/romneys-strong-debate-performance-erases-obamas-lead/>

<sup>4</sup> "Low marks for the 2012 election: Voters pessimistic about partisan cooperation." Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, November 15, 2012. See <http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/15/low-marks-for-the-2012-election/>

numbers have rebounded, trending upward since the 2000 election. For example, the novelty – and mystery – surrounding unknown candidate Sarah Palin’s participation in the 2008 vice presidential debate garnered approximately 70 million viewers; the 2012 Obama-Romney debates attracted 60 million viewers on average.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these campaign events are occurring with more regularity, in both presidential primaries and in state-level elections.

Today, the two dominant parties organize 20-plus primary debates; the Commission on Presidential Debates schedules three general election debate and one vice presidential debate per election season. Televised debates are now commonplace in electoral process at the state level too, with congressional, gubernatorial, and even mayoral candidates participating. Furthermore, high profile and competitive state-level debates are increasingly broadcasted nationally. As the volume of debates and the number of viewers increase, these campaign events offer a collective experience where individuals watch among family and friends, engage in water cooler talk at the workplace, and chime in on social media. This collective experience has been a popular topic of interest for political communication scholars. Studies relying on survey data, however, face validity problems resulting from the consistent over-reporting of debate exposure, according to Prior (2012); others (e.g. Shaw, 1999; Hillygus & Jackman, 2003) have noted that isolating campaign effects in survey research often proves elusive and calls for exhaustive data sets. That being said, the results of experimental research show more promise – and demonstrate consistent media effects from exposure to electoral debates. These effects often hold implications for citizenship, with viewers gaining knowledge of candidates and policy issues, developing more interest in the election, and feeling greater levels of confidence in vote choice or even undergoing change in vote choice. Thus, the importance of debates extends far beyond their iconicity and image-based influence on electoral process.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2012/final-presidential-debate-draws-59-2-million-viewers.html>

## **Mediated Debates: A Historical Overview**

Although historical memory misleads many to think of the iconic Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960 as the first of its kind – the first mediated and broadcasted electoral debate between two candidates – these unique campaign events began through radio. During the 1948 Republican primaries, candidates Harold Stassen and Thomas Dewey were the first to participate in a mediated debate; radio broadcasted the event leading into the Oregon primary. Despite the technological affordances of radio, and later television, equal time laws outlined in the Communication Act of 1934 enabled broadcasters to resist airing debates since networks were concerned with the costs associated with devoting equal and precious airtime to include candidates with little electoral chances (Minow & LaMay, 2008). Furthermore, few candidates were comfortable enough with the emerging media technology to take such campaign risks. That being said, little known challengers had the most to gain from debates and placed increased pressure on organizing them.

Following increased political pressure to establish debates between the two dominant candidates, the League of Women Voters hosted a pseudo-debate in 1952, addressing just two agenda topics. In 1956 Democrats Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver participated in the first televised presidential primary debate, an event broadcasted by ABC. These mediated campaign events proved sparse but after Congress temporarily relaxed Section #315 of the Communication Act of 1934, which required equal time for all candidates, debates became a more attractive prospect by the 1960 presidential campaign (Minow & LaMay, 2008; Sarlin, 2011). Since Nixon's unpopularity and Kennedy's inexperience on the national political stage dominated campaign narratives, each had a distinct incentive for participating. Nonetheless, persistent network concerns over equal time laws, Nixon's on-camera troubles in the 1960 debates, and

Lyndon Johnson's resistance resulted in a dearth of debates between 1960 and 1976 – with the lone exception of the 1968 Vietnam primary debate between Democrats Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy.

What changed in 1976? Both networks and candidates had increased incentives to participate. First, the Congressional repeal of parts of the Communication Act of 1934 and a 1975 ruling by the Federal Communications Commission that categorized debates sponsored by non-networks as “news events” meant that broadcasters could work around constricting equal time laws. Second, Ford and Carter were relatively unknown to the public and saw debates as a means to remedy that. The 1976 debates institutionalized these large-scale campaign events in the electoral process; they became routine campaign events and prominent news stories. The number of primary debates ballooned by 1984, the year in which Democrats organized more than 10 intraparty debates. The launch of new cable news sources such as CNN and C-SPAN, made the proliferation of these primary debates possible (Sarlin, 2011).

Although the mediated campaign debates of today are a far cry from the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates, which operated as lengthier point-counterpoint discussions unfiltered by media moderators, they do resemble these unfettered debates in the sense that they are covered by national press, provide issues-based information, and capture an attentive audience. Routinizing debates have undoubtedly raised the prominence of image-based politics but they also provide more transparency and public access to the candidates. Beyond image-based campaigning, debates operate as a forum for character considerations of candidates and a forum for learning about the policy stances and platforms of the candidates. Although candidates are not required by law to participate in debates, incentives lie in strengthening their candidacy, exposing opponent weaknesses, humanizing their personalities, and establishing the agenda of their campaign and/or



first term. Furthermore, debates provide free and direct access to the electorate. Paradoxically, it is the underlying risks of candidate participation in debates that continue to attract a sizable public audience.

Despite tireless negotiations by all participating parties, no single campaign or candidate can eliminate the element of surprise from debates. In other words, candidates are not privy to the questions asked in a debate and cannot possibly predict all responses and reactions made by his/her opponents. Schroeder (2008) has suggested it is this promise of spontaneity that keeps the public tuned in – and makes debates unlike any other campaign event: “Choreographed and unscripted, contrived and authentic, debates straddle the fault line between artifice and reality – like everything else on TV, only more so” (p. 11).

The unknown offers enough intrigue to generate mass audiences, as candidates respond to campaign and policy issues without the crutch of their handlers.<sup>6</sup> Despite the preparedness of candidates, debates offer less rehearsed versions of the candidates, more policy information than is typically found in news coverage of the campaign, and more authenticity of character than a stump speech or interview. Beyond their symbolic value, Minow and LaMay (2008) have contended that debates are in fact the only campaign event where both candidates participate under conditions not entirely under their control. In short, mediated debates offer the public a less controlled and civically meaningful glimpse into electoral politics (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Minow and LaMay, 2008).

Staying true to form, however, news media coverage of debates narrowly focuses on the dramatic horserace aspects of the event and coverage seldom extends beyond candidate

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<sup>6</sup> The debate audience in 1960 surpassed the entertainment audiences for programs they were replacing on the networks by an average of 20% across the four debates (Minow & LaMay, 2008).

performance critiques. Pundits speak freely of Kennedy's smile and ease with the camera; Reagan's plain folks appeal; Gore's perceived impatience and plasticity; and Clinton's charisma in the town hall format. What the press ignores is the policy issues, platforms, and stances learned about the candidates through the debate process. Post-debate coverage is often the target of media critics whom claim the news media recaps these events through strategic narratives focused on the tactics and game-frames rather than the policy information that surfaces from these campaign events. We also know from the work of Pingree, Scholl and Quenette (2012) that post-debate framing influences public reasoning. In other words, those exposed to post-debate game-framed news coverage are more likely to use strategic considerations in their political reasoning while those exposed to policy-framed coverage are more likely to tap policy considerations. While most of the media chatter surrounding campaign debates concerns the performance and image of the candidates, we often overlook the civic service these campaign events provide the public.

### **Debates: A Remedy for Public Ignorance?**

From the onset, the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates carved new opportunities for campaign learning and deliberation on the issues. Moreover, civic effects were strongest among those viewing the 1960 debates on their intended medium (e.g. television) rather than those listening via radio broadcasts (Druckman, 2003). When presidential debates returned for the Carter-Ford campaign in 1976, similar knowledge gains were reported (Lang & Lang, 1978). Early studies of presidential debates consistently found that exposure improves political knowledge and political efficacy (Ellsworth, 1965; Lang & Lang, 1978; Miller & MacKuen, 1979). Since debates were held sporadically prior to the 1976 Ford-Carter campaign, skepticism of their usefulness prevailed nonetheless, particularly among cultural critics (e.g. Boorstin, 1961; Postman, 1985)

concerned with technology's expanding influence in the electoral process.

The 1976 election reinvigorated the study of debate effects for the next several decades. As research persisted, scholars often concluded that exposure to debates improves levels of public knowledge about the campaign (Pfau, 1988; Drew & Weaver, 1991; Zhu et al., 1994; Holbrook, 1999; Druckman, 2003; Benoit, Hansen & Verser, 2003). Perhaps an even more prescient finding, based on knowledge inequities underscored by the research of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), is that effects were cited across all voter demographics and for both primary and general election debates. Research examining effects of the 1976 U.S. presidential election noted that debate viewing not only improved public knowledge of the candidates and their issue stances but that these beneficial knowledge effects occurred across people with varying levels of baseline knowledge and effects were stronger than those resulting from exposure to other sources of campaign information, chiefly news (Becker et al, 1978). Likewise, Lemert (1993) found that even after controlling for variance in pre-existing knowledge, exposure to the 1988 debates continued to serve as a predictor of knowledge gains. In short, the literature suggests debates educate across the spectrum and that these campaign events are beneficial to the greater public rather than effects conditional to knowledge levels or interest in politics.

Follow-up studies unearthed additional nuances about the benefits of viewing mediated electoral debates. For example, increases in knowledge pertaining to issues were particularly promising, as the work of Holbrook (1999) found that exposure resulted in largest learning gains for policy-specific issues. What's more, knowledge of issues also resulted in accurately identifying where candidates stood on specific policy positions; research on the 1996 debates found viewers more accurately identified the policy positions of Dole and Clinton than those unexposed to the debates (Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998). Experiments exploring exposure to

the 1980 debates also reinforced earlier scholarship by citing strong knowledge effects in the context of presidential primaries; moreover, this research suggested effects were more enduring than previously thought, since those exposed to the debates continued to learn at higher rates than control-group participants (Lemert, Elliott, Nestvold, & Rarick, 1983).

Benoit and Hansen (2004) also found that knowledge gains were greatest for information about non-incumbents, suggesting that these mass audience campaign events provide the public with the chance to learn more about challengers and less known candidates. Considering the incumbency bias cited in news coverage of campaigns (Arnold, 2004), this finding is an important one. Beyond the possibility of leveling the playing field for presidential candidates, debate exposure bridges another gap of sorts by coaxing those less knowledgeable and less interested in elections into the political sphere.

### **A Knowledge Gap No More**

The fragmenting media environment of more recent years have opened the floodgates for civic-minded research concerned with variance in news diets among the electorate. Of chief concern: the extent to which media choice isolates segments of the population from substantive public affairs news. This is what Prior (2007) has called an era of “politics by choice,” referring to the end of accidental news exposure and byproduct learning in the post-broadcast environment. Since debate effects are found across various segments of the population, exposure to these valuable campaign events may reverse troubling trends related to news media preferences and political knowledge.

Scholars (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Prior, 2005/2007; Conboy & Steel, 2008; Gilens, Vavreck, & Cohen, 2007) have found that the high-choice media environment increases political knowledge and engagement gaps among the electorate, as the hyper interested (who follow hard

news) gain greater levels of knowledge and interest from media consumption than the less interested who tend to prefer more entertaining pools of information. These conclusions would come as little surprise to Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1970), whose research developed the knowledge gap theory in mass communication after discovering that segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status often acquire information from media at a faster rate than those on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Their research later identified that these knowledge gap effects lessened when issues were considered salient by the public (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1975). This study also revealed that knowledge gap effects were strongest among national issues – issues likely prominent in presidential campaigns. We also know from the work of Zaller (1992) that information-seeking motives are lowest among those with low levels of political knowledge. Since debates function as collective experiences and render issues salient to a mass audience, we see civically beneficial effects across all types of people.

Holbrook (1999) found that debate exposure mitigates the ill effects of knowledge gap. Furthermore, this effect has held for six election cycles: the 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 debates (Holbrook, 2002). The consistency of these findings is crucial to the relevance of debates for three distinct reasons: 1) low information voters only begin to follow presidential campaigns late in the campaign cycle (Gelman & King, 1993); 2) the quality of campaign news coverage is at its worst, with horserace frames proliferating, the closer it is to the election (Dunaway & Stein, 2013); and 3) knowledge gaps widen the closer campaigns creep toward Election Day (Patterson, 1980; Holbrook, 2002). Others, too, have found that debate exposure reduces the effects of a spiraling knowledge gap (McLeod, Bybee & Durall, 1982; Lanoue, 1992; Holbrook, 2002). From a theoretical perspective, these findings are especially noteworthy since they offer promise to news effects indicating that those with higher levels of baseline knowledge

are more likely to absorb, retain, and recall public affairs information and that knowledge gap is strongest among women and racial minorities (Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). One explanation for these promising debate effects may exist in the low burden of viewer participation.

Neuman's (1976) research has shown that television, despite its criticisms, functions as a "knowledge leveler" that helps close the information gap between high and low-knowledge individuals. In the pre-cable era when network television was king, subsequent research also found similar reductions in the knowledge gap through exposure to television (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Graber, 2001; Prior, 2007). Holbrook (2002) suggested, "In terms of the civic functions of campaigns, then, voters can learn from presidential campaigns and that campaign information is most likely to be acquired on an equitable basis when it is presented in a highly visible and accessible format" (p. 450). Furthermore, Gitlin (2002) argued that today's high choice media environment conditions individuals to seek information on the motives of stimulation. The passivity of the medium and its entertaining visual elements provide a stimulating experience which positions debates as a campaign event palatable to a mass audience – and a campaign event capable of educating a public composed of few information seekers (Jamieson & Bridsell, 1988). Thus, the medium in which electoral debates are transmitted may also play a role in arming low-information voters with increased levels of campaign knowledge and in creating a campaign event with equalizing civic benefits.

Gaziano (1997) has called for more attention to knowledge gap research, suggesting heightened relevance based on widening socioeconomic and wage disparities. Similarly, the evidence documenting widening knowledge and engagement gaps between entertainment seekers and news seekers (Prior, 2005/2007) strengthens this call for increased attention to

knowledge gap. Debates render policy matters salient to voters, even to those less interested or knowledgeable about politics. By increasing salience, individuals across knowledge spectrums and interest levels can learn more about the candidates and issues. Thus, debates offer a unique context to theoretically extend knowledge gap research. When it comes to civic effects, debates are especially beneficial to low-information individuals, but gains do not necessarily end at knowledge.

### **Efficacy, Engagement, and Indirect Effects**

Scholarship has also found that debates are beneficial in engaging groups typically underrepresented in electoral politics, as evident from their effects on younger voters (McKinney & Banwart, 2005; McKinney & Rill, 2009; Kirk & Schill, 2011). In other words, the civic benefits of exposure extend beyond mere knowledge gains and these campaign events can achieve wonders for political engagement and in creating a more inclusive democracy. The work of Lemert et al. (1983) has also demonstrated the role debates play in fostering engagement; their research found that exposure to presidential primary debates increased interest in the races of both parties. Even research citing sparse campaign effects seem to conclude that debates (along with conventions) offer measurable impact on the campaign process and, at the very least, improve vote choice stability (Erikson & Wlezien, 2012).

Among partisans whose minds are more resistant to persuasion during the campaign process, exposure to debates reinforced vote choice and improved confidence in their candidate of choice (Holbert, 2005). According to Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert (2001), improved confidence in vote choice may also spur civically desirable indirect effects such as increased likelihood of voting. Research has shown that debates hold persuasive effects over viewers, too (Geer, 1988; Yawn et al., 1998; Fridkin et al., 2007). Since voters rely on heuristics in

establishing vote choice, campaign debates can provide policy specifics in a simplistic format to help individuals distinguish the platforms and differences among candidates.

Studies found that debates assist decision-making processes through vote choice reinforcement or, for undecided voters, through persuasion (Wald & Lupfer, 1978; Fridkin et al, 2007; Cho & Ha, 2012; Schrott & Lanoue, 2013). Although most scholars have found that debate viewing has more to do with partisan reinforcement than persuasion, Geer's (1998) research found that the persuasive effects of debate viewing are in fact stronger than earlier studies suggest. Geer (1988) found that not only were undecided voters susceptible to vote change after exposure to the debates but also those who held weak predispositions toward a particular candidate going into the debates. Moreover, the persuasive effects are known to be stronger in the context of the primary debates since people know less about the candidates at that juncture in the campaign (Yawn et al., 1998). In other words, viewers are more receptive to opinion change early in the campaign season because they harbor fewer predispositions. Instilling affirmation in vote intention and providing less partisan and undecided voters with information useful to establishing vote choice are particularly promising effects considering the wishy-washy nature of public opinion in the electoral process (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008).

The work of Cho and Choy (2011) demonstrated that debates also hold indirect civic effects; they found that exposure leads to higher levels of campaign news consumption. Further reinforcing the indirect effects argument, Dolan and Holbrook (2001) acknowledged a substantial connection between political knowledge and subsequent electoral engagement. Knowledge is known to beget engagement by improving levels of political efficacy and other motivating factors (Lewis-Beck et al, 2008; Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson, 2002; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007). Also suggestive of indirect effects, political knowledge helps fuel



public deliberation (McLeod et al, 1982; Fishkin, 1991). Thus, debates as an educating campaign event can indirectly influence the volume of public discussion of an election. For example, an exhaustive analysis spanning 1996 to 2004 found that exposure to presidential debates fostered increased public deliberation, increased campaign news consumption (particularly for low information voters), increased tolerance, and increased levels of political efficacy (Carlin et al, 2009). In short, the more voters know, the more likely they are to engage in the electoral process.

### **State-Level Debate Effects**

Despite the interest in presidential debate research, there's a lingering gap in the literature that fails to fully examine debates within other electoral contexts. Extant debate literature either narrowly focuses on presidential races or examines state-level debates through the limited lens of strategic communication, focusing on candidate rhetoric (e.g. Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007; Banwart & McKinney, 2005; Airne & Benoit, 2005) at the expense of exploring the roles and influence news professional and media play in the debate process.

The work of Just, Crigler, and Wallach (1990), has shown that exposure to a congressional campaign debate can improve recall of issues, with 75% of viewers able to recognize all of the issues discussed during the debate, but they found considerable variance in knowledge across specific issues. Moreover, they found that political advertisements were more effective than debates in educating the public within the state-level debate context (Just et al., 1990). Hullet and Loudon (1998) found that topics discussed in the congressional debates became salient to individuals viewing those debates, suggesting an agenda-setting effect for exposure to state-level debates. A more recent study showed that debate viewers of the 2010 California gubernatorial race indeed gained knowledge from exposure; researchers found that knowledge gains attributed to debate exposure surpassed other avenues of information such as

political ads (Hardy, Jamieson, & Winneg, 2011). This finding underscores recent Pew data which showed that the public generally finds debates more useful than campaign ads in acquiring election information. Although there's some work suggestive that state-level debates may not function all that differently from presidential debates, exactly how state-level and presidential debates compare remains largely unclear.

### **In Conclusion**

Electoral debates are often the butt of scholarly, media, and public criticism (as we will see in Chapter 3), despite evidence of civically desirable outcomes. Too often debates are discussed within the context of the image and spectacle. As Schroeder (2008) suggested: "Although the mythology surrounding the first Kennedy-Nixon broadcast would greatly amplify in the years to follow, the moral of the story has never varied: presidential debates are best apprehended as television shows, governed not by the rules of rhetoric or politics but by the demands of their host medium. The values of debates are the values of television: celebrity, visuals, conflict, and hype" (p. 9). Although the entertaining aspects and spectacle of these events lower barriers of participation and motivate the public to follow these events, the benefits of debates are frequently overlooked nonetheless. In fact, it is this delicate balance between spectacle and substance which allows for debates to spur civically desirable outcomes. For debates to effectively educate and engage the public, spectacle and substance must coexist.

The civic effects of presidential debates are both direct and indirect; debates help bridge knowledge and engagement gaps, fuel electoral interest, and generate discourse on policy issues. Following the party conventions, research has shown that debates are the single most influential presidential campaign event (Shaw, 1999). Although much less is known about the effects of state-level debates, there is some evidence to suggest they provide similar benefits. Such effects

are increasingly important in the more fragmented news environment – a news environment criticized for shallow campaign coverage that often places priority on cynicism, strategy, and tactics at the expense of more substantive policy matters. In other words, debates inform and engage the public in the political process, perhaps in ways the news media fails to.

Debates help mitigate the shortcomings of campaign news coverage by providing candidate and issue specific information to help educate voters before taking the polls. What's more, debates continue to attract mass audiences. Just as campaign news coverage influences and redefines the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Funkhauser, 1973; Just et al., 1996), so do debates (see Lang & Lang, 1978; Benoit et al., 2001). When debates feature a policy-centric agenda, we find a more policy-minded public. For example, Benoit et al. (1998) found that viewers of the 1996 presidential debates were not only more likely to correctly identify candidate policy platforms than non-viewers but were also more likely to cite policy reasons for their vote decision. This finding is echoed in later research on the 2000 presidential debates, when scholars found that exposure to the debates improved policy considerations of vote choice and policy issues brought to light in the debates became more salient to the public (Benoit et al., 2001).

However, as we'll see in the following chapter, debates often fall short in consistently and uniformly focusing on policy matters. Moreover, these invaluable campaign events do not fully realize their civic potential, as rules, formats, and moderating influence hold implications for the agenda content and tones of debates.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE STRUCTURE OF DEBATES AND AGENDA SUBSTANCE

The consistency of civically desirable outcomes in the effects literature examining electoral debates underscores the importance of these campaign events. Moreover, debates tend to encompass more policy information than is typical of campaign news and they attract mass audiences inclusive of individuals whom may otherwise tune out of elections. Where the effects literature falls short is in assessing how sponsorship, rules, format, and moderating influence these relationships between debate exposure and effects. There is reason to believe, however, that debate effects are not uniform.

In related research I have found inconsistent debate effects. Using 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) data, I found that those exposed to the town hall debate format (where citizens directly pose questions to the candidates) correlated with greater levels of political knowledge than those exposed to traditional single-moderator debate formats (Turcotte, 2013). This finding is unsurprising considering the public agenda seldom includes strategy and tactics topics that are known to 1) be of greater interest to news professionals (Epstein, 1973) and 2) detract from substantive policy discourse (Fallows, 1996; Lawrence, 2000). With flawed reporting of debate exposure posing validity problems for research relying on survey data (Prior, 2012), I extended this research to experimental methods during the 2012 election.

Utilizing an experimental method to test debate effects, we found that just one of three general election debates improved levels of campaign knowledge. This time results showed that only the foreign policy debate increased levels of campaign knowledge; the town-hall format bore no influence on campaign knowledge (Turcotte & Goidel, 2014). In the context of the 2012 study, it seems that viewers come in to the debates with higher levels of domestic policy

knowledge which ultimately limits learning to the foreign policy themed debate. The inconsistency of these effects suggests variance may also be explained by looking to the influence of rules, formats, and moderators on the content of debate. Thus, a number of often neglected variables merit new scrutiny.

Extant scholarship cites differences between media facilitated debate agendas and the public agenda as presented in town hall style debates; these differences are reflected both in content and the tone of discourse (Matera & Salwen, 1996; Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Morello, 2005; Fallows, 2008). Prior literature has revealed contrasts between media debate agendas and the public town hall agenda, underlying differences in policy issues as well as the overall tenor of debates (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Carlin et al, 2001; Graber, 2001; Morello, 2005; Fallows, 2008). This provides some evidence that variables tied to formats and moderators create somewhat different campaign experiences – distinctions that may ultimately contribute to variance in debate effects.

Debates have undergone considerable change in format and structure. Thus, research that avoids treating effects as uniform is increasingly important. Beyond the introduction of the town hall format in 1992, we saw the end of press panels in the 1996 presidential election – both moves by the Commission on Presidential Debates designed to bring debates more in line with the public agenda (Kaid et al., 2000). We also know from news norms and routines and economic models of the news (e.g. Hamilton, 2004; Dunaway, 2008 etc.) that external and internal factors influence news products. In other words, journalists do not operate in a vacuum in their reporting of the news; internal organizational structures and external market influences have a hand in shaping content. Since rules, formats, and organizational mechanisms vary across debates, and since news professionals conditioned by the norms and routines of their trade serve

as the primary agenda-setter and gatekeeper of debates, an understanding of how these influences shape debate agendas is a necessary step in capturing a more accurate picture of debate content, debate tone, and, ultimately, debate effects.

### **Variance in Content**

First, we know the news agenda strays from the public agenda during the campaign process (Just et al., 1996). There is also anecdotal and election-specific research which has shown that this is also the case for debates. Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1979) found that early mediated presidential debates proved unreflective of issues paramount to the public agenda – a finding later reinforced by the work of Benoit and Hansen (2001), who underscored similar effects during the 1992 and 2000 debates. In other words, policy topics most salient to citizens were absent from these particular debate agendas. That being said, more recent research has shown that debates keep candidate agendas at bay, with time constraints and response rules limiting opportunities for strategic rhetoric (Boydston, Glazier, & Pietryka, 2013). Unlike other campaign events such as stump speeches and conventions, the press moderators uniquely shape the agenda of debates – bypassing question input from candidates and parties. More importantly, the questions posed by moderating journalists not only set the agenda of debates but influence candidate responses (Carlin et al., 2001).

As Patterson (1994) cautioned, news values are not necessarily synonymous with political values. In other words, a press debate agenda does not ensure that public information needs are adequately addressed. A common critique from the public is that media moderators do not fully address domestic policy matters that bear a direct influence on voters; moreover, researchers note a perceived redundancy problem concerning the issues press moderators do address (Carlin et al., 2009). Carlin et al. (2009) also found that the public ranks character and

traits questions – topics routinely emphasized by the press – as least “useful” in debates. As debates have evolved to account for more variety in format – from press panels to single moderators and now town halls and debates featuring social media – we should expect to see differences in question content.

Relative to members of the press, the public poses questions that pertain more to domestic policy issues and “backyard” issues that more directly influence their lives. Moreover, public debate questions (relative to those generated from media moderators) cover a wider spectrum of policy issues while deemphasizing strategy and tactics content (Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011; Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Schroeder, 2008). Debates involving public input may help mitigate the obstacles of “issue access” to the media; Boydston (2013) has found that few issues obtain access to media coverage, which ultimately mutes a number of policy matters that hold social significance or public importance. The prevalence of strategy and tactics questions in debates also deserves greater examination, since scholars have cited undesirable outcomes from exposure to these topics. Election news emphasizing campaign strategy is associated with increased levels of cynicism and less motivation to engage in politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). What’s more, campaign strategy content was shown to hinder information retention (Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that strategy content is simply less of a priority for members of the public posing questions to the candidates.

More broadly, when the media provides the public with access to the candidates, citizen questions represent a more diverse range of policy issues than those stemming from members of the press (Just et al., 1996; Kaid et al., 2000). Consequently, these town hall debates are viewed more favorably than other debate formats where journalists hold greater power over the agenda

(Lipsitz, Trost, Grossman, & Sides, 2005). Public preference for the town hall debates is unsurprising considering declining levels of media trust (Gronke & Cook, 2007).

In a qualitative analysis comparing press and public agendas across a 20-year sample of the presidential debates transcripts, 1992-2012, I found that the public not only addresses a wider spectrum of policy issues than the press but that their issue priorities are chiefly domestic, emphasizing concerns that hold direct implications for their families or communities (Turcotte, 2013). This public debate agenda demonstrates a priority for backyard issues: issues with greater proximity to the public are more likely to be addressed by the public in a debate forum. These key public issues seldom include foreign policy issues; they often involve the economy, education, healthcare, taxation, and social issues. With a more policy-minded public agenda, there is simply less room for campaign strategy and tactics issues in the town hall format.

While some scholarship has explored content differences between public versus press debate questions, these studies are limited in scope and fail to consider content variance across moderators and other electoral, format, and media variables. In other words, how might the content of debate questions vary from journalists working for broadcast vs. print media? How might the content differ between nonprofit journalists and those working for a commercial outlet? Moreover, can we expect content variance across networks or differences from those hailing from partisan media (e.g. Fox and MSNBC)?

We know from extant literature (e.g. Hamilton, 2004; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Dunaway, 2008 etc.) that news content varies according to profit pressures and market competition. More specifically, outlets facing more competitive pressures are less likely to deliver policy-driven news products (Dunaway, 2008; Yan & Napoli, 2006; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). Thus, we could expect to see evidence of content variance between



commercially-driven and nonprofit journalist debate moderators. Based on the literature analyzing press coverage of presidents and campaigns (e.g. Groeling & Kernell, 1998; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011; Larson, 1996; Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999), we might also expect to find distinctions in debate content related to the medium since broadcast and print media function under differing constraints and respond to differing news audiences. Distinctions may also exist at the network level. For example, the work of Larson (2000) has shown that ABC is more prone to horserace emphasis than its competing networks, whereas NBC devotes more airtime to policy issues in its campaign coverage. Similarly, a comparison between national vs. local networks found local networks offer less substantive campaign content (Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999). Others have suggested that broadcast campaign news is more likely to emphasize campaign strategy and tactics over print media outlets (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011; Fallows, 2008). Content variance in campaign coverage has even been attributed to a reporter's training or beat (Freedman & Fico, 2004; Carter, Fico, & McCabe, 2002). In short, there is much work to be done in parsing out more nuanced news influences of debate content.

Much of the work in this area has been limited to drawing comparisons between the public questions in the town hall format and press-generated questions. Within this context, there are measurable differences in the two distinct debate agendas. For example, seasoned debate moderator Jim Lehrer (2011) noted that character and trait questions commonplace among the media's debate agenda went unasked by members of the public in the 1996 town hall debate. What's more, rhetorical studies have suggested that in creating more issue-centric debate agendas, citizens are, consequently, less likely to insight conflict, clash or character assaults (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Carlin et al, 2001). Thus, format and media variables may influence debate tone in addition to content.

## Variance in Tone

The news media satisfy a democratic function insofar that the press serves as the primary supplier of campaign information. Increasingly, scholars (Sabato, 1992; Patterson, 1996; Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Cohen, 2008) have found that this supplied campaign information is unnecessarily negative. Bennett and Serrin (2005) found that watchdog journalism “has adopted a tone of cynicism and negativity” without providing tangible evidence to justify increasingly pessimistic coverage. Patterson (1996) suggested that negativity simply does a better job of satisfying news values, such as conflict and drama; game-framed coverage lends itself to conflict-driven news tones (Gross & Brewer, 2007). What’s more, these strategy and tactics stories that often fuel negativity and distrust of democracy are easily and cheaply produced. Most troubling, strategic game-frames are more commonplace during periods where the information environment matters most to the public: in election seasons, as Election Day creeps closer, and in particularly close elections (Lawrence, 2000; Dunaway & Stein, 2013; Hayes, 2010).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) attributed the rise of “judgmental” journalism to 24-hour news and new levels of skepticism associated with Watergate and Vietnam. Hallin (1992) found that the sound bite for presidential election broadcasts shrunk from 43 to 9 seconds between 1968 and 1988, resulting in a shift toward “journalist-centered” news coverage. There’s also research indicating that the rise in campaign news negativity correlates with the shrinking news sound bite and expanded emphasis on journalist commentary (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lichter, 2001; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). Despite the increasingly harsh tone of the news media’s campaign coverage, attack journalism, negativity, and cynicism can vary according to ownership, medium, or reporting style. For example, studies have shown that competitive market pressures and corporate ownership structures yield greater levels of negativity in campaign news

content (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010; Dunway, 2013). Just, Crigler, and Buhr (1999) found that print media offer more cynical campaign coverage than local television and broadcast networks.

A recent study (Vraga et al., 2012) exploring the moderating styles of journalists across political talk shows found that these style differences of tone (e.g. detached correspondent style and aggressive moderating style) influence not only the media credibility of the programs for viewers but also their assessment of the program's "informational" value. If one were to apply a similar framework to debates, a question regarding conflict in Syria should be held in higher esteem by the public than a question attacking a candidate on open marriage allegations. In other words, how aggressive and combative a moderator behaves in a debate should influence the perceived civic value of the campaign event.

Research overwhelming suggests that media moderators pose "comparative" questions that invite clash and conflict, and that their questions are more adversarial than those stemming from the public (Carlin et al, 2001; Kaid et al, 2000). Although Scholars note that clash-based tone is not inherently bad, as it simplifies policy comparisons among the candidates (Carlin et al., 2009), such questions also solicit attacks among the candidates and create the perception of a polarized political climate. Moreover, clash questions beget clash-based responses from the candidates. For example, an analysis of the 2000 U.S. presidential election found that when moderating journalists posed a question soliciting clash, candidates responded with a clash-based response 80% of the time (Carlin et al., 2001). Polarization in coverage of policy news often heightens partisanship among the electorate, increasing the influence of partisan perspectives (Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013).

Attack and clash debate questions are unsurprising and in step with campaign literature demonstrating that the news most often exudes a negative tone in its coverage of elections

(Patterson, 1996; Lichter & Smith, 1996). Whether benign or bad for democracy, these characteristics are uniquely tied to news norms and routines. Questions which solicit clash often inflate differences between candidates but also fulfill news routines of balance, objectivity, and the “two-truths” model or “point-counterpoint” style of news reporting (Tuchman, 1973; Epstein, 1973). Staging conflict in news satisfies a core news value, simplifies campaigns for audiences by drawing distinctions through polarization, and also saves journalists time through its formulaic structure. These “adversarial” questions routinely address campaign issues (e.g. flip-flopping, promises broken, character assaults etc.) over less entertaining matters such as policy issues.

According to Eveland, McLeod, and Nathanson (1994), conflict is a selling point in debates that helps secure mass appeal. This assertion parallels market-driven models of news production, which has shown that bottom-line pressures influence not only news content but news tone (see Hamilton, 2004; Dunaway, 2013). For example, Rosenstiel (2005) has cited a link between industry competition and increasing reliance on polls and interpretive horserace coverage. Just as market competition seems to solicit far more entertaining styles, more interpretive news, and more negativity and conflict – we might argue that journalists entrenched in these routines are conditioned to respond to economic pressures not only in reporting the news but in moderating debates.

In election specific contexts, scholars have found that debate moderators manufacture clash through argumentation, accusations, and adversarial questioning. By soliciting conflict through adversarial questioning, moderating journalists maintain mass appeal (Ben-Porath, 2007). Fallows (2008) has observed that such tones often take the form of “gotcha” questions or loaded hypotheticals designed to expose contradictions. These tones are inherently negative,

often emphasizing scandal, mistrust, gaffes, and other candidate missteps. Hart and Jarvis (1997) found “chest-puffing” and conflict more common in traditional formatted debates over the town hall format. Morello’s (2005) work suggests variance in tone is tied to subtle rhetorical differences between news professionals and the public; he found that press questions emphasize the past (often dredging up contradictions or previous statements or voting records), whereas public questions focus on the future, deploying “what” and “why” questions that more seamlessly relate to platforms and policy views.

Moderators also absolve themselves from adversarial questioning by, instead, priming a candidate to attack his or her opponent (Fallows, 2008; Morello, 2005; Carlin et al., 2001). For example, broaching the sensitive topic of sex scandal allegations in President Clinton’s 1996 reelection campaign, moderator Jim Lehrer, as described in his book *Tension City* (2011), attempted to coax GOP challenger Bob Dole to attack Clinton’s character. During the first debate, Lehrer asked Dole to acknowledge “differences in more personal areas that are relevant” to the campaign. Later in that debate, he opened the door again for Dole to comment “on a policy matter or a personal matter” that the American people should know about Clinton. Insisting he wanted to run a campaign on his own merit, Dole declined the opportunities to attack President Clinton’s character. In response, Lehrer opened the vice presidential debate with similar attack bait. He asked, “Some supporters of Senator Dole have expressed disappointment over his unwillingness in Hartford Sunday night to draw personal and ethical differences between him and President Clinton. How do you feel about it?” In comparison, not a single public question asked in the 1996 debates focused on Clinton’s sex scandal allegations, or any character/traits issues for that matter (Lehrer, 2011).

Moderator emphasis on negativity is unsurprising given that scholars have suggested the news media's campaign coverage is growing more focused on campaign issues (e.g. scandals, gaffes, tactics, and strategy) in order to fill the 24-hour news hole in increasingly lengthy campaign seasons (Sabato, 1992; Thompson, 1995; Patterson, 1996; Cohen, 2008). But these negative tones in campaign news coverage come at a democratic cost: increasing levels of political disengagement and public cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Forgette & Morris, 2006). Spillover of news negativity in debates may result in ill effects from exposure to these invaluable campaign events. While such concerns are largely untested, research does, however, suggest that such negativity is more prevalent in questions posed by moderating journalists than members of the public (Morello, 2005; Carlin et al., 2001; Graber, 2001; Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Matera & Salwen, 1996; Kaid et al., 2000).

In contrast, the public questioning process is often less antagonistic and less likely to employ a tone that fosters incivility (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Schroeder, 2008). One possible explanation for the public's resistance to negativity is that members of the public are not conditioned by the news norms and routines that press moderators adhere to. In other words, press news norms and routines place a high value on conflict-driven content. Another possible explanation lies in the topics of concerns. Since the public agenda focuses more on policy and less on character and traits topics, there are simply fewer opportunities to pose attack questions (Turcotte, 2013). Given that the public is less likely to focus on character and traits than the news media, it is unsurprising that research has shown a consistent moderator emphasis on sensational clash-based debate questions relative to the public emphasis in town hall debates (Morello, 2005; Fallows, 2008). This moderator tone of negativity and clash may even explain why some research has shown a positive relationship between debate viewing and public cynicism (e.g.

Wald & Lupfer, 1978; Stroud, Stephens, & Pye, 2011). Just as the tone of news in the high choice media environment has become increasingly negative (Patterson, 1994; Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Cohen, 2008), we could also expect to see shifts in the tone of debate questions over time. Nevertheless, research to date has yet to explore these patterns across election cycles.

Although scholars have examined the tone of debate questions between public versus press-generated questions, there's a dearth of literature accounting for other format and media variables. For example, would a moderator from broadcast media operate differently from a member of the print press? How might moderating journalists from commercial media vary from those in nonprofit media? And given the fragmenting news landscape, do moderators from partisan outlets (e.g. Fox or MSNBC) vary in tone? Although these questions remain unanswered, variance in how the news is packaged across media and markets render these important research questions to probe in the context of debates.

For example, research examining coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential election found differences in tone between online news and more traditional media, with online sources more neutral in tone than broadcast and print media (Belt, Just, & Crigler, 2012). Moreover, since scholars have found that print media emphasizes more policy content in its election coverage (Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999), we should expect less negativity from moderating print journalists than broadcast journalists more entrenched in campaign strategy and tactics reporting. Furthermore, with the advent of social media sponsored debates, we must also acknowledge the possibility of variance across the public debate agenda. As the town hall format evolves to include virtual forums, such as the 2007 CNN/YouTube debates, we may observe additional

layers of variance for debate content and tone that result from whether the questioner has face-to-face interaction with the candidate or submits the question through the safety net of the web.

### **Implications for Virtual Formats**

As the town hall format has moved away from the public in more recent elections – with rules barring follow-up questions, providing moderating journalists with more leverage in terms of question selection, and even allowing moderators to pose questions (McKinney, 2005) – virtual town hall formats afforded through digital and social media may preserve public input in a format growing less participatory. Hindman (2009) has argued that representative democracy is not merely about having a voice, but being heard; thus, civic arguments can also be made for advocating social media sponsorship and virtual town hall debates which offer the public a greater stake in electoral process. Beyond preserving public input in the debates, such sponsorship engages a segment of the population historically known for being inactive in electoral process: young voters. Nonetheless, not all members of the electorate necessarily enjoy equal access to participating in a virtual town hall.

Hargittai's (2007) research has shown that racial minorities routinely lag in adoption of social and digital media platforms. Since socio-economic demographics influence likelihood of use, debates sponsored by social media may not reflect the full scope of the public agenda. Other scholars caution against bullish optimism regarding the web's democratizing effect. Hindman (2009) has suggested that the internet has failed to bring a plurality of voices into the public discourse; traditional media and political elites continue to shape the political agenda. Despite the endless space and increased autonomy of online news, digital sources of information are less likely to spotlight policy issues (Boydston, 2013). What remains even more unclear is the influence of virtual formats on question tone. Although public questions asked by people in a



town hall forum seldom deploy an argumentative or accusatory tone, people may feel more liberty to do so behind the veil of technology since social and digital media afford opportunities for questioning with a level of anonymity or, at the very least, questioning sans the discomfort of face-to-face interaction. What's clear is research exploring influence of social and digital media on campaign events is somewhat fragmented and wholly underdeveloped.

To date, work in this emerging area tends to focus more on strategic use of digital and social media in campaigns. For example, Church (2010) found that presidential candidates utilizing YouTube's YouChoose channel featured videos predominantly focused on traits and advocacy rather than policy concerns. In other words, social and digital media operate as an extension of campaign talking points for candidates rather than as an outlet for more substantive policy discourse.<sup>7</sup> That being said, Stromer-Galley (2006) has suggested that candidates are more resistant to virtual interaction with the public because they fear spontaneity and feel less in control of their message. Research exploring the relationship between public use of social and digital media in the context of campaigns offers more promising findings.

The literature exploring social and digital media influence on debates has been limited to the 2007 CNN-YouTube debates. Studies found that these debates generated great public interest and spurred participation from groups historically disinterested in political process, including younger voters and minority voters (Ricke, 2010). In fact, ratings figures has shown that these CNN-YouTube debates were the most watched among cable news ever for the 18-34 years of age demographic (Moretti, 2007). Participation in these debates also extended beyond those uploading video submissions to include online discourse with more than 17,000 and 21,000 YouTube comments posted following the Democratic and GOP CNN-YouTube debates (Kirk &

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<sup>7</sup> This may be partly attributed to character constraints of the technology. For example, Twitter users are limited to 140-character tweets.

Schill, 2011). What's more, an analysis of the questions asked in these debates found that participation was more than superficial, with participants addressing substantive policy concerns (Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011). Such optimism is nonetheless tempered by the fact that questions selected by CNN – the gatekeeper of these virtual town hall debates – were unreflective of the diversity of uploaded questions submitted to the network. Stromer-Galley and Bryant (2011) found that selected questions covered topics pertaining to culture wars and campaign strategy more often than policy issues.

While the shift to virtual town hall formats through social and digital media arguably offers the public more inclusion in setting the debate agenda, research on what some refer to as “second-level digital divide” or the “experiential divide” suggests members of the public on the lower economic spectrum and/or aging segments of the population may lack the skills necessary to partake in these virtual forums (Chadwick, 2006; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Min, 2010). Those in poorer, rural areas are thus disadvantaged by a town hall format influenced by social and digital media (Moretti, 2007). To date, the literature (e.g. McKinney & Rill, 2009; Ricke, 2010) exploring digital and social media influence on debates is focused on media effects; however, as the technology expands opportunities for certain segments of the electorate while alienating others, we may also observe variance in question content or tone under this format. For example, we could see heightened emphasis on social issues as younger segments of the population become more active in the agenda-setting process of debates. We could also see heightened cynicism, as more people disenfranchised by politics partake in the debate process. Although expectations are unclear, it is worth accounting for the influence of social and digital media on the debate agenda, particularly since Facebook, Google, MySpace, and Twitter have all co-sponsored debates since the groundbreaking CNN-YouTube partnership in 2007.

## **In Conclusion**

Both press panels and the single-moderator format places the debate agenda in the hands of journalists – journalists often constrained by news norms and values, profit pressures and market competition. For better or worse, the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates institutionalized the participation of press moderators, greatly expanding the influence of journalists over electoral process (Meadow & Jackson-Beeck, 1978; Windt, 1994). Friedenberg (1994) has suggested that the primary power players (e.g. journalists and candidates) have little incentive for making debates an educational forum. Moderators are conditioned to keep the debates entertaining to a mass audience (Graber, 2001). Designed by the Commission on Presidential Debates to make the campaigns more inclusive, the town hall format transfers the agenda-setting function from the media to members of the public. Since their inception in 1992, presidential campaigns hold at least one town hall style debate per election year. However, media moderators retain a degree of gatekeeping authority nonetheless through their selection of the audience questions, topics, and occasional interjections.

Since we know that exposure to debates can heighten the salience of candidate policy stances and specific policy issues for voters (Swanson & Swanson, 1978; Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001), the content and tone of question agendas are increasingly important due to deficiencies in campaign news coverage, emerging debate rules and formats, and the proliferation of mediated campaign debates across electoral contexts. Given the more competitive state of campaign news coverage, the news values and routines media moderators operate under, and evolving debate format structures, this dissertation addresses four broadly outlined research questions. Before outlining the methodological framework in the following chapter, I offer the following research questions guiding this research:

RQ1: Who and what shapes the electoral debate agenda? In other words, which official sources are cited and which types of policy issues are rendered salient – and under what conditions?

RQ2: Are the soft news, campaign issues, and infotainment topics emphasized in campaign coverage also present in the content of electoral debates – and under what conditions?

RQ3: Are the news values of conflict, clash, and cynicism emphasized in the tone of campaign coverage also present in the content of electoral debates – and under what conditions?

RQ4: Through sponsorship, virtual town halls, or electronic question submissions, what role do digital and social media play in influencing electoral debate content and tone?

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY: QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

To address the research questions I conduct a quantitative content analysis. Content analysis is a strong method for capturing a systemic summary of media messages and is most appropriate for describing content characteristics (Neuendorf, 2002; Keyton, 2011). Content analysis is routinely text driven, problem driven or method driven (Krippendorff, 2004). This study is problem driven insofar that it is motivated by democratic concerns regarding low voter knowledge and the quality of campaign news. Peripherally, this research is motivated by the availability of rich texts (e.g. archived debate transcripts) which enables analysis that extends beyond a single election year and across electoral contexts. The proposed content analysis extends across electoral contexts to improve external validity of the findings.

Unlike other content analysis studies examining debates through the rhetorical nuances of the candidates (e.g. Meadow & Jackson-Beeck, 1978; Friedenberg, 1994), this study is squarely focused on the role of the media. The scope of this media focus explores the agenda-setting and gatekeeping functions of the news media in the debate context; these functions are often influenced by medium, organization, commercial pressures, news values, and news routines. To unmask the debate agenda and isolate conditions of particular content and tone characteristics, I first build an exhaustive data set tapping the debate question as the primary unit of analysis. This unit of analysis best satisfies the research questions since they capture the agenda-setting function of participating journalists. The data set lends itself to a number of analyses that capture not only a systemic picture of debate agendas – over time and across formats – but serves as a crucial step in identifying variables predictive of particular agenda content characteristics and tone.

## Sampling

I gathered transcripts from three unique electoral contexts: 1) U.S. general election presidential and vice presidential debates; 2) primary presidential debates; and 3) state-level debates inclusive of Senate and gubernatorial debates. These three unique electoral contexts supply a much larger sample size than previous research exploring debate content and increase the likelihood of finding variance in coding values. By limiting the sample frame to televised debates, I narrow the scope to texts most relevant to understanding news influence since the role of journalists is most prominent within mediated electoral debates. Krippendorff (2004) refers to this type of purposive sampling as relevance sampling, or the process of reducing texts and units included based on their ability to satisfy the needs of the research questions.

According to Krippendorff (2004), purposive relevance sampling is more systemic than simple convenience sampling, which is ultimately more susceptible to bias. While purposive sampling has its limitations and can impede on a researcher's ability to make generalizations, the full sample ( $N = 1,950$ ) is as exhaustive as possible given the availability of texts. By including *every* question from the transcripts, I further minimize sampling bias. Since all questions from selected transcripts are included in the data set prior to analysis, I safeguard against predispositions to questions that best fit expected outcomes.

The sample is also limited to debates in which complete transcripts are available. This is an important parameter, considering that partial transcripts supplied by the media often focus on particularly shocking or sensational debate moments; using complete transcripts helps avoid inflating the presence of questions focused on campaign issues, attacks, cynicism etc. Thus, each

unique question asked in the transcripts is included as cases in the dataset.<sup>8</sup> While the proposed method of sampling is largely purposive, the dataset is exhaustive nonetheless.<sup>9</sup>

### **General Election Sample**

Most research to date has focused on the most watched and most institutionalized electoral debates: the presidential debates. The subsample includes all televised general election U.S. presidential debates in their entirety, beginning with the first Kennedy-Nixon debate held on September 26, 1960 to the third Obama-Romney debate on October 22, 2012. Each transcript is obtained through the Commission on Presidential Debates' online archive.<sup>10</sup> This subsample totals 30 debates (N = 496). They include questions from six town hall style debates and questions from a balance of single-moderator and multi-journalist press panel formats. The subsample also includes questions across three distinct debate agendas: domestic policy, foreign policy, and mixed agendas (see Appendix B).

The dataset also includes every question asked in a televised vice presidential debate (see Appendix B). Since vice presidential candidates may not garner the same level of respect as presidential candidates, particularly incumbent presidents, this is an important subsample to include. For example, the work of Benoit (2011) has shown that vice presidential debates offer less policy content and more character and traits content than presidential debates. What's more, subtleties in content variance may also influence the tone of questions. In other words, content may indeed vary between presidential and vice presidential debates. Thus, the dataset includes all televised vice presidential debate questions from the 1976 Mondale-Dole debate to the 2012 Biden-Ryan debate. Since a vice presidential debate was not held in 1980, this subsample totals 9

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<sup>8</sup> Questions repeated for clarification and questions repeated to pose to competing candidate(s) are omitted from the analysis to avoid redundancy.

<sup>9</sup> The dataset includes 66 questions asked by candidates to competing candidates on stage; these questions were excluded from samples used in the analyses.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=debate-transcripts>

debates (N = 162). When collapsed with presidential general election debates, the total general election sample is N=658. Complete transcripts were obtained through the Commission on Presidential Debates' online archive.

### **Presidential Primaries**

Since primary debates feature a number of candidates which exceeds general election debates and these debates are party-specific, the question content of the media may reflect these characteristics. While televised primary debates first appeared prior to the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, these campaign events were sparsely held until the mid-1980s. It was not until the 1984 campaign that primary debates became institutionalized; today they far outnumber general election debates.

Since full transcripts of primary debates prior to the year 2000 are extremely limited, this primaries subsample spans from 2000-2012 and includes transcripts obtained through the American Presidency Project, an online database provided by the University of California at Santa Barbara.<sup>11</sup> These transcripts are limited to 2 Democratic and 5 Republican debates for the 2000 primaries; 8 Democratic debates for the 2004 primaries; 5 Democratic, 5 Republican, and 1 dual-party debate for the 2008 primaries; and 8 Republican debates for the 2012 primaries (see Appendix D). While the unavailability of texts from older election cycles limits the ability to draw agenda inferences across time for this particular subsample, the 34-debate sample (N=981) does, however, include a mix of debates from both parties and encompasses debates throughout the primary process – those held early with numerous candidates and those falling closer to the general election when parties have reduced the number of potential nominees to two candidates. This subsample also improves the diversity of media moderators throughout the full data set and is inclusive of press panels, single-moderator, and town hall formats.

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/debates.php>



## **State-Level Races**

In order to generalize findings to non-presidential contexts and move from the national political arena to statewide politics, I include a subsample of U.S. Senate and gubernatorial debates (see Appendix E). Again, availability of complete transcripts from older election years is sparse. Using Purdue University's online C-SPAN Archives and transcripts supplied by various national media, I include 20 state-level debates in the dataset (N=311) spanning from 2000-2012.<sup>12</sup> While most of these transcripts fall within the last few election cycles, the transcripts do cover debates held in both midterm and presidential years, and offer balance among debate format diversity and diversity of geographic location. One sampling limitation results from the fact that published Senate and gubernatorial transcripts are more accessible for high profile, competitive races – a variable controlled for in my regression models.

## **New Media Sponsored**

To address what I anticipate as the future of electoral debate sponsorship, I also identify a subsample of debates sponsored or co-sponsored by digital media entities, chiefly social media. This strengthens the sample of question cases stemming from members of the public. Furthermore, this unique sample opens up the possibility of making inferences between the traditional town hall format and the virtual town hall format, where participants submit questions through social and digital media. Since social media sponsorship is just beginning to emerge, the limitation of this subsample lies in its size. To date, debates falling under this sponsorship model are limited to seven (N=203), beginning with the July 2007 CNN/YouTube Democratic primary and November 2007 CNN/YouTube GOP primary debates. Since then, Facebook partnered with ABC for a Democratic primary debate in January of 2008; MySpace teamed with MTV and the

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<sup>12</sup> Since C-SPAN Archives include file footage but not necessarily complete transcripts, in some cases this state-level data source is coupled with reputable national and local media sources publishing debate transcripts to ensure that all questions are included as cases.

Associated Press to sponsor a virtual primary debate in February of 2008; Fox News and Google teamed for a GOP primary debate in 2011; and, most recently, Facebook and NBC News co-sponsored a GOP primary in January of 2012.<sup>13</sup>

While purposive sampling has its limitations and can impede on a researcher's ability to make generalizations, the full sample (N=1,950) is as exhaustive as possible given the availability of texts and is the first to combine question data from multiple election years and contexts. According to Krippendorff (2004), purposive relevance sampling is more systemic than simple convenience sampling that is more susceptible to bias. Moreover, by including *every* question from the transcripts selected, I minimize any possibility of sampling bias.

### **Content Analysis Methods**

Content analyses typically include two distinct types of content: manifest and latent content. Manifest content concerns surface-level characteristics that are concrete and uninfluenced by interpretation (Benoit, 2011). This type of undisputable content coding covers the independent variables – all of which address rules, format nuances, moderator characteristics, electoral context, and question source. The second part of the analysis involves the coding of more sensitive latent content, which is material classified according to interpretation or a more subjective evaluative process (Krippendorff, 2004; Benoit, 2011). This more interpretive content coding advances analysis beyond denotative meaning to include connotative meaning; Krippendorff (2004) refers to this process as “semantic validity.”

The dependent variables examining content and tone of debate questions fall under the umbrella of latent content. Latent content is shaped by symbolic meaning or meaning unrecognizable to most laypeople (and software). Meaning is often embedded implicitly and

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<sup>13</sup> The Tea Party also hosted a Twitter “town hall” debate during the 2010 midterm elections but a closer examination of the transcript revealed participants were people of influence from conservative think tanks and nonprofits rather than members of the public. Thus, this particular transcript was excluded from the sample.

requires a high degree of understanding of concepts and context of the content coded for (Krippendorff, 2004; Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). For this reason, Benoit (2011) recommends human coders over software because interpretations become difficult for computers to make. Since Krippendorff (2011) states that coders influence results by way of personal predispositions and common values, it is not uncommon for latent coding to yield lower reliability values than manifest content. Therefore, it is paramount that coders have familiarity with concepts, come from similar educational and professional backgrounds, and possess comparable levels of cognitive ability to accurately identify content characteristics (Peter & Lauf, 2002).

### **Human Coders and Training**

Using funds from the Manship School of Communication's Hamilton Fellowship, two research assistants were trained to handle the primary coding work. Although I independently coded for manifest content (i.e. independent variables and controls), the research assistants executed coding for all interpretive latent content (i.e. all dependent variables) in order to maintain objective results and increase transparency. These research assistants were senior political communication undergraduates with intimate knowledge of the concepts. Additionally, I trained an alternate third coder, also an advanced political communication undergraduate, who handled a smaller subsample (20%). Training a third coder on standby factors in flexibility for the unexpected (e.g. if a primary coder falls behind or cannot handle the scope of the work).

The training process called for the development of code sheets, concept guides, and three rigorous practice sessions with all three coders and the primary researcher present. Training sessions were structured to reach consensus on the content categories but also to minimize the likelihood of coding cases as "other," which Krippendorff (2011) urges to use sparingly in order to establish sufficient variance in the dataset. Fewer cases of content categories can hinder the

reliability of the analysis. Research assistants were allowed to code independently only after concepts met .700-level agreement during the training sessions. Additionally, bi-weekly meetings were held throughout the four-month coding period to reinforce concepts and maintain acceptable inter-coder reliability. Such training measures are necessary steps in improving the validity of any content analysis (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989).

### **Concepts and Variables**

Deriving coding schemes driven by theory and prior research improves validity and also improves inter-coder reliability values (Keyton, 2011; Hayes, 2005). Pilot studies also help in signaling problems with coding concepts, particularly for variables unaddressed by previous literature. Thus, I conceptualize (latent content) dependent variables according to previous literature focused on content characteristics and tone of campaign coverage and, to a lesser extent, from a separate study utilizing a smaller sample (N=429) of general election debate questions (see Turcotte, forthcoming). See Appendix A for coding examples.

### **Dependent Variables**

Before assessing media influence on the content and tone of debate agendas, it is also important to acknowledge that exogenous influences – including competing media, political elite, and the public – can shape the agendas of news professionals (Cook, 1998). The agenda-building process, however, does not uniformly spread the media's attention across stakeholders. Despite the expansion of polling, the press agenda and priorities of political elite often receive more spotlight than the priorities of the public. According to the work of Hayes (2008), agenda-setting effects are most powerful when the media echoes the agenda of candidates; he refers to this process as agenda convergence. Coding for the political elites and media elites referenced in debate questions treads new territory on this important aspect of agenda convergence research,

since the convergence of elite agendas is more apt to inform and influence the public agenda. McCombs (2004) defines agenda convergence as the extent to which policymakers set the media agenda, whereas “intermedia” agenda-setting occurs when the agenda of elite media trickles down and is adopted by secondary or competing media outlets.

Questions were coded for embedded citations in order to assess the extent to which agenda convergence occurs in the debate context. Agenda convergence is measured through a categorical Media Cite variable. Coders assigned a “0” for questions that did not reference an exogenous source; a “1” for those citing traditional media; a “2” citing online media; a “3” for those citing candidate statements; a “4” for those citing campaign staffers; a “5” for those citing political ads; a “6” for those citing public officials; a “7” for those citing polls; an “8” for those citing nonprofit sources; a “9” for those citing members of the public; and a “10” for those citing other sources. Categories were collapsed to create dummy variables to assess the frequency with which 1) public concerns were referenced; 2) the talking points of campaigns were referenced; and 3) the priorities of the media were referenced. This variable determines the extent to which agenda convergence and intermedia agenda-setting occurs in the debate context while exposing exogenous influences of debate questions.

In addressing the first content variable measuring substance, I differentiate between hard news and soft news questions. Hamilton (2004) defines hard news as content primarily pertaining to public affairs information and soft news as content with “low levels of public affairs information” (p. 15). More specifically, soft news content caters to human interest angles, lifestyle, character, and other more entertainment-driven topics rather than policy matters. For this dichotomous variable, all questions were assigned a “1” for having primarily a hard news focus or a “0” for those with a soft news focus.

The next content variable differentiates between questions pertaining to policy issues and those pertaining to campaign issues. Patterson's (1980) work found that election news more often emphasizes campaign issues, meaning issues focused on candidate statements and behavior on the campaign trail, because these stories are more dramatic and more easily covered than policy matters. These campaign issues often capture mistakes or gaffes made by the candidate but can also include strategic topics as well. Patterson (1980) defines policy issues as content that seeks clarity on policy problems. For this dichotomous variable, all questions were assigned a "1" for having a primary policy issue focus or a "0" for having a campaign issue focus. To unmask additional layers to campaign issue content I also look to the work of other scholars (e.g. Kahn, 1991; Kahn, 1995; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Kaplan et al., 2005) who developed more specificity of campaign news by categorizing content according to: 1) policy issues; 2) character and traits; 3) horserace; and 4) strategy and tactics. I extend these categories to create a second, more nuanced nominal variable for assessing the content of debate questions.

Character and traits content is conceptualized according to personal or professional traits (i.e. leadership, values, integrity etc.). Horserace content refers to questions dealing with the competitive aspects of the race such as polls or, in other words, which candidate is ahead and which candidate is behind (see Fallows, 1996; Lawrence, 2000). Strategy and tactics questions encompass all aspects of campaign operations including (but not limited to) motivations, attacks, and political advertising (see Kahn, 1991/1995). Ultimately, this type of electoral focus emphasizes what Epstein (1973) refers to as the "pragmatics" of elections. These concepts commonly fall under the umbrella of "game-frames" or "strategy" frames often utilized in assessing content of campaign news coverage (Aalberg, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2011). Coders assigned a "1" for all questions with a primary policy focus; a "2" for personal character; a "3"

for professional traits; a “4” for horserace; and a “5” for strategy and tactics.<sup>14</sup> Due to the low frequency of horserace questions – accounting for just 1.2% of the total sample (N=23) – and given that this content also falls under conceptualizations of strategy and tactics content, these questions were collapsed into the strategy and tactics category prior to data analysis. Dummy variables were then created to parse out and analyze individual content categories.

Moving on to the next set of dependent variables, tone is measured according to three dichotomous variables. These variables satisfy the news value of conflict but also emphasize less desirable aspects of electoral politics: clash, attacks, and cynicism. First, a variable measures the presence of clash in debate questions. Clash is best conceptualized as the solicitation of conflict or difference of “ideas” or “positions” (Carlin et al., 2009). Clash questions may also emphasize difference in character. These questions are recognizable through their insistence that candidates characterize the views and stances of their opponents, often fueling distance or polarization between the candidates. Although clash questions can assist voters in learning about policy differences among candidates, they may also produce an environment of disharmony, and exposure to such conflict may further disengage the public from partaking in electoral politics (Forgette & Morris, 2006). All questions were assigned a “1” for the presence of clash or a “0” for the absence of clash.

According to many scholars, news negativity is more problematic in election years, as journalists attack candidates in ways that overstep the scope of traditional watchdog journalism (Sabato, 1992; Patterson, 1996; Bennett & Serrin, 2005). Attacks are conceptualized as statements that go beyond clarification and inquisition in order to emphasize personal or professional flaws, usually through an unnecessarily hostile tone. Coders were trained to

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<sup>14</sup> Coders initially drew distinctions between personal character and professional traits, treating them as two distinct content categories, but these were later collapsed into a single character and traits category because questions routinely referenced both.

consider this variable through the lens of political advertising and ask themselves whether the content in the debate question would be coded as an attack ad if campaign advertising was the domain of the study. All questions were assigned a “1” if their tone attacked a candidate or a “0” for the absence of an attack.

Another aspect of tone relevant to conflict-driven news coverage of elections concerns the presence of cynicism. In fact, there’s evidence to suggest public affairs news accentuates the most negative elements of politics and, consequently, fuels cynicism among the electorate (Patterson, 1994/1996; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996/1997; Moy & Pfau, 2000). As Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 145) succinctly state, “People learn about the motives of political actors through the media and their representations of political action. The form of this representation is primarily, but not exclusively, strategic and oppositional.” Political cynicism is conceptualized as the absence of trust; cynicism emphasizes motivations of self-interest over collective interest while questioning the agenda of elected officials (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Thus, I measure *cynicism* in the debate context by coding content appealing to self-interest and distrust; this content includes strategy and tactics content, gaffes, broken promises, character flaws, mudslinging, pandering, “flip-flopping,” scandal, and dirty money. All questions with cynical tones present were assigned a “1” and those absent of cynicism were assigned a “0.”

Coders were initially asked to differentiate between individual cynicism portraying individual candidates as untrustworthy versus institutional cynicism, which suggests the overarching political system is broken. Content coded for institutional cynicism include references to Washington gridlock, politics as usual, special interests, and voter apathy and are not reflective of a particular candidate. This variable is of particular interest since McCombs (2004) cautions that media cynicism begets public cynicism; moreover, effects studies have



shown that exposure to political cynicism disengages the public from the electoral process (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Due to the subjectivity of these individual versus institutional distinctions and low frequency of cynicism questions altogether, accounting for 16.2% of the total sample (N=306), both types were collapsed into a single cynicism variable.

### **Independent Variables**

The first key independent variable isolates debate format. Based on what we know about differences between the public and press agenda (Just et al., 1996; Morello, 2005; Hart & Jarvis, 1997), coding for format allows for more systemic comparisons between press questions and questions stemming from members of the public. For example, research has shown that format influences the extent of conflict in debates; town hall agendas were found to be less conflict-driven than those set by media moderators (Eveland, McLeod, & Nathanson, 1994). Moreover, comparisons between the press panel and single moderator formats allow for assessment of two formats with varying levels of press input in the debate agenda. In addition, I include a category for “virtual” town hall debates, to account for formats where public questions were submitted through digital/social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, etc.). Questions appearing in press panel debates were assigned a “1”; those in single moderator debates a “2”; those in town hall debates a “3”; those in virtual town hall debates a “4”; and hybrid formats received a “5.”<sup>15</sup> Also in response to electronic media influence in the debate process, I include a Web submission variable assigned to any questions submitted through social and digital media. This is an important distinction to include since traditional format debates, too, at times, solicit a few questions from the viewing audience.

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<sup>15</sup> To constitute a hybrid format classification, at least 1/3 of questions in the debate had to be generated by members of the public. (In non-general election debates it is not uncommon to split time between press panel and town hall format in a single debate).

The next set of coding categories provide more nuanced measures of media influence by accounting for moderator characteristics and the characteristics of each individual question source. To avoid falsely inferring that format influences debate agendas, I consider the growing trend of moderators interjecting in the town hall format by introducing their own questions. For example, CNN's Candy Crowley asked 8 of 19 questions included in the 'public' town hall agenda for the second 2012 Obama-Romney debate. Thus, relying on a simple format variable runs the risk of falsely attributing influence. I remedy this by including two additional, and, arguably, stronger measures of influence: moderator characteristics and question source.

The question source variable calls for coding each question according to who asked it. This variable also enables a more nuanced analysis of the press panel format, which includes journalists from varying mediums and news outlets participating in setting the debate agenda. For the categorical source variable, questions are assigned a "1" when asked by citizens, a "2" when asked by a network journalist, a "3" for cable journalist, a "4" for local broadcast journalist, a "5" for a national print journalist, a "6" for local print journalist, a "7" for nonprofit journalist, an "8" for persons from a non-media nonprofit, a "9" for wire service, a "10" for radio journalist, an "11" for online journalist/blogger, and a "12" for candidate source.<sup>16</sup>

These variables addressing the professional background of question sources and moderators are important, considering extant scholarship has found that campaign news coverage – both content and tone – varies according to profit pressures and ownership (Hamilton, 2004; Dunaway, 2008/2012). For example, one might expect to find content differences between commercial media and nonprofit media or variance across mediums. The work of Farnsworth and Lichter (2011) has shown that campaign coverage is less substantive for commercial media

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<sup>16</sup> As a result of low frequencies, wire service sources ( $N=4$ ) were collapsed into the national print source category, as were questions with sources from online media ( $N=18$ ).

than nonprofit outlets. What's more, Chaffee and Kanihan (1997) found that television outlets emphasize candidate traits and personality politics more frequently than print; whereas print devotes more coverage to policy news. Moy and Pfau's research (2000) suggested print media offers less cynical coverage than broadcast. Furthermore, Ridout and Mellen (2007) found that broadcast media agendas are less likely to converge with candidate agendas than print since broadcast is more committed to strategy, tactics, and horserace content. Since competitive pressures for cable moderators and journalists may be exacerbated by the 24-hour news hole, distinctions may also for questions with cable press sources. Inversely, local journalists who do not have to contend with the competitive pressures of the national stage may operate under slightly varied news norms and values – and content may reflect that.

Drawing from the source variable, a similar coding scheme is utilized for a moderator variable that categorizes each question according to characteristics of that particular debate moderator. This variable ultimately measures the news background of the moderating journalist: network television, cable television, local broadcast, national publication, local publication, nonprofit media, wire service, radio, and online media. I also include two dichotomous variables for moderator race (“1/0” for presence or absence of a minority moderator) and moderator gender (“1/0” for presence or absence of female moderator), as these traits could influence agenda content and tone.<sup>17</sup> For example, the work of Clayman et al. (2012) showed that female journalists are more aggressive in their tone of questioning. We also know that a lack of gender and ethnic diversity in the newsroom has plagued journalism for decades; reporters with minority backgrounds may feel increased pressure to stand out or satisfy particular news values or commercial pressures. Despite scholarship that parses out journalist-level influence from

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<sup>17</sup> While this data set aims to capture the first systemic overview of electoral debate agendas it is worth noting that analysis is strictly text-based, limited to verbal communication and does not include body language or other visual cues expressed by the moderators or members of the public participating in the debates.

institutional media influences of campaign coverage (see Clayman et al., 2012) these variables have largely been ignored in the domain of debates.<sup>18</sup>

To consider another often overlooked area of agenda influence, I also include two sponsorship variables. The first sponsorship variable codes questions according to whether they came from a debate sponsored by the media. This dichotomous variable treats any debate solely sponsored *or* co-sponsored by the media as “1” whereas questions coming from debates with solely nonprofit (e.g. orgs such as The League of Women Voters or political parties) sponsorship are coded as “0.” This is a variable worthy of testing, considering debate scholar Alan Schroeder (2000) has observed increasing media sponsorship of debates, particularly through the expansion of cable television and increasing involvement from national media in the primary debate process. The second, digital media sponsor variable, accounts for the absence or presence of a digital and social media sponsor: Google, MySpace, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Questions from debates which include a digital and social media sponsor were assigned a “1” whereas those in debates without digital/social media sponsorship received a “0.” This variable can tell us whether nontraditional media sponsorship performs any differently than traditional media in terms of agenda outcomes.

Several additional covariates are used in order to control for electoral and debate context. Since scholars (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Prior, 2007; Cohen, 2008) have shown evidence to suggest that campaign coverage grew increasingly hostile and more infotainment driven after the advent of media choice, I include debate year as a continuous variable. I also code for debate type by indicating whether the question comes from a presidential (“1”), vice presidential (“2”), GOP primary (“3”), Democratic primary (“4”), Senate (“5”) or gubernatorial (“6”) debate. In order to generate stronger subsamples, GOP and Democratic primary debates were collapsed into

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<sup>18</sup> Race and gender controls are also extended to the question source variable.

a single primary category and Senate and gubernatorial debate questions were collapsed into a single state-level category. Research has shown that vice presidential debates include more clash and conflict (Carlin et al., 2009) and less policy information (Benoit, 2011), thus reinforcing the possibility that agenda content and/or tone is partially dependent on the type of election. This variable enables comparisons across electoral contexts and determines the extent to which preliminary findings in presidential debates are generalizable to other races – both national and statewide. Moreover, dummy variables allow me to control for specific electoral contexts.

Covariates unique to debate rules are also included in the content analysis. To establish debate context, I code for debate topic, which categorizes questions according to whether they stem from domestic policy debates, foreign policy debates, or mixed-agenda debates. Since the spectrum of possible topics is limited in foreign policy debates, it is reasonable to expect these forums may offer fewer opportunities for campaign tactics, attacks, and other deviations from policy. It is worth noting, however, that this variable is far less applicable to debates beyond the general election presidential context. Each question received a “1” when falling in a domestic policy debate, a “2” for falling in a mixed-agenda debate, and a “3” when falling in a foreign policy debate. A dummy variable was then created to create a foreign policy debate control. Secondly, two continuous rules variables measuring both debate length (in minutes) and question response time (in seconds) were included because lengthier debates and lengthier response times for candidates may encourage more substantive questions or a deviation from sound-bite style journalism, which would hold implications for both question content and tone.

Electoral context is established by including candidate and contest specific variables. Since Fallows (2008) qualitatively found less agenda substance in debate contexts with multiple candidates (chiefly the presidential primaries), I included a continuous candidate number

variable that records the number of candidates participating in the debate. This variable also serves as a proxy for the lifecycle of a campaign, with higher numbers of candidates indicative of questions asked earlier in the campaign process. Campaign lifecycle influences the volume of horserace coverage and policy coverage in the news, as the media focus on less substantive narratives later in an election cycle (Dunaway & Stein, 2013; Patterson, 1994).

Furthermore, I include a dichotomous candidate gender variable to signal whether a female is participating in the debate and a candidate race variable to signal whether a racial/ethnic minority is participating in the debate. These variables may also play a role in shaping debate agendas, as questioners may be more selective when deploying an adversarial tone depending on the background of participating candidates. For example, Pew research demonstrated a lengthy honeymoon period between the press and minority candidate Barack Obama; inversely, journalists were routinely criticized for treating Democrat Geraldine Ferraro and Republican Sarah Palin unfairly when they landed on the ticket of their respective presidential campaigns. Questions asked in a debate with a female candidate presence received a “1” while those asked in a male-only debate were coded as “0.” An identical coding scheme was used for the candidate race variable, with a “1” assigned to questions in debates with minority candidates present or a “0” for their absence. Two other contest-specific variables round out the electoral controls.

Since incumbency is believed to influence news coverage of elections, this element may also play a role in shaping debate agendas. For example, Arnold’s (2004) research found that press coverage of Congress is more favorable for incumbents; inversely, Cohen (2008) cited a negativity bias for how campaign news covers incumbent presidents. Carlin et al. (2009) also found that incumbency fosters heightened levels of clash and conflict in presidential debates.

Thus, I include an incumbency variable indicating the presence (“1”) or absence (“0”) of a participating incumbent for each question. Finally, a competition variable is also introduced to measure the tightness of the race. This variable has serious content implications since tighter races yield an increase in news media emphasis on horserace coverage and polls (Dunaway & Stein, 2013). As Hayes (2010) observes, competitive races are less likely to reflect the candidate’s agenda as policy becomes secondary to strategy, tactics, and horserace narratives. Competition is measured as a continuous variable based on the spread of final vote count percentage.<sup>19</sup>

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

Upon completion of coding, I assessed Kappa values for each dependent variable using a 20% subsample from the full data set, with subsample cases selected systemically for every fifth case in the complete data set. The data set is arranged in temporal order according to debate type to avoid oversampling of a particular electoral context or time period. Cohen’s Kappa is far more advanced than Holsti’s method since it also accounts for chance agreement and the possibility that coders have different probabilities of categorically labeling cases (Hayes, 2005; Benoit, 2011). While Krippendorff’s Alpha is arguably a most stringent test for measuring inter-coder reliability, it is unnecessary for larger samples and Cohen’s Kappa is considered acceptable for nominal variables (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005).<sup>20</sup>

The data analysis advances in two steps, moving from the presentation of descriptive statistics and correlations to a series of logistic regression models that introduce a number of

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<sup>19</sup> For questions asked in primary debates, the competition variable is determined by averaging the vote count spread for the five primary contests held closest to the date of the debate.

<sup>20</sup> Krippendorff’s Alpha also accounts for the “absence of a statistical relationship between a series of units and how they are coded” (Krippendorff, 2011, p. 98). Critics of Cohen’s Kappa contend the measure is less effective at accounting for coder predispositions and may reward coder disagreement and penalize coder agreement when assessing inter-rater reliability (Krippendorff, 2011; Zwick, 1988). Nonetheless, Kappa measures are considered sufficient for large sample sizes and nominal variables (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005).

covariates. The final methodological phase involves the development of logistic regression models since the dependent variables of interest are dichotomous. I enhance the precision of these models by also assessing goodness of fit through Hosmer and Lemeshow tests. These statistical methods help to determine the level of influence format and media variables have on debate agendas and on the substance and tone of discourse.<sup>21</sup> These models also enable controls for other influencers of the debate agenda (e.g. incumbency, the number of candidates etc.) and bring the research closer in assessing causality. Lastly, predicted probabilities are presented for variables with particularly substantial effects; these probabilities are computed to provide better explanations of the relationships and synthesize the data in a more visually appealing format.

In the following results chapters I introduce hypotheses and findings for assessing agenda convergence, question content, question tone, and the influence of digital and social media on the debate agenda. First, I explore the relationship between format and media variables and agenda convergence in Chapter 5.

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<sup>21</sup> Interaction effects were also tested for; only strong interaction effects are included in the regression models (see subsequent results chapters).



## CHAPTER 5

### CONVERGENCE: EXOGENOUS INFLUENCES OF DEBATE AGENDAS

The work of Shoemaker and Reese (1991) has shown that in addition to individual journalist predispositions and institutional news norms and routines, exogenous influences can also have a stake in shaping agendas. Although the media are the final “arbiters” of what is newsworthy, the agenda-setting process can draw influence from competing media, political elite and, to a lesser extent, the public (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Cook, 1998). Since the news media do not act alone in setting the agenda, it is important to consider external sources of influence and the news media’s propensity to rely on these sources.

Timothy Cook’s (1998) theory of an institutional press suggests uniformity in news gathering processes but also uniformity in news content. News professionals routinely look to other media sources when setting the news agenda (Fallows, 1996; Cook, 1998). This symbiotic relationship across news outlets somewhat streamlines the mainstream news agenda. The news media’s emphasis on “official” sources offers a pathway for political elite influence (Cook, 1998; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). In relying on elite source, public officials, candidates, and political pundits have a voice in shaping the political agenda. Moreover, the rise of public opinion polling has extended limited agenda-setting functions to the people. In other words, news professionals no longer operate in a vacuum, as the interests of competing media, political elite, and the public may also influence the press agenda.

Measuring agenda convergence through observations of citations in debate questions, I explore this arm of agenda-setting research to electoral debate agendas. Given that the work of Hayes (2008/2010) has demonstrated that the talking points of elites are particularly persuasive when the news media echo their messages – finding that agenda-setting effects are more

powerful when the agendas of political elite converge with the news media's – it is worth extending this work to the debate context. Although well documented in news coverage, the extent to which agenda convergence occurs in the debate context remains unknown.

The following chapter looks to add another layer of understanding to the debate agenda by testing the extent to which three key sources of agenda-setting influence are cited and referenced in the questions posed to the candidates: 1) the media; 2) political elites; and 3) the public. I explore these exogenous influences of debate agendas by content analyzing the nature of the sources cited in debate questions, testing relationships across various format, moderator, source, and sponsorship variables.

### **Exogenous Media Influence and Debate Agendas**

Since following the lead of competing media functions as a time-saving news routine, and as a response to news competition, we should expect to find variance dependent on the level of commercial news influence in particular formats. And since moderators reflect various media characteristics, we might also expect to find the reliance on citing the media to vary according to the backgrounds of the moderating journalist and the news pressures and routines they are conditioned to respond to. For example, we should expect that nonprofit journalists have more autonomy in setting the news agenda than news professionals with competing broadcast or print media and, thus, less likely to echo the concerns of other media outlets. Since moderating local journalists are not competing on a national stage, they too, may be less likely to facilitate an agenda echoing other media.

As a result of blurring characteristics across formats, these relationships must also be explored at the source level of the questions. We should expect that agenda convergence is less likely to occur for questioners who do not operate under norms and routines of commercial news

(e.g. nonprofit journalists and members of the public). Moreover, sources away from the national news limelight should also be less reliant on looking to external media sources in generating their debate questions. Lastly, debates sponsored by commercial media should also influence the reliance of exogenous agenda-building sources on question content.

To measure all three exogenous influence variables, research assistants were asked to code each question using a categorical Citation variable in which they assigned a value based on primary source cited in the debate question. Questions were content analyzed for embedded citations as a measure of agenda convergence. Research assistants assigned a value based on whether the question cited the media, various political elite, or the public. Coders assigned a “0” for questions that did not reference an exogenous source; a “1” for those citing traditional media; a “2” citing online media; a “3” for those citing candidate statements; a “4” for those citing campaign staffers; a “5” for those citing political ads; a “6” for those citing public officials; a “7” for those citing polls; an “8” for those citing nonprofit sources; a “9” for those citing members of the public; and a “10” for those citing other sources. A Kappa value of .67 was assessed for the citation variable using a 20% subsample from the full data set, with subsample cases selected systemically for every fifth case in the data set.<sup>22</sup>

I eliminate 66 questions posed by candidates to other candidates since they are unreflective of the independent variables of interest. Candidate-to-candidate questioning seldom occurs in electoral debates, resulting in a subsample too small to find significant effects. Thus, I omit them from the study, leaving a sample size of 1,884 questions. Of the sample, 35.2% (N=663) of questions cited an exogenous influence; questions without a citation of any kind were

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<sup>22</sup> This Kappa value is a conservative value for two reasons: 1) in cases with more than one citation coders were forced to discern the most dominant/most germane citation to the crux of the question in order to maintain mutual exclusivity of categories; and 2) this value reflects Kappa scores for the full question citation variable prior to the collapsing of categories to create a political elite citation variable.

coded as “0.” A dummy dependent variable was used to parse out only questions citing other media (“1”) from questions that did not cite other media (“0”). Questions coded as media cites included references to headlines, press commentary, media interviews, and soundbites; they include both cites which identify a specific media outlet or news professional and cites that reference stories, interviews, and commentary without explicitly stating which news source comments were derived from.

First, I find that the frequency of questions citing the media is markedly low, accounting for just 1% of the total sample. This leaves just 19 cases in the entire dataset – too few to draw inferences from.<sup>23</sup> The infrequency of cases citing other media suggests that 1) this is not a phenomenon in the debate context and 2) drawing inferences based on this small of a sub-sample is simply impossible. Therefore, this component of the study was dropped from further analysis.<sup>24</sup> The data suggest debate questions are much more prone to echoing the agenda of political elite than piggybacking on other news sources.

### **Exogenous Political Influence and Debate Agendas**

Scholarship has shown that news professionals routinely rely on official sources to build the media agenda (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996; Fallows, 1996; Cook, 1998). This process is often referred to as the “indexing” of news sources; journalists builds news credibility by citing public officials but also saves them time and helps them adhere to objectivity norms. Cook (1998) characterizes this emphasis on elite sources as government officials “subsidizing”

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<sup>23</sup> Some scholars suggest at least 50 cases for each predictor variables when using logistic regression models (Burns & Burns, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> I develop a logistic regression model inclusive of a number of covariates that provide debate context and electoral controls. These controls are identical to those included in the models for political elite cites and public cites. No significant relationships are found for any of the nine control variables. For the independent media variables, just one relationship holds: the single moderator format holds a positive relationship with questions citing the media. The Exp(B) value suggests questions in these formats are more than 3 times as likely to cite the media than questions from other debate formats ( $p < .05$ ) but there are simply too few cases to test this relationship with an adequate number of covariates. Due to too few cases, this model is ultimately excluded from the study.

the content of news, meaning that political elite provide easy and accessible content for news professionals. Consequently, this process also emphasizes the agenda of political elite or as Bennett (1990) cautions provides a megaphone for government leaders.

Hayes (2010) found that when the agenda of political elite and the news media converge, agenda-setting effects are more powerful. In other words, the converged agenda yields greater influence and persuasive impact on the public agenda and the issues that voters prioritize. This type of agenda convergence echoes the talking points of political elite; in the electoral context news professionals often regurgitate the talking points of campaigns – including candidate statements, campaign communications, and political ads. The nature of political elite-media convergence in the debate context remains unclear. Since indexing official sources saves time and builds credibility, we should expect that the extent of media influence through debate formats, moderators, question sources, and sponsorship affect this process.

For formats that empower the press to set the debate agenda, reliance on questions citing political elite should be greater than the town hall format which largely solicits the public to set the agenda. In other words, members of the public should be less concerned by the talking points of political elite – and less likely to cite political elite when questioning the candidates. I therefore propose the following format specific hypotheses:

H1a: Questions in town hall formats are less likely to cite political elite.

H1b: Questions in press panel formats are more likely to cite political elite.

H1c: Questions in single moderator formats are more likely to cite political elite.

Although sourcing public officials functions as a news routine common across mediums, commercial pressures should also play a role in echoing political elite since doing so is a time (and arguably cost) saving function. Nonprofit journalists, for example, should be less driven to

cite political elite due to greater autonomy in agenda-setting and the absence of profit-driven pressures. Similarly, since local journalists hold less proximity to Washington politics, we should expect their reliance on elite sources to be less pronounced than insider reporters. Inversely, cable journalists have a greater news hole to fill and thus look to the agenda of public officials to supply the news; these journalists should be more likely to cite political elite when posing questions to debate candidates. I offer the following moderator specific hypotheses:

H2a: Questions in debates with moderating print journalists are more likely to cite political elite.

H2b: Questions in debates with moderating broadcast journalists are more likely to cite political elite.

H2c: Questions in debates with moderating nonprofit journalists are less likely to cite political elite.

H2d: Questions in debates with moderating cable journalists are more likely to cite political elite.

H2e: Questions in debates with moderating local journalists are less likely to cite political elite.

Since moderating journalists cannot dictate total control over debate agendas, particularly in press panel and town hall formats, I also explore political elite-media convergence at the source level. Doing so also enables comparisons between public question sources and journalists from various professional backgrounds. Applying the same rationale guiding the moderator-related hypotheses, I also offer the following source-specific hypotheses:

H3a: Questions from print journalists are more likely to cite political elite.

H3b: Questions from broadcast journalists are more likely to political elite.

H3c: Questions from nonprofit journalists are less likely to cite political elite.

H3d: Questions from the public are less likely to cite political elite.

H3e: Questions from cable journalists are more likely to cite political elite.

H3f: Questions from local journalists are less likely to cite political elite.

Additionally, we should expect that debates sponsored by commercial media – media which operate under the profit pressures and competitive constraints – foster agendas that are more likely to draw from the talking points of political elite, and the participating campaigns in particular. Thus, I include the following sponsorship-specific hypothesis:

H4: Questions asked in a debate with media sponsorship are more likely to cite political elite.

Using the categorical Media Cite variable, I collapse questions citing candidates, campaign communications, political ads, and other political elite into a dummy variable assigning “1” for questions citing *any* political elite and all else as “0.” After collapsing related content categories, 29% of the dataset is classified as citing political elite (N=547). Before introducing control variables, I first assess the correlations between the independent variables of interest and questions citing political elite.

### **Debate Format and Political Elite Cites**

As expected, the town hall format holds a negative relationship with questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = -.15, p < .01$ . This demonstrates that debate agendas largely driven by members of the public are much less likely to regurgitate the agendas of political elite when questioning the candidates; thus, H1a is supported. For both formats where journalists retain the most control over the debate agenda, I find a positive relationship with questions citing political elite although the relationship is statistically significant solely for the press panel format. I find a positive relationship between press panels and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = .13, p < .01$ . Therefore, the data show support for H1b, but not H1c.

### **Moderator Characteristics and Political Elite Cites**

For the moderator variables, I unexpectedly find a negative relationship between print journalist moderators and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = -.06, p < .01$ . Thus, H2a is not supported. Moreover, I fail to observe any statistically significant relationships for broadcast moderators and nonprofit moderators. Thus, H2b and H2c are not supported. Extending the tests beyond mediums of moderators, I find evidence of effects for both cable journalists and local journalists. As expected, I observe a negative relationship between debates with moderating local journalists and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = -.11, p < .01$ . Thus, H2e is supported. Surprisingly, I find a negative relationship between cable news moderators and questions citing political elites,  $r(1,882) = -.09, p < .01$ . Thus, H2d is not supported.

### **Question Source and Political Elite Cites**

Paralleling the findings for the moderator variable, I do not observe a relationship between print journalist question sources and content citing political elites. Thus, H3a is not supported. I do, however, find that despite a lack of relationship for the broadcast moderator variable, there is a positive relationship between broadcast journalist sources and questions citing political elite:  $r(1,882) = .12, p < .01$ . Thus, H3b is supported. Unexpectedly, I also find a positive relationship between nonprofit journalist sources and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = .05, p < .05$ . Thus, H3c is not supported – nor is H3e supported. Although I fail to observe a relationship between cable news sources and questions citing political elite, both members of the public and local journalists are less likely to echo the political agenda.

In line with the relationship for the town hall format variable, I observe a negative relationship between questions asked by the public and content citing political elite:  $r(1,882) = -.15, p < .01$ . Therefore, H3d is supported. H3f is also supported, meaning I find a negative relationship between local journalist sources and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = -.10,$



$p < .01$ . This finding reinforces the negative relationship found between questions in debates moderated by local journalists and content citing political elite.

### **Sponsorship and Political Elite Cites**

Lastly, the sponsorship variable does not perform as expected. In fact, I observe a modest negative relationship between commercial media sponsorship and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = -.05$ ,  $p < .05$ . This demonstrates that commercial sponsorship is less likely to create a debate agenda reliant on the talking points of political elites and, ultimately, the participating campaigns. Thus, H4 is not supported.

### **Logistic Regression Model**

To test these relationships further, I develop a logistic regression model with covariates that include controls for electoral context and controls for debate rules.<sup>25</sup> These electoral controls include continuous variables for election year, competitiveness of the race (as measured by final vote percentage spread between top two candidates), the number of participating candidates in the debate, as well as two dichotomous variables: a variable measuring whether an incumbent participated in the debate and a variable measuring whether the question came from a state-level race. Lastly, debate controls included continuous variables for debate length (in minutes), allocated candidate response time (in seconds), and a dichotomous variable discerning whether the question came from a domestic policy debate. Just as competitiveness or incumbency in a race can influence the content or tone of campaign news (see Cohen, 2008; Dunaway & Stein, 2013), the work of Hayes (2010) has also demonstrated that the agenda of candidates and the news media is more inclined to converge when races tighten and as election day nears. Although the control variables did not provide any statistically significant relationships, I identify a

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<sup>25</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test reflects an acceptable goodness of fit for the model:  $\chi^2 = 7.58$ ,  $p = .48$ ,  $df = 8$ .

number of media variables as bearing a strong influence on the likelihood of questions citing political elite.

For the format variables, I find that one of the two relationships holds (see Table 5-1). Although the town hall format expectedly holds a negative relationship with questions citing political elite, the relationship failed to reach statistical significance. Thus, H1a is not supported. The press panel variable performed as expected, with questions asked in this format being more than 1.6 times as likely to cite members of the political elite as questions from other debate formats. Therefore, H2b is supported. Using this regression model, I hold all other variables at their mean levels to generate predicted probabilities for the press panel variable. I find that questions from press panels have a predicted probability of .302, whereas questions from the remaining formats have a predicted probability of .213 (see Figure 5-1). This reflects a -.089 change or an overall difference of 29.5%.

The model also shows that one of three moderator variables holds after introducing electoral and debate controls. The print moderator and cable moderators bear a slight negative relationship with political elite cites but these are not statistically significant; therefore, H2a and H2d are not supported. The key finding at the moderator level lies with the local moderator variable. Local moderators hold a negative relationship with questions citing the political elite. Using the regression model, I hold all other variables at their mean levels and find that the local moderator variable yields a predicted probability of .133, whereas questions stemming from debates with national-scale moderators have a predicted probability of .268 (see Figure 5-2). This reflects a change of .135, or an overall increase in political elite cites of 50.4% when non-local moderators are at the helm of the debate. Thus, the expectation outlined in H2e is supported. Moreover, this relationship is further corroborated at the source level.

Table 5-1. Logistic regression model: Predictors of political elite cites

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Press panel format	.47**	.14	10.85	1.60
Town hall format	-.28	.29	.97	.75
Print moderator	-.22	.33	.44	.80
Local moderator	-.87*	.36	5.75	.42
Cable moderator	-.11	.15	.52	.89
Media sponsor	.46*	.20	4.94	1.58
Nonprofit source	2.09**	.32	42.62	8.11
Public source	-1.76**	.32	30.71	.17
Broadcast source	.30	.16	3.39	1.35
Local source	-.83**	.22	14.70	.44
Electoral controls				
Election year	-.01	.01	2.94	.99
Candidate No.	-.03	.04	.44	.97
Competitiveness	-.01	.01	1.01	.99
Incumbent	.17	.17	.93	1.18
State-level	-.22	.26	.71	.80
Debate context				
Length	.00	.00	.05	1.00
Response time	.00	.00	.59	1.00
Domestic policy	-.28	.15	3.17	.76
Constant	26.45	16.13		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 209.69$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $\log \text{likelihood} = -1,030.18$ ; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .15$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

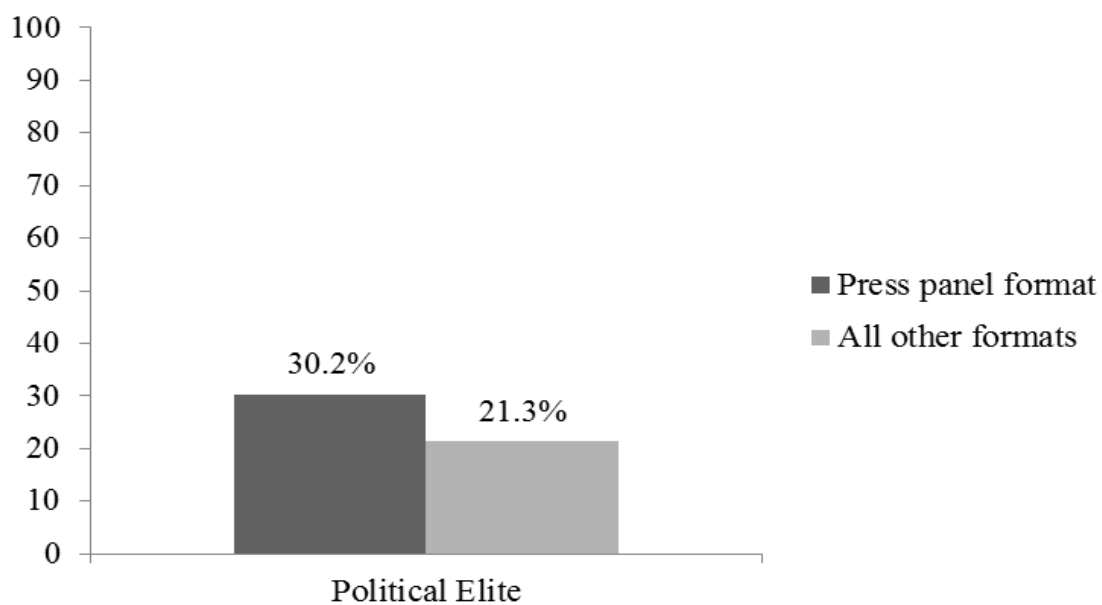


Figure 5-1. Predicted probabilities: Press panel format & political elite cites

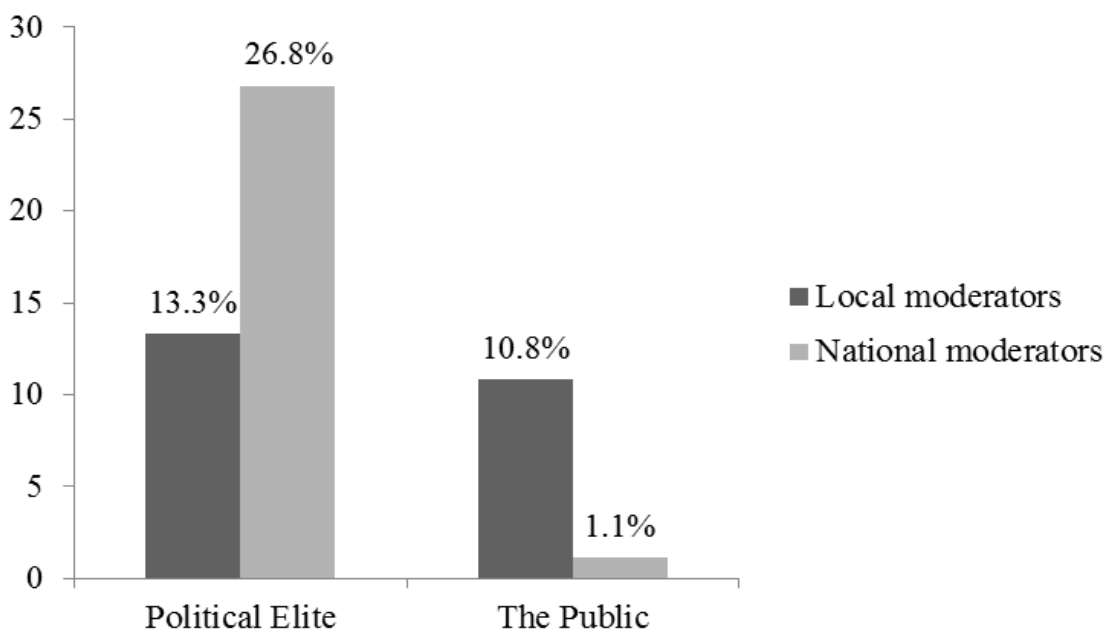


Figure 5-2. Predicted probabilities: Local moderators & question cites

At the source level I find questions asked by local journalists, too, hold a negative relationship with political elite cites. Therefore, H3f is also supported. Another question source that diminishes the likelihood of questions addressing the talking points of political elite includes members of the public. Public question sources held a strong negative relationship with political elite cites; this finding supports H3d. I compute the predicted probability of the public source variable by holding all other variables in the regression model at their mean values; questions asked by the public yield a predicted probability of .093, whereas those from all other sources hold a predicted probability of .372 (see Figure 5-3). These values reflect a difference of .279 or, in other words, an overall increase in political elite cites of 75% for non-public question sources. So, which source variables are predictors of political elite cites?

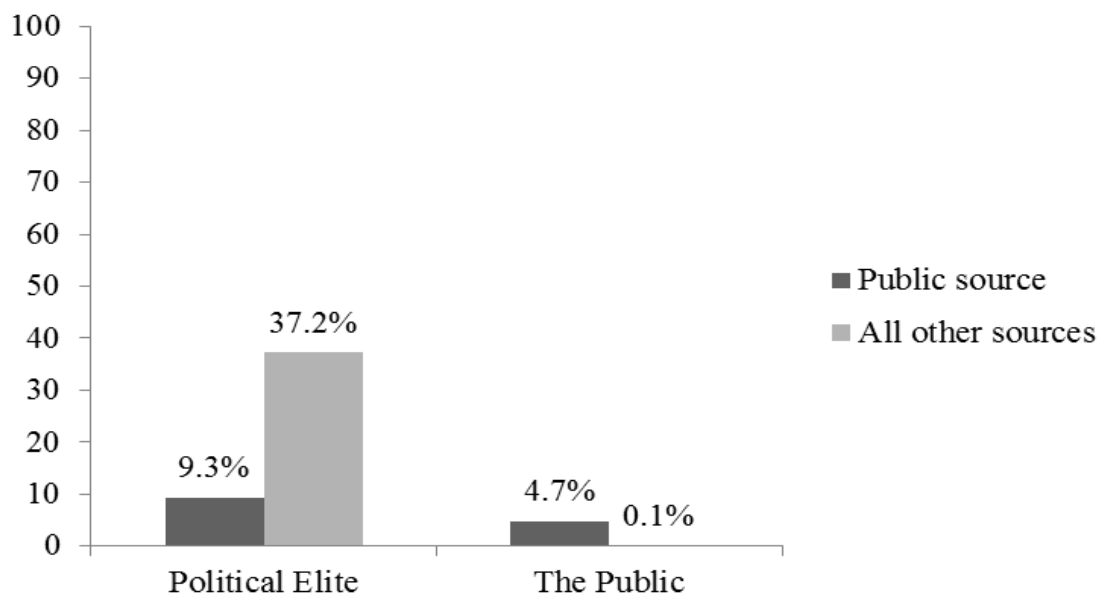


Figure 5-3. Predicted probabilities: Public source & question cites

Although the broadcast journalist source expectedly holds a positive relationship with political elite cites, the relationship falls just shy of reaching statistical significance at the  $p < .05$  level. Thus, I cannot claim the model supports H3b. The strongest predictor of political elite cites

comes from an unlikely source: nonprofit journalists. I find a strong positive relationship between nonprofit journalist sources and questions citing political elite. Questions from nonprofit journalists were more than 8 times as likely to cite political elite as those from other sources. Therefore, H3c is not supported. To better explain this relationship, I hold all other variables in the model at their mean levels to generate a predicted probability of .678 for nonprofit sources while those asked by all other sources hold a predicted probability of .206 (see Figure 5-4). This shows a difference of .472 or an overall increase in political elite cites for questions asked by nonprofit sources of 69.6%. Albeit surprising, the effect is not only statistically significant but sizable.

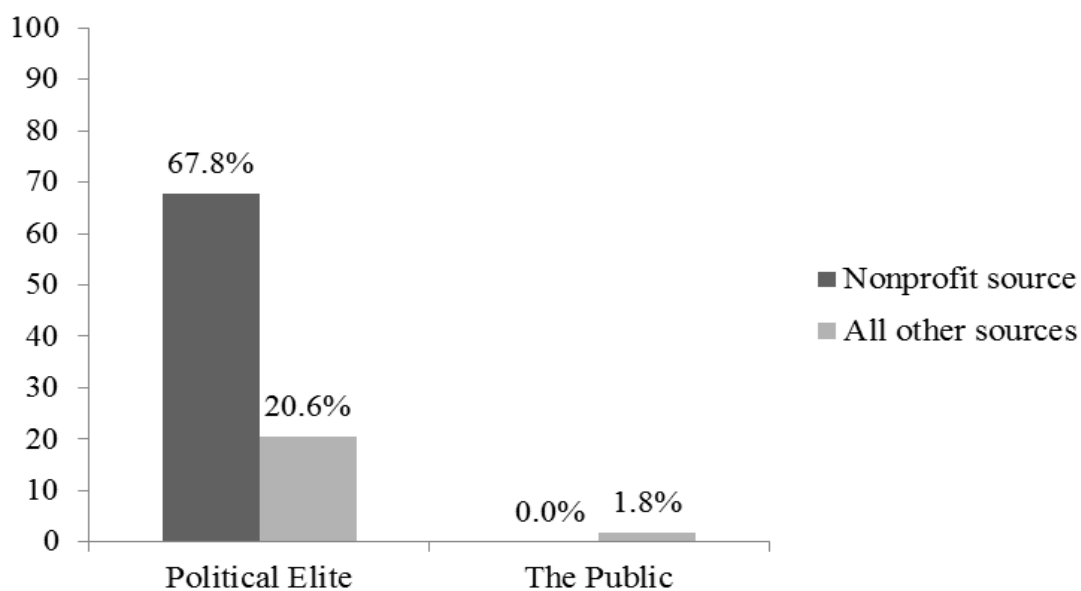


Figure 5-4. Predicted probabilities: Nonprofit source & question cites

Finally, I find support for H4. The model shows that questions from debates sponsored by commercial media hold a positive relationship with political elite cites; questions from this sponsorship model are nearly 1.6 times as likely to cite political elite than those found in a debate

with nonprofit sponsorship. In the next stage of data analysis I examine the extent of exogenous public influence on the debate agenda through questions citing public concerns.

### **Exogenous Public Influence and Debate Agendas**

The public represents a third common source of agenda building. The public's priorities are arguably more front-and-center today than ever before thanks to the rise of public opinion polling in the 1970s. Public opinion alerts both news professionals and policymakers to the needs and priorities of citizens and can influence legislation and how political elite respond to policy matters. Campaign news is often criticized for neglecting the priorities of the public and/or steering the priorities of the public through the media's agenda-setting function (Patterson, 1994; Just et al., 1996; Fallows, 1996). Thus, electoral debates which aim to incorporate public concerns in the agenda are especially prescient given the shortcomings of campaign news coverage. Although the town hall format – and later social media – provided the public new avenues for participation, much less is known about if and when news professionals evoke the priorities and concerns of the public when posing questions to the candidates.

Considering that commercial media's campaign coverage often strays from public priorities (Just et al., 1996), we should expect that debate questions citing public concerns will vary according to the level of public input allowed in the debate versus press input. In other words, no format should better represent public priorities than the town hall format, which provides undecided voters a chance to directly ask the candidates questions and set the debate agenda. Therefore, I propose the following format-specific hypotheses:

H5a: Questions in town hall formats are more likely to cite the public.

H5b: Questions in press panel formats are less likely to cite the public.

H5c: Questions in single moderator formats are less likely to cite the public.

Beyond format, moderator characteristics should also influence the propensity to cite public concerns since news professionals operate according to variable competitive pressures. Commercial print and broadcast moderators – cable included – should be less interested in public concerns since more marketable narratives of campaign issues and the horserace of elections purge out policy issues deemed important by the public. Nonprofit journalists and, to a lesser extent, local news professionals should have fewer commercial incentives to deviate from the public agenda and local journalists share greater proximity to the public than national journalists who Fallows (1996) says have more in common with their political elite sources than their news audiences. I therefore offer the following moderator-specific hypotheses:

H6a: Questions in debates with moderating print journalists are less likely to cite the public.

H6b: Questions in debates with moderating broadcast journalists are less likely to cite the public.

H6c: Questions in debates with moderating nonprofit journalists are more likely to cite the public.

H6d: Questions in debates with moderating cable journalists are less likely to cite the public.

H6e: Questions in debates with moderating local journalists are more likely to cite the public.

To assess these relationships in a more nuanced way, I also test the propensity to cite the public in debate questions according to the specific question source. Since moderators are not the source of all questions in a town hall and press panel format, I parse out question source for a more accurate assessment of media influence on agenda convergence. In doing so, I also have the ability to also test the relationship between public debate questions and propensity to cite public concerns. Thus, I offer the following source-specific hypotheses:

H7a: Questions from print journalists are less likely to cite the public.



H7b: Questions from broadcast journalists are less likely to cite the public.

H7c: Questions from nonprofit journalists are more likely to cite the public.

H7d: Questions from the public are more likely to cite the public.

H7e: Questions from cable journalists are less likely to cite the public.

H7f: Questions from local journalists are more likely to cite the public.

Just as moderating nonprofit journalists should be less driven by commercial pressures and narratives deviating from the public agenda, nonprofit debate sponsorship may increase emphasis of public concerns in a way that commercial media sponsored debates cannot. Thus, I propose the following sponsorship-specific hypothesis:

H8: Questions in debates with media sponsorship are less likely to cite the public.

Using the categorical Media Cite variable, a dummy variable was created to parse out questions citing the public (“1”) from those that did not (“0”).<sup>26</sup> Although members of the public were cited in debate questions more often than the media, frequencies were nonetheless low: questions citing the public accounted for 3.2% of the total sample (N=60). As was the case for the previous dependent convergence variables, I omit 66 candidate-to-candidate questions since they are unreflective of media influences. Moreover, this particular subsample of candidate questions is too small to isolate significant effects. Thus, I omit them from the analysis, leaving me with a sample size of 1,884 questions.

Before introducing control variables, I first assess the correlations between the independent variables of interest and questions citing the public.

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<sup>26</sup> It could also be argued that questions citing polls should be collapsed in the Public Cite variable, since polls can reflect public concerns and issues; however, questions citing polls accounted for just 1.5% of the total sample; were more likely to pertain to horserace and electoral outcomes than public issues; and when included in the analysis did not alter the relationships of the key variables. Thus, poll cites were excluded from the Public Cite variable.

### **Debate Format and Public Cites**

Surprisingly, I find that debate format bears little influence on the likelihood of questions citing concerns of the public. No effects were found for both the press panel and single moderator format; thus, H5b and H5c are not supported. Although the town hall format moved in the expected direction, holding a positive relationship with questions citing the public, the relationship was not statistically significant. Therefore, I also found a lack of support for H5a. Despite the null findings for the format variables, correlations suggest moderator characteristics do play a role in debate agendas citing public interests.

### **Moderator Characteristics and Public Cites**

In testing the relationship between moderating print journalists and questions citing the public, I observe a positive relationship that counters expectations,  $r(1,882) = .08, p < .01$ . Therefore, H6a is not supported. In addition, I fail to find any effects for the broadcast moderator variable, meaning H6b also lacks support. I do find effects for the moderating nonprofit journalist variable but this relationship, too, counters expectations. I find a negative relationship between nonprofit moderators and questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = -.05, p < .05$ . Therefore, H6c is not supported. Although a relationship between cable moderators and questions citing the public is not found, demonstrating a lack of support for H6d, effects are observed for the local moderator variable. I find a positive relationship between moderating local journalists and questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = .21, p < .01$ . Beyond statistical significance, the effect is sizable relative to other media variables tested and falls in line with theoretical expectations since local journalists have fewer commercial pressures than Washington journalists and are arguably more in tune to public interests. Therefore, H6e is supported.

## **Question Source and Public Cites**

Once I parse out questions and tie them directly to their source, the relationships become more in line with expectations outlined in the hypotheses, with a couple exceptions. Although the print journalist source and questions citing the public moves in the expected negative direction, the relationship fails to reach statistical significance; therefore, H7a is not supported. Paralleling the findings for the nonprofit moderator variable, I also observe a negative relationship between nonprofit journalist sources and questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = -.05, p < .01$ . Again, this shows a lack of support for H7c. Nonetheless, all other source variables perform as expected. As expected, I find a negative relationship between broadcast journalist sources and questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = -.05, p < .05$ . This finding demonstrates support for H7b. Similarly, this negative relationship is heightened for cable broadcast journalists facing greater commercial pressures to satisfy demands of 24-hour news. I find a negative relationship between cable sources and questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = -.07, p < .01$ . Therefore, H7e is supported. For local journalist sources, I find a positive relationship with questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = .09, p < .01$ , although the effect is somewhat weaker than that observed for the local moderator variable. Nonetheless, H7f is supported. Lastly, questions asked by members of the public are, naturally, more likely to cite public concerns. I find a positive relationship with public questions citing the public,  $r(1,882) = .07, p < .01$ . Thus, H7d is supported.

## **Sponsorship and Public Cites**

For the final independent variable, I fail to observe a relationship between commercial media sponsorship and questions citing the public. In other words, debates sponsored by profit-driven media do not seem to depress the likelihood of addressing public concerns. Thus, H8 is not supported.

## Logistic Regression Model

To further test these relationships, I develop a logistic regression model with covariates accounting for electoral controls and controls for debate rules.<sup>27</sup> These electoral controls include continuous variables for election year, competitiveness of the race (as measured by final vote percentage spread between top two candidates), the number of participating candidates in the debate, as well as two dichotomous variables: a variable measuring whether an incumbent participated in the debate and a variable measuring whether the question came from a state-level race. Lastly, debate controls include continuous variables for debate length (in minutes), allocated candidate response time (in seconds), and a dichotomous variable discerning whether the question came from a domestic policy debate.

I find that only election year holds a statistically significant relationship with questions citing the public. This positive relationship ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), shows that with each 1-unit change in election year, we see a slight increase in questions citing the public included in the agenda (see Table 5-2). This finding is unsurprising considering that the adoption of the town hall format in 1992 and the inclusion of social media components in 2007 have transferred some of the agenda-setting duties of the press to members of the public. For the three moderator variables tested – print moderator, nonprofit moderator, and local moderator – I find only the latter of the three hold. The print moderator variable shows a positive relationship with questions citing the public while the nonprofit moderator variable shows a negative relationship. The directions of these relationships counter expectations but also fail to reach statistical significance. Nonetheless, H6a and H6c are not supported. In contrast, the local moderator variable not only performs as expected but the effect is strong and statistically significant.

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<sup>27</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test reflects an acceptable goodness of fit for the model:  $\chi^2 = 8.47$ ,  $p = .39$ ,  $df = 8$ .

Table 5-2. Logistic regression model: Predictors of public cites

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Print moderator	.58	.72	.65	1.79
Nonprofit moderator	-.44	.55	.63	.65
Local moderator	2.39**	.60	15.86	11.01
Nonprofit source	-2.73**	.82	11.23	.07
Public source	1.95**	.62	9.92	7.01
Broadcast source	-1.06	.59	3.16	.35
Cable source	-1.92	1.05	3.34	.15
Local source	.19	.49	.16	1.22
Electoral controls				
Election year	.08*	.03	6.04	1.08
Candidate No.	-.06	.11	.36	.94
Competitiveness	.03	.02	2.94	1.03
Incumbent	.46	.49	.88	1.58
State-level	.51	.77	.44	1.67
Debate context				
Length	.00	.01	.08	1.00
Response time	.00	.01	.00	1.00
Domestic policy	.46	.48	.93	1.58
Constant	-165.37*	65.42		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 95.52$ ,  $df = 16$ ; log likelihood = -218.08, Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .20$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

I find that questions from forums moderated by local journalists are more than 11 times as likely to cite public concerns as questions from debates with other moderators. From the regression model I hold all other variables at their mean values, demonstrating that questions in debates with local moderators have a predicted probability of .108 for citing the public; questions in debates with other moderator types hold a predicted probability of .011 (see Figure 5-2). This reflects a difference in -.097 or an overall decline of approximately 89.8%. In sum, local moderators are a strong predictor of questions citing public concerns; therefore, H6e is supported.

Interestingly, the stronger measure of attribution (e.g. the source variable) does not reach statistical significance for the local journalist question source. Although local journalists continue holding a positive relationship with questions citing the public, the relationship falls short of reaching the .05 level of significance. Therefore, H7f is not supported. All other media variables at the source level hold a negative relationship with questions citing the public. The broadcast source and cable source variables decrease the odds of citing public concerns but these negative relationships merely approach statistical significance ( $p < .10$ ). Thus, the data do not support H7b or H7e. The nonprofit press source, however, holds a strong and significant negative relationship with questions citing the public. When holding all other variables in the model at their mean levels, I find that nonprofit sources have a predicted probability of .000, whereas all other question sources hold a predicted probability of .018 (see Figure 5-4). This demonstrates a difference of nearly 100%, suggesting that nonprofit sources nearly never cite the public when asking questions in debates. Thus, H7c is not supported. In short, press influence in debate agendas diminishes the likelihood of questions citing the public in particular contexts.

Although questions citing the public are chronically low, they do exist. Much of these questions, however, are driven by members of the public themselves when participating in the debate process. Unsurprisingly, I find that public question sources hold a strong, positive relationship with questions citing the public. Questions from the public are 7 times more likely to cite the public than questions from all other sources. Holding all other variables at their mean values, I observe a predicted probability of .047 for the public source variable whereas all other sources generate a predicted probability of .001 (see Figure 5-3). This reflects a change of -.046 or an overall difference of 97.9%. Therefore, H7d is supported. The implications of these findings related to public and political elite cites are discussed below.

### **Discussion**

For the three primary sources of exogenous agenda influence, the data show that questions citing other media are nearly non-existent in the debate agenda. In other words, “pack journalism” is more a byproduct of the campaign news environment than the debate environment. In fact, I observe just 19 cases of questions citing the media; thus, further analysis in this area is unwarranted. When comparing the remaining two sources of exogenous influence, debate agendas parallel campaign news agendas insofar that political elite are more commonly cited than members of the public. This suggests that debate agendas are more likely to converge with the agendas of candidates than members of the public. In fact, questions citing the public are chronically low and account for less than 5% of all questions in the dataset. This is unsurprising considering that news professionals are conditioned to seek out “official” sources when packaging the news (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 1998). In the context of debates, questions are more likely to echo talking points of political elite than other members of the press or members of the public. This reinforces prior research citing a great deal of agenda convergence between

candidates and the press (Tedesco, 2001; Hayes, 2010). Nonetheless, not all formats or news professionals echo political elite agendas with the same level of frequency.

I find the press panel format is a significant predictor of citing political elites. As will be discussed in future chapters, this finding fits an overall pattern which suggests this particular format is most removed from the public due to its influence from multiple – and competing – journalists on the debate stage and is most susceptible to competitive pressures influencing content and tone of questions. As expected, local journalists who are not household names and share greater proximity with their news audiences seem more in tune to the public. Both local moderators and local journalist sources reduce the likelihood of questions citing political elite agendas; local moderators are the largest predictor of questions citing the public.<sup>28</sup> One limitation worth noting is that a question citing the public does not necessarily signal a question that addresses an issue of high priority for the public. Nonetheless, questions citing the public are a scarcity in the debate agenda even among forums with local press influence or active public participation. What is clear is that variables holding a positive relationship with questions citing the public seem to hold an inverse relationship with questions citing political elite. In other words, debate agendas – like news agendas – are finite and relying on one particular exogenous source tends to crowd out the other.

For example, local press variables perform as predictors of public cites while also performing as variables likely to diminish the frequency of questions citing political elite. Although local moderators offer relatively equal play to exogenous public sources and exogenous political elite sources, we see considerable differences when compared to the remainder of the dataset. Local moderators are simply less likely to offer a debate megaphone for

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<sup>28</sup> Although the local journalist source variable falls short of reaching statistical significance, this variable also moves in a positive direction with public cites. This peculiar finding may indicate that the public cites are more symptomatic of local moderator routines than specific questions from local journalists.



the agenda of the political elite. This is important finding given that extant scholarship has found strong indexing effects for national news media, resulting in not only an over-reliance on official sources but, at times, allegiance to official sources (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). In sum, indexing heightens the needs of elite agendas while often neglecting the concerns of the public agenda.

What's more, nonprofit press sources nearly never cite the public in their debate questions but hold a predicted probability of nearly 70% in citing political elite – far exceeding all other sources for this variable. Similarly, while we see citizen debate participants hold a positive relationship with questions citing the public they actually diminish the likelihood of debate questions citing political elite. With a predicted probability of less than 10%, we see that the public is simply less interested in echoing the talking points of candidates and other political insiders. Although extant literature has found varying degrees of press-candidate convergence between print and television mediums (see Ridout & Mellen, 2007), neither the print nor broadcast variables bore much influence on the exogenous sources cited in debate questions.

Also worth noting is that the evolution of debate format has had some success in making the debate process more responsive to public needs. The electoral year variable shows that questions are more likely to cite the public over time; this is in direct response to opening the questioning up to undecided voters via the town hall format and online media submissions afforded through more recent debate partnerships with social and digital media companies. Inversely, we see a negative relationship with electoral year and political elite cites that approaches significance ( $p < .10$ ). As formats continue to tap public participation, we should continue to see the nature of these exogenous question influences change over time. But why should the level of emphasis on political elite vs. public cites matter?

News professionals are not isolated from the media environment around them. News professionals not only look to other media when determining if and how to cover an event, but they also look to the talking points of political elite to save time and bolster news credibility (Cook, 1998; Bennett et al., 2007). It is worth noting that journalists may at times craft questions in advance of including an exogenous source; they later look to an outside source to validate their question or shield themselves from criticism for addressing something controversial, as Cook (1998) suggests. Including an official source makes a journalist less liable for any adverse consequences of the question, and allows them to deflect blame for content deemed particularly harsh or unfair. Whether a citation is sought in advance of or after a question is crafted remains unanswered; Lehrer (2011) does not acknowledge the role of exogenous influences beyond the occasional consultation with colleagues, family, or friends. Nonetheless, if we can expect that news professionals are keenly aware of how competing media are covering the campaign and what official elite sources are saying about the campaign as they construct debate questions. In looking to what elite are saying, and how media are covering campaigns, the agenda-setting function of news becomes more powerful.

Scholars (Hayes, 2008/2010; Ridout & Smith, 2008) have demonstrated that agenda convergence uniquely shapes the campaign communication environment. Hayes (2008) has demonstrated that when news agendas echo the agendas of candidates, agenda-setting effects are strengthened. Consequently, converged agendas hold more persuasive influence over the public than fragmented agendas. If candidates and other political elite are communicating messages of policy, agenda convergence could raise awareness and knowledge of issues. However, the news media are seldom drawn to policy issues in campaign coverage, preferring to expose campaign issues and conflict over policy matters. In fact, the media agenda is most likely to converge with

the agenda of political elites when the messages in these elite agendas are laced with negativity (Ridout & Smith, 2008). In other words, convergence could hold severe implications not only for the content and tone of debate agendas but also public attitudes toward debates.

Now that I have considered exogenous influence in the debate agenda, the following chapters will explore the nature of debate agendas by un-packaging the specific topics addressed in the agenda and by evaluating the level of news negativity in debate questions. In looking at multiple independent media variables, I next assess format, moderator, question source, and sponsorship influence on the content of the debate agenda.

## CHAPTER 6

### AGENDA CONTENT: POLICY ISSUES VS. CAMPAIGN ISSUES

The shortcomings of campaign news coverage are well documented; journalists routinely emphasize campaign issues – including horserace narratives, character and traits matters, and the strategy and tactics of the election – often at some cost to policy coverage. In the current chapter I assess media influence on agenda substance by testing for variables that either foster or depress policy-driven debate questions. This distinction between policy issues and campaign issues is an important one given the news media's propensity to focus on campaign pragmatics over policy. This emphasis on pragmatics (i.e. campaign strategy and tactics) is not only considered less substantive than policy content but is also associated with public cynicism and disengagement in electoral process. The following chapter explores the media's influence on the content of debate questions in these two unique domains: questions with a primary focus of policy issues and questions with a primary focus of campaign issues.

#### **The News Media and Policy Content**

I isolate predictors of policy driven debate questions by examining the relationship between various debate formats and content; various moderator characteristics and question; characteristics of question source and content; and sponsorship and content. Patterson (1980) draws an important distinction of substance between election news coverage focused on policy issues and news coverage focused on campaign issues, or what Epstein (1973) would refer to as the “pragmatics” of elections (see Appendix A). Research assistants first coded for content through a dichotomous variable assigning debate questions a “1” for having a primary focus on policy and “0” for those with a primary focus on campaign issues ( $Kappa = .78, p < .01$ ).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A dichotomous variable discerning hard news questions from soft news questions was also coded for but later omitted from further analysis due to a high collinearity (at the .951 level) with the policy vs. campaign issue

Across the sample (N=1,884), 69.2% were classified as policy questions, demonstrating that debates do indeed offer an information environment that is more issues focused than news coverage of campaigns.

Extant research has demonstrated a policy-minded public when it comes to citizen involvement in town hall debates (McKinney, 2005; Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011; Turcotte, 2013). Since members of the public are less conditioned to address campaign strategy and tactics – and considering what we know about trends in campaign news coverage, predispositions of the press, and the competitive pressures of commercial media – I offer the following format specific hypotheses:

H1a: Questions in town hall formats are more likely to address policy issues.

H1b: Questions in press panel formats are less likely to address policy issues.

H1c: Questions in single moderator formats are less likely to address policy issues.

Beyond format, we should also expect moderator characteristics to have a hand in shaping the content of debate agendas; the moderators ultimately hold agenda-setting and/or gatekeeping powers in facilitating electoral debates. We also know that institutional norms and routines – and ultimately content – can vary according to media, markets, and an organization's ownership structure (Dunaway, 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). Thus, I offer the following moderator-specific hypotheses:

H2a: Questions in debates with moderating print journalists are more likely to address policy issues.

H2b: Questions in debates with moderating nonprofit journalists are more likely to address policy issues.

H2c: Questions in debates with moderating broadcast journalists are less likely to address policy issues.

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variable. This collinearity is unsurprising given that hard news is apt to reflect policy issues and soft news apt to reflect campaign issues such as character and traits.

H2d: Questions in debates with moderating cable journalists are less likely to address policy issues.

H2e: Questions asked in debates with moderating local journalists are more likely to address policy issues.

Lastly, since moderators cannot control all content asked in a press panel format or town hall forum and since they interject in town hall forums with increasing regularity, it is also essential to test question content at the source level. Therefore I include the following source-specific hypotheses:

H3a: Questions from the public are more likely to address policy issues.

H3b: Questions from print journalists are more likely to address policy issues.

H3c: Questions from nonprofit journalists are more likely to address policy issues.

H3d: Questions from broadcast journalists are less likely to address policy issues.

H3e: Questions from cable journalists are less likely to address policy issues.

H3f: Questions from local journalists are more likely to address policy issues.

A last media variable worthy of attention is the sponsorship variable. In the early days of mediated electoral debates, nonprofit organizations such as The League of Women Voters would organize and sponsor such events. Today, largely due to the proliferation of primary debates, media sponsorship is becoming more prevalent and solidifying media influence of these campaign events (Schroeder, 2000). Therefore, a final variable is included to test whether (commercial) media sponsorship also influences the content of debate questions.

H4: Questions in debates with media sponsorship are less likely to address policy issues.

Before analyzing the data, I omit 66 questions posed by candidates to other candidates in the debate since they are unreflective of media influences. These candidate-to-candidate questions were permitted in some portions of primary debates; they are more representative of

political elite agenda-setting and campaign talking points rather than news media influence. Thus, I omit them from the analysis, leaving me with a new sample size of 1,884 questions. Before introducing control variables, I first assess the correlations between the independent variables of interest and policy questions.

### **Debate Format and Policy Content**

In examining the relationship between debate format and questions with a primary focus of policy content, I find significant associations for two of the three dominant debate formats: the press panel and single moderator format. As expected, the press panel format depresses the likelihood of questions addressing policy issues. I find a negative relationship between the press panel format and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = -.07, p < .01$ .

Thus, I find initial support for H1b. Surprisingly, the single moderator relationship fails to perform as expected. Despite also functioning as a highly press-influenced format (with no public input in the questioning process), single moderator debates actually hold a positive, albeit small, relationship with policy questions,  $r(1,882) = .04, p < .05$ . This preliminary finding counters the expectations outlined in H1c.

Furthermore, H1a is not supported. Although the relationship between the town hall format and policy questions is positive,  $r(1,882) = .03, p < .10$ , the correlation is not statistically significant. Therefore, a debate format largely driven by public questions bears little influence over the likelihood of a policy driven debate agenda.

### **Moderator Characteristics and Policy Content**

In assessing the relationships between moderator characteristics and content I find that medium matters little in predicting the likelihood of policy-based questions. The correlations demonstrate a lack of support for H2a, H2b, and H2c, meaning the medium of the moderator

does not hold much influence over the debate agenda. In other words, there is little distinction between questions asked in forums moderated by print journalists versus those moderated by broadcast journalists. What's more, debates moderated by nonprofit journalists who have little commercial incentive to stray from substantive policy topics also bear little influence on policy issue questions. But the data do demonstrate geographic influence and influence specific to cable moderators.

Scholars note that the advent of cable also coincided with news shifts to infotainment coverage (Buchanan, 2001; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Since cable journalists arguably function with more competitive pressures to entertain, as they must satisfy the 24-hour news hole, it is reasonable to expect content nuances unique to cable moderators. The data offer preliminary support for this; I find a negative relationship between moderating cable journalists and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = -.06, p < .01$ . Thus, H2d is supported.

Also functioning as expected, I find a positive relationship between moderating local journalists and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = .06, p < .01$ . In other words, print journalists working for publications with a state-level or local audience and those working for local broadcast affiliates rather than the national networks seem to facilitate a more policy-focused agenda than moderating celebrity journalists of the national press corps. Therefore, H2e is supported.

### **Question Source and Policy Content**

At the source level, I also find few significant relationships influencing policy content in debate questions. First, correlations show a lack of statistically significant relationship between public asked questions and policy content; H3a is not supported. Similarly, there is lack of evidence supporting a relationship between print journalist sources and policy questions and between local journalist sources and policy questions; thus, H3b and H3f are not supported.



Although public and print journalist question sources move in a positive direction with policy content, effects are marginal and statistically insignificant.

Modest effects are, however, found for questions with nonprofit journalist, broadcast journalist, and cable journalist sources. Interestingly, I find a negative relationship between nonprofit journalist sources and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = -.04, p < .05$ . Therefore, H3c is not supported. As expected, I find a negative relationship between broadcast journalist sources and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = -.04, p < .05$ , demonstrating support for H3d. Similarly, I also find a negative relationship between cable journalist sources and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = -.05, p < .05$ . This finding demonstrates support for H3e.

Although few relationships between source and policy content are statistically significant, commercial broadcast journalists – at least in the national news arena – seem to diminish the likelihood of policy questions appearing in debates. That being said, nonprofit press sources operating without the same kinds of routines, competitive pressures, and market-driven models of news as commercial journalists appear to perform similarly to commercial media.

### **Sponsorship and Policy Content**

Lastly, I find a negative relationship between questions stemming from media sponsored debates and policy content,  $r(1,882) = -.05, p < .05$ . This finding suggests media sponsorship weakens a policy-driven debate agenda and ultimately demonstrates support for H4. Since many exogenous factors may also influence agenda content – particularly debate rules and electoral variables – I further test these relationships in a logistic regression model while controlling for a number of possible agenda influences.

## Logistic Regression Model

To test whether these associations between various media variables and policy content hold, I conduct a logistic regression analysis that includes covariates accounting for electoral context and debate rules. I first test the model to demonstrate statistical significance apart from a constant-only model ( $\chi^2 = 106.9$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 17$ ).<sup>30</sup>

Electoral controls include dichotomous variables reflecting whether questions came from a presidential debate, a state-level debate; they also include a variable assessing whether an incumbent candidate partook in the debate. These measures moved questions in a positive direction with policy content but neither of them reached an acceptable level of statistical significance. Based on literature concerning news coverage of campaigns, I also control for election year and competitiveness of the race as measured by a continuous variable: the spread of the final vote count percentage. It is expected that news coverage has become more focused on campaign issues in the post-broadcast environment, so one would expect a decline in policy-centric debate questions over time.

Second, a more competitive race yields more news emphasis on horserace coverage and campaign issues that pull the press away from policy matters (Dunaway & Stein, 2013); however these patterns do not hold in the model. Lastly, a continuous variable measuring the number of candidates holds a positive and statistically significant relationship with policy issues; thus, debates with more participating candidates have a marginal effect on policy content in questions. Since the number of candidates also serves as a proxy for campaign lifecycle, this relationship is expected given that scholars have found the press devotes more attention to policy matters earlier in an election season (Just et al., 1996; Patterson, 1994).

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<sup>30</sup> The Hosmer-Lemeshow test reflects an adequate goodness of fit for the model,  $\chi^2 = 6.86$ ,  $p = .55$ ,  $df = 8$ .

Since longer debates and longer time periods allocated for candidate responses may influence the substance of question content, I also include these two continuous debate controls measuring length of the debate (in minutes) and length of allocated response time (in seconds). Neither of these variables yields a significant relationship on policy content in questions; however, a third (dichotomous) variable controlling for questions asked in debates designated as foreign policy debates shows a strong and significant relationship (see Table 6-1).

The EXP(B) value shows that when the control variable for debate topic moves from a non-foreign policy debate (e.g. domestic policy or mixed agenda debate) to a designated foreign policy agenda, the odds ratio is nearly 4.5 times as large. In other words, questions asked in foreign policy debates are nearly 4.5 times as likely to reflect policy issues content (see Figure 6-1). I also find that few media variables predict policy issues questions.

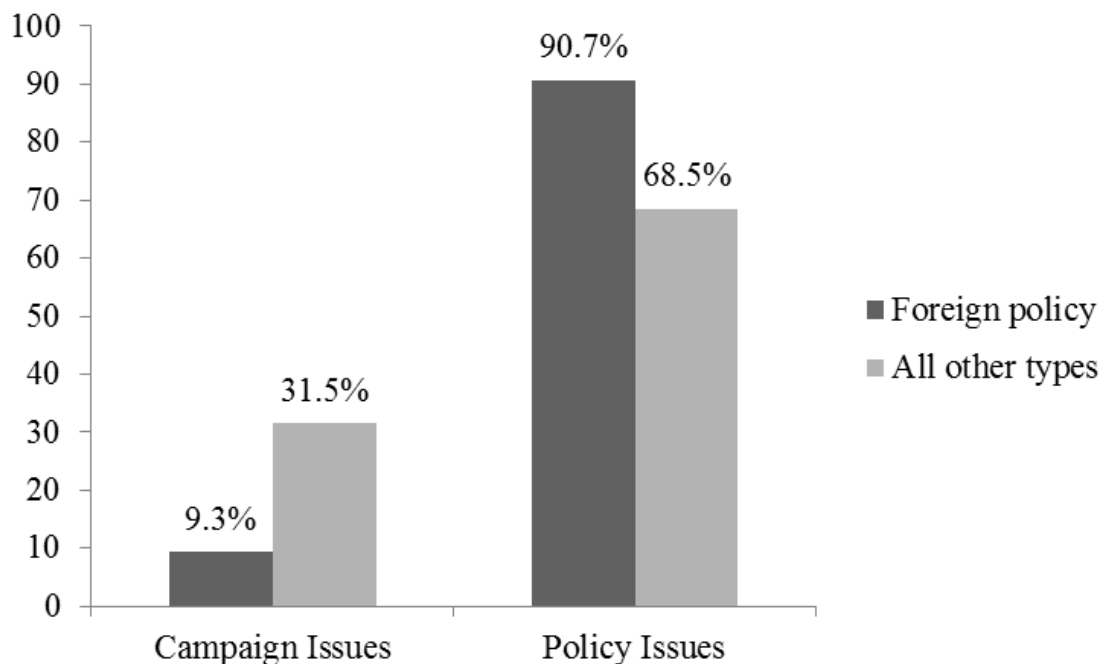


Figure 6-1. Predicted probabilities: Foreign policy debates and content

Table 6-1. Logistic Regression Model: Predictors of policy, campaign issues

Predictor	Policy Issues				Campaign Issues			
	B	SE B	Wald	e <sup>B</sup>	B	SE B	Wald	e <sup>B</sup>
Media variables								
Panel format	-.34*	.16	4.55	.71	.34*	.16	4.55	1.41
Single moderator	.31	.19	2.55	1.37	-.31	.19	2.55	.73
Local moderator	.59*	.25	5.32	1.81	-.59*	.25	5.32	.55
Cable moderator	-.08	.17	.22	.92	.08	.17	.22	1.08
Media sponsor	-.45*	.19	5.43	.64	.45*	.19	5.43	1.56
Nonprofit source	-.94**	.19	23.04	.39	.94**	.19	23.04	2.57
Broadcast source	-.33*	.14	5.39	.72	.33*	.14	5.39	1.40
Cable source	-.09	.19	.26	.91	.09	.19	.26	1.10
Electoral controls								
Election year	.01	.01	.63	1.01	-.01	.01	.63	.99
Candidate No.	.16**	.04	15.98	1.18	-.16**	.04	15.98	.85
Competitiveness	-.00	.01	.14	.99	.00	.01	.14	1.00
Incumbent	.16	.17	.86	1.17	-.16	.17	.86	.85
Presidential (GE)	.35	.20	2.98	1.42	-.35	.20	2.98	.70
State-level	.42	.24	3.11	1.52	-.42	.24	3.11	.65
Debate context								
Length	-.01	.00	1.25	.99	.01	.00	1.25	1.00
Response time	.00	.00	.02	1.00	.00	.00	.02	1.00
Foreign policy	1.50**	.34	19.99	4.49	-1.50**	.34	19.99	.22
Constant	-11.23	15.46			11.23	15.46		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 106.9$ ,  $df = 17$ , Log likelihood = -1,110.49; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .08$ \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

The model indicates that just a single media variable performs as a predictor of policy issues question: the local moderator variable (see Table 6-1). The relationship is both sizable and statistically significant. The Wald statistic shows that questions in forums moderated by local journalists predict policy content ( $p < .05$ ). The odds ratio (1.81) demonstrates that questions in debates moderated by local journalists are nearly twice as likely to focus on policy issues as questions asked in forums moderated by members of the national press corps. What's more, this relationship holds after controlling for state-level debates. Therefore, H2e is supported. From the regression model I hold all other variables at their mean values to generate a predicted probability of .806 for the local moderator variable. When compared to the predicted probability for questions with national press moderators, .697, we see a chance of .109 or an overall difference of 13.5% (see Figure 6-2).

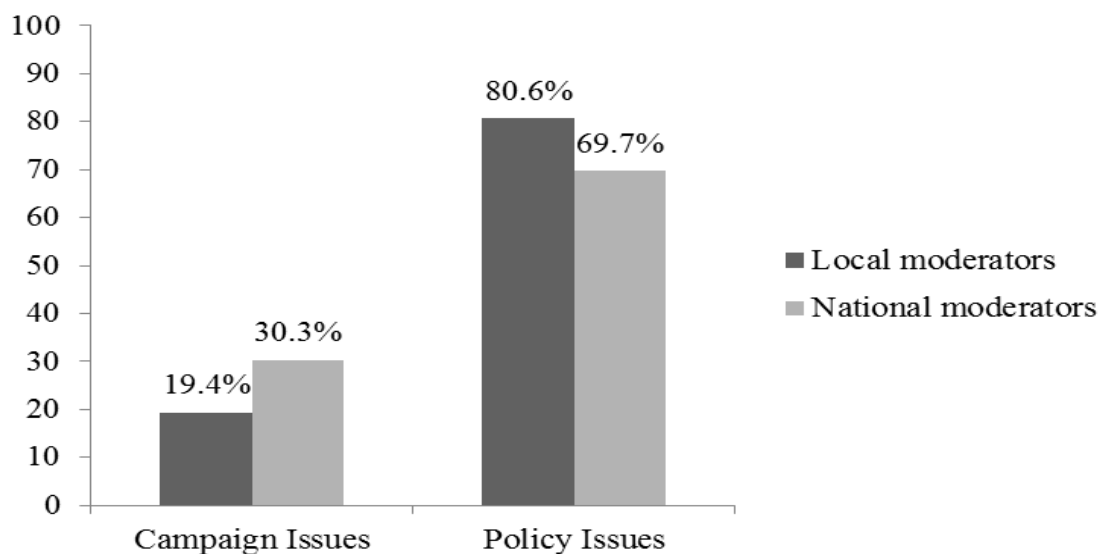


Figure 6-2. Predicted probabilities: Local moderators and content

Although the single moderator format held a positive association with policy questions in preliminary analyses, the relationship failed to reach statistical significance in the regression model. Surprisingly, other media variables expected to predict policy content – including town

hall format, public question sources, and nonprofit moderators and question sources – failed to do so. In fact, a number of media variables (e.g. panel format, media sponsorship, nonprofit sources, and broadcast sources) hold negative relationships with policy issues questions. As expected, the press panel format, media sponsorship, and broadcast journalist source hold a negative (and significant) relationship with policy questions; thus, H1b, H3d, and H4 are supported by the model. The effect sizes for the panel format, media sponsorship, and broadcast journalist variables are comparable; thus I generate predicted probabilities for the panel format variable only. Using the model to hold all other variables at mean values, I find that the press panel format has a predicted probability of .669 with policy questions and a probability of .741 for all other debate formats (see Figure 6-3). This reflects a marginal difference of -.072 or an overall change of 9.7%. Although the cable moderator and cable journalist source variables were negatively associated with policy questions in the preliminary analyses, the relationships do not hold in the regression model; H2d and H3e are not supported.

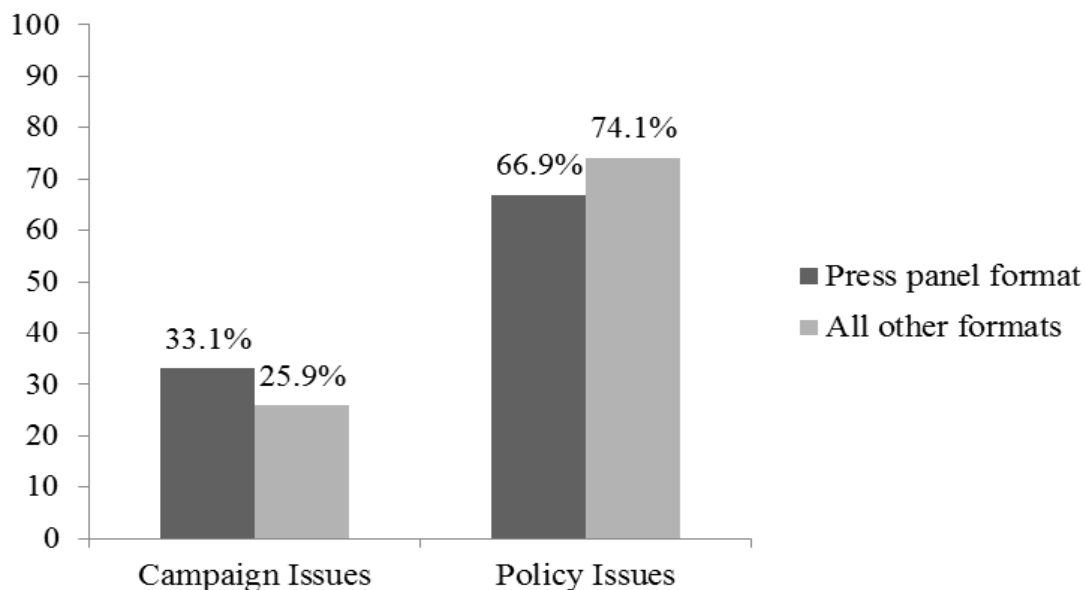


Figure 6-3. Predicted probabilities: Press panel format and content

Perhaps more surprisingly, the data show a negative and significant relationship between nonprofit journalist sources and policy questions, meaning H3c is also not supported. Using the model to hold all other variables at their mean levels, I generate a predicted probability of .514 for nonprofit question sources, whereas all other sources hold a predicted probability of .731 for policy questions (see Figure 6-4); this results in a change of -.217 or overall difference of 29.7%. In sum, these findings suggest that many more media variables are predictors of campaign issues questions rather than policy issues. These variables are discussed in greater detail.

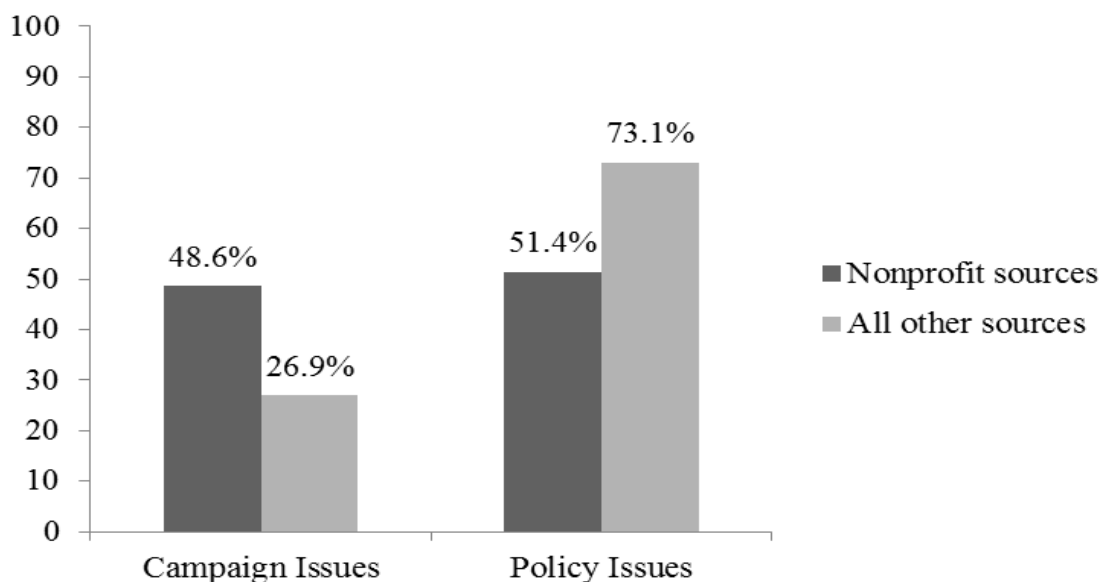


Figure 6-4. Predicted probabilities: Nonprofit source and content

### **The News Media and Campaign Issues Content**

In response to the post-broadcast environment, the news media have placed greater emphasis on campaign coverage of electoral pragmatics, meaning the strategy, tactics, and horserace aspects of elections. Secondly, soft news narratives of character, traits, and overall electability have contributed to a campaign issues emphasis in news coverage. Thus, I now analyze this dichotomous variable through the lens of campaign issues.

According to Prior (2007), increased media choice increased pressure to create a more entertaining news product to attract the attention of audiences more interested in entertainment programming over public affairs and hard news content. While Epstein (1973) alerted us to these less substantive news narratives long before the proliferation of media choice, competitive pressures of the news industry exacerbate the problem. Such “strategic” or “game” frames commonplace with campaign issues do not merely push out policy content from the news agenda (Lawrence, 2000; Dunaway, 2008) but also create a heightened sense of public cynicism, distrust of elected officials – even disgust with democracy (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Forgette & Morris, 2006).

While policy stories are considered prized discourse for the news media’s coverage of campaigns, one could call campaign issues content the antithesis of policy issues (see Patterson, 1980). These news narratives are considered less substantive relative to policy matters but are also more prevalent narratives since they are cheaply produced and create more dramatic storylines. Therefore, isolating the predictors of policy-focused debate questions is merely a first step in assessing news influence on the agenda of electoral debates. Next, I assess the predictors of campaign issues debate questions by examining the relationship between debate formats and content; moderator characteristics and content; characteristics of question source and content; and sponsorship and content. Across the total sample, 30.8% of questions (N=581) were coded as having a primary focus on campaign issues.

The coding initially included another categorical variable parsing out specific categories within campaign issues, such as strategy and tactics, horserace, personal character, and professional traits but frequency of cases were too low to generate meaningful inferences. Although campaign news is particularly saturated with horserace coverage, reflecting close to



50% of news content in the weeks leading up to recent presidential elections (Pew, 2012), they account for merely 1.2% of debate questions (N=23) and, after controlling for rules, format, and electoral controls, primary debates remain the lone significant predictor of horserace debate questions; thus, they are not analyzed separate from the campaign issues category.<sup>31</sup>

The news norms and routines literature suggests that journalists are conditioned to emphasize drama and conflict. Although drama and conflict are associated with news values, they are also connected to economic influences of the news; they satisfy market demands and create a more sellable news product. In the context of campaign coverage, drama and conflict are more easily achieved through campaign issues stories. Considering these news values, we should expect variance in campaign issues questions between formats with agendas dictated by news professionals and those which incorporate public input. Therefore, I offer the following format-specific hypotheses:

H5a: Questions in town hall formats are less likely to address campaign issues.

H5b: Questions in press panel formats are more likely to address campaign issues.

H5c: Questions in single moderator formats are more likely to address campaign issues.

Similar to policy content in the news, emphasis on campaign issues can vary according to mediums, markets, and an organization's ownership structure. Therefore, moderator characteristics unique to medium and market may also influence the propensity to emphasize campaign issues questions which routinely emphasize strategy, tactics, and the entertaining aspects of politics as a horserace or game. Thus, I propose the following moderator-specific hypotheses:

H6a: Questions in debates with moderating print journalists are more likely to address campaign issues.

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<sup>31</sup> See <http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/02/winning-media-campaign-2012/>

H6b: Questions in debates with moderating nonprofit journalists are less likely to address campaign issues.

H6c: Questions in debates with moderating broadcast journalists are more likely to address campaign issues.

H6d: Questions in debates with moderating cable journalists are more likely to address campaign issues.

H6e: Questions in debates with moderating local journalists are less likely to address campaign issues.

Again, since moderators may impede on the public town hall agendas with their own set of questions and since they cannot possibly control all content of the debate agenda in formats that incorporate other sources of questioning, it is essential that the relationship is also tested at the source level. Therefore, the following source-specific hypotheses are proposed:

H7a: Questions from the public are less likely to address campaign issues.

H7b: Questions from print journalists are more likely to address campaign issues.

H7c: Questions from nonprofit journalists are less likely to address campaign issues.

H7d: Questions from broadcast journalists are more likely to address campaign issues.

H7e: Questions from cable journalists are more likely to address campaign issues.

H7f: Questions from local journalists are less likely to address campaign issues.

As a final measure of media influence on campaign issues content, I also include a variable testing the relationship between media sponsorship and questions with a primary focus on campaign issues. Debate sponsorship from commercial news outlets could influence the debate agenda insofar that content satisfying news values of drama and conflict receive greater attention. Thus, I hypothesize the following:

H8: Questions in debates with media sponsorship are more likely to address campaign issues.

As is the case in the analysis with policy questions as the dependent variable, I omit the 66 questions in the dataset asked by other participating candidates since they are irrelevant in assessing media influence on content. Before running a regression model, I first assess the correlations between the independent variables of interest and campaign issues questions.

### **Debate Format and Campaign Issues**

The analysis reveals relationships between format and campaign issues questions that do not quite perform as expected. I find a positive relationship between the press panel format and campaign issues questions,  $r(1,882) = .07, p < .01$ . Thus, H5b is supported. Inversely, however, the single moderator format negatively correlates with campaign issues content,  $r(1,882) = -.04, p < .05$ , meaning H5c is not supported. The format which reduces press influence on the debate agenda also limits the likelihood of a campaign issues focused agenda, albeit the relationship is not statistically significant. Therefore, H5a is not supported. In sum, the correlations suggest a format which incorporates the most press influence, the panel format, is likely to increase the prevalence of campaign issues in the debate agenda.

### **Moderator Characteristics and Campaign Issues**

In terms of moderator characteristics, I find little influence across mediums. I find a lack of support for H6a, H6b, and H6c, meaning print, broadcast, and nonprofit moderator variables yield no significant effects on campaign issues content. I do, however, find a positive relationship between questions asked in forums with cable moderators and campaign issues questions,  $r(1,882) = .06, p < .01$ . Therefore, H6d is supported. Unlike cable journalists operating under the national limelight and pressures of the 24-hour news, moderating local journalists influence campaign issues in a different way. I find support for H6e, citing a negative relationship between local moderators and campaign issues questions:  $r(1,882) = -.06, p < .01$ .

## **Question Source and Campaign Issues**

At the source level I observe mixed effects. First, I find a positive relationship between broadcast journalist sources and campaign issues questions,  $r(1,882) = .04, p < .05$ . This relationship demonstrates support for H7d, meaning broadcast journalists are more inclined to address campaign issues in the debate. Although, no significant effect is found for the print journalist source variable (meaning H7b is not supported), the nonprofit variable performs similarly to the broadcast variable. I find that nonprofit journalist sources also hold a positive relationship with campaign issues questions,  $r(1,882) = .04, p < .05$ . This finding counters expectations outlined in H7c.

Although I observe a small negative relationship between questions asked by members of the public and campaign issues content, the relationship fails to reach statistical significance; thus, H7a is not supported. A similar relationship is observed between local journalist sources and campaign issues questions, which moves in a negative direction but falls short of reaching statistical significance. Therefore, H7f is not supported. As expected, however, I find a positive relationship between cable journalist sources and questions with a primary focus on campaign issues,  $r(1,882) = .05, p < .05$ . This demonstrates support for H7e.

## **Sponsorship and Campaign Issues**

Finally, the expectation concerning media sponsorship and campaign issues questions holds. I find that media sponsorship yields a positive relationship with campaign issues questions,  $r(1,882) = .05, p < .05$ . Therefore, H8 is supported; questions asked in debates with commercial media sponsorship are more likely to pertain to campaign issues whereas those asked in a forum solely sponsored by nonprofits hold the inverse relationship. Since exogenous

factors also influence content, I further test these relationships in a logistic regression model while controlling for a number of other possible influences.

### **Logistic Regression Model**

Since the content variable is dichotomous (1 = policy issues/0 = campaign issues), I run an identical logistic regression model for the campaign issues variable by reversing the coding scheme so that “1” reflects campaign issues and “0” categorizes policy issues questions. As such, the model’s chi square values, its H-L goodness of fit results, and all covariates remain the same. Due to the results indicating that media variables are stronger predictors of campaign issues over policy issues, this second model improves understanding of these relationships by including odds-ratios for variables predictive of campaign issues content.

Electoral controls and debate context variables perform as they do in the policy issues regression model; the foreign policy control holds a negative relationship with campaign issues, as does the number of candidates participating in the debate. In other words, the more candidates involved (also indicative of a debate falling earlier in the campaign) reduces questions emphasizing campaign issues and debates reserved for strictly foreign policy agendas also reduce the prevalence of campaign issues questions.

In terms of format, the press panel format holds a positive and significant relationship with campaign issues questions (see Table 6-1). By interpreting the EXP(B), we see that questions asked under this format are 1.4 times as likely to focus on campaign issues than those asked within other debate formats. From these models, predicted probabilities are generated for the panel format variable after holding all other variables at their mean levels (see Figure 6-3). This relationship, which demonstrates support for H5b, is unsurprising given this format places the agenda-setting powers in the hands of multiple journalists. Moreover, I find a similar

relationship with broadcast journalist sources; broadcast sources also hold a positive relationship with campaign issues questions. Broadcast sources are 1.4 times as likely to focus on campaign issues as members of the press with print journalism backgrounds. This demonstrates continued support for H7d. I also find a slightly larger effect for the media sponsorship variable; questions appearing in forums with commercial media sponsorship are 1.6 times as likely to focus on campaign issues than questions asked in formats without any media sponsorship influence. Therefore, H8 is also supported. Since cable journalists operate in a more competitive 24-7 news environment, we should expect cable moderators and cable journalist sources, too, hold a positive relationship with campaign issues questions. While the direction of the relationship underscores this expectation, the relationships for these two variables fell short of statistical significance. Therefore, H6d and H7e are not supported.

Most interestingly, I find that nonprofit journalist sources are the strongest predictor of campaign issues questions. Questions asked by nonprofit journalists are 2.6 times as likely to focus on campaign issues as questions asked by other sources (e.g. commercial journalists or the public). Using the model to hold all other variables at their mean levels, I generate a predicted probability of .486 for the nonprofit source variable, demonstrating that nearly half of questions generated by nonprofit journalists are likely to focus on campaign issues over policy issues. When compared to the predicted probability of campaign issues questions for all other sources, .269, we see that nonprofit journalists are considerably more reliant on these agenda topics (see Figure 6-4). This counters expectations outlined in H7c and goes against the grain of news norms and content expectations considering that consumer-driven models of news that devote more coverage to campaign issues are less imperative for nonprofit outlets. I discuss the implications of these mixed findings below.

## Discussion

What we can glean from these findings is that the news media influence the content of debate agendas but that influence is highly nuanced and does not always affect content in ways that are consistent with how the news media cover campaigns. Although this analysis did not yield significant relationships between question content and variables such as single moderator (or town hall format), print moderators and sources, cable moderators and sources, and nonprofit moderators, the data do suggest agenda distinctions unique to the medium (e.g. broadcast journalist sources), sponsorship, the press panel format, and nonprofit journalist sources. Since debates continue to attract a mass audience, the public learns from debates, and debates are more policy-driven than campaign news, these content distinctions are worthy of our attention.

Before discussing what these relationships mean for the substance of debate agendas, some context is needed. First, the content analysis reveals that debates are relatively policy-driven; questions with a primary focus on policy issues accounted for nearly 70% of the sample, whereas the remaining 30% pertained to campaign issues – horserace, strategy, tactics, character, and traits – often regarded as less substantive topics of elections. Considering that Pew data shows that horserace stories, a slice of campaign issues content, accounted for close to half of all campaign news coverage in the weeks leading up to the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential elections (Pew, 2012), one could argue that debates are filling the policy void left by a news media with more entertaining priorities.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, I find an imbalance in debate agendas that is uniquely tied to particular media variables.

Among the three dominant debate formats, the press panel format (which includes the highest level of input from the press) depresses policy content in debate questions. In fact, questions asked in these forums are 1.4 times as likely to reflect campaign issues as questions

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<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/02/winning-media-campaign-2012/>

asked in a town hall format or single moderator debate. When news professionals devote more time to campaign issues it means less airtime or inches devoted to policy matters; as many scholars observe, campaign issues – whether it be game-frames, horserace coverage, or strategic narratives – simply crowd out more substantive coverage of policy issues (Lang & Lang, 1978; Lawrence, 2000). This finding ultimately suggests that the format with the highest level of press input yields a greater level of campaign issues content, as panelists must compete with other prominent journalists to retain debate spotlight and attract attention; this suggests that formats incorporating multiple journalists create added incentives to focus on more entertaining campaign issues aspects of the election. It is worth noting that the panel format is conceptualized as any debates with two or more press questioners and can include up to as many as five participating journalists; however, future analyses should also account for the specific number of press participants to test whether a linear relationship with campaign issues questions is observed as the number of participants increases.

Since a similar relationship does not hold for the single moderator format, which also taps a press-controlled debate agenda, it seems that news professionals feel added pressure to generate more entertaining questions when participating in a panel format among a number of other competing elite journalists. In other words, journalists may strive for more entertaining, attention-grabbing questions in order to stand out among the panel and generate post-debate buzz. Motivations aside, this finding suggests that the Commission on Presidential Debates' (CPD) efforts in the early 1990s to move away from the press panel format toward single moderator and town hall formats is a move that benefits policy-driven agendas. Debate organizers in other electoral contexts, including the presidential primaries and state-level races, may also want to consider such a shift in format.



A similar relationship is identified for questions stemming from broadcast journalist sources. Here we see that broadcast journalists are 1.4 times as likely to ask questions pertaining to campaign issues than other sources (e.g. print journalists and members of the public). This relationship is in step with research demonstrating that print news coverage of elections is more substantive than television news (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). It seems broadcast journalists participating in debates are more likely to emphasize campaign issues than journalists from print media or the public; this may result from added emphasis on sound bite reporting unique to the broadcast environment and the fact that television journalism is more concise, leaving fewer opportunities for explanatory journalism sometimes necessary to report complex policy matters.

As expected, similar relationships are found for cable journalist sources and cable moderators but fall short of reaching statistical significance. As the dataset expands to include more cases of cable news question sources and cable moderators, we should find significant effects in future research. Nonetheless, the data suggest that limiting the participation of broadcast journalists may help bolster a policy-centric agenda. Furthermore, limiting media sponsorship may also create a debate environment more conducive to policy questions.

The data show that debates which include commercial media sponsorship, at some level, are more likely to generate campaign issues questions than those sponsored by nonprofits, political parties, or any other non-commercial news entity. I find that questions asked in media sponsored forums are 1.6 times more likely to have a campaign issues focus than those asked in forums with an absence of commercial media sponsorship. In other words, media sponsored debates limit policy discourse in the debate agenda. This relationship is unsurprisingly given that commercial news professionals increasingly face pressures to generate sound bites, conflict, and more entertaining election coverage in an environment where news audiences are becoming

more fragmented. Moving forward, debates structured with commercial media sponsors should yield greater emphasis on campaign issues questions. Those wishing to preserve a more policy-centric agenda may look to other avenues of sponsorship. Although nonprofit debate sponsorship bodes well for policy agendas, nonprofit journalists have a different effect on agenda outcomes.

Although press panels, broadcast journalist sources, and media sponsorship increase campaign issues questions, it is nonprofit journalist sources that hold the largest effect. Surprisingly, I find that questions asked by nonprofit journalists are more than 2.5 times more likely to reflect campaign issues than questions asked by commercial journalists or members of the public. In fact, out of all variables in the model, nonprofit journalist source is the largest predictor of campaign issues questions. This relationship is at odds with expectations based on the content of campaign news, which routinely cites market demands and commercial pressures as depressing policy content and hard news (Hamilton, 2004; Dunaway, 2008). Since nonprofit journalists operate in an environment where commercial pressures are less relevant, we would expect to find an association between these sources and policy issues questions. Although puzzling, the relationship does reinforce recent work finding a negative relationship between nonprofit press moderators and policy debate questions (Turcotte, forthcoming).

Although a statistically significant relationship was not found for all tested media variables, the data show that more media variables are associated with campaign issues content than policy issues. In fact, only a single media variable held a positive relationship with policy issues questions: the local moderator variable. Questions asked in debates with local moderating journalists were nearly 2 times (1.8) more likely to focus on policy issues than questions asked in debates moderated by national journalists. It is worth noting, however, that the local journalist question source variable also moved in positive direction with policy issues but failed to reach

statistical significance. This may be the result of too few cases of questions asked by local journalists in the sample and I would expect the relationship to reach significance as the dataset expands. Nonetheless, the data tells us something unique about local vs. national press corps.

The local moderator finding may be attributed to the possibility that 1) local journalists may not face the same level of commercial pressures, scrutiny, or competition that journalists on the national stage due (and are, consequently, less inclined to emphasize more entertaining campaign issues topics) or 2) local journalists are more in tune with the public agenda. Since their audience is more geographically confined, local journalists may possess a greater understanding of the policy issues important to their market. Since the relationship holds even after controlling for state-level debates, this finding suggests more involvement from local journalists in the debate process is a positive for policy content. As primary debates become more prolific, this offers food for thought in selecting which journalists to moderate these campaign events. In terms of public influence on policy questions, results are less cogent.

Given that members of the public are not conditioned to create drama and conflict in elections the way news professionals are, we should expect that town hall formats and questions directly coming from a public source should hold a positive relationship with policy questions. Although these two variables move in the expected direction, the independent variables measuring public input did not correlate with policy questions enough to reach statistical significance; thus, these two variables are not further tested in Table 6-1. Although H1a and H3a are not predictors of policy questions, nor are they predictors of campaign issues questions. Therefore, public questioners do not seem to function all that differently from the news professionals shaping the debate agenda. In other words, town hall formats and questions directly derived from members of the public are no more or less likely to facilitate a policy-driven agenda

or a campaign-issues agenda. These null findings suggest that public input in the debate process neither harms nor helps the substance of the agenda.

Two other control variables also bear a positive relationship with policy issues questions, one of which holds direct implications for how presidential debates are structured. Although the effect ( $EXP(B)=1.18$ ) is modest, the number of participating candidates in a debate holds a positive relationship with policy issues. This suggests two things: 1) primary debates with multiple candidates can remain policy-focused despite a more crowded stage and 2) debates held earlier in the campaign process before elections are winnowed down to a two-person race are more policy focused than those held closer to the election. This second point reinforces research demonstrating that campaign issues, particularly horserace narratives, become more prevalent as the election draws closer (Just et al., 1996; Dunaway & Stein, 2013). As Patterson (1994) observes, reporters often exhaust policy coverage over lengthy campaign seasons and later focus on campaign issues not only to amuse audiences but themselves.

Lastly, I find that despite media influences on policy issues and campaign issues content, a debate rules distinction is the largest predictor of policy content in questions. Debates designated as strictly “foreign policy” debates are nearly 4.5 times more likely to yield questions specific to policy issues than debates with domestic policy or mixed policy agendas. Although this finding is less applicable to state-level contexts, it merits attention since only one general election presidential debate is allocated as a “foreign policy” debate and primary debates are seldom designated as such. Despite media chatter questioning the necessity of foreign policy debates, they do produce more policy-driven questions, which may also have an effect on political learning: an experiment testing knowledge effects from exposure to the three U.S.

presidential debates in 2012 found that knowledge gains were chiefly driven by exposure to the foreign policy debate (Turcotte & Goidel, 2014).<sup>33</sup>

In sum, the news media can indeed influence the content of the debate agenda; however, the news media do not uniformly influence debates. The data suggests that when local journalists moderate debates, we should see greater emphasis on policy questions. Inversely, panel formats, commercial media sponsorship, broadcast journalist sources, and nonprofit journalist sources are positively associated with greater emphasis on campaign issues – at the expense of policy content. How these news influences inform the tone of debate questions is explored in the following chapter.

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<sup>33</sup> Also 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/>

## CHAPTER 7

### CLASH, CONFLICT, AND MEDIA INFLUENCE ON DEBATE TONE

Coverage of electoral campaigns is most often characterized by their negativity (Sabato, 1992; Patterson, 1996; Cohen, 2008). In the news media's quest to generate conflict and satisfy core news values, journalists have heightened public awareness of gaffes, misdeeds, and scandal. This negativity is sometimes justified and newsworthy but oftentimes superficial and unnecessarily negative. What's more, the negative tone plaguing campaign coverage has only intensified in the more competitive 24-hour news environment as outlets try to fill larger news holes and break through the white noise of a high choice media environment. While extensive literature has focused on the tone news professionals set in their election coverage, little is known about how these news routines and values affect the tone of debate agendas.

Negativity may manifest in a variety of forms. For instance, questions of clash often prime polarization and exacerbate the differences between candidates or parties – ultimately heightening feelings of disagreement or perceived unwillingness to compromise. Attack questions emphasize the flaws of candidates; these questions foster negativity and distrust in elected officials. Such attack questions overstep the watchdog role of journalism, abandoning accountability journalism for negativity journalism (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). What's more, questions laced with cynicism also produce negativity by introducing a sense of skepticism concerning the motives of candidates. Such questions produce negativity at the candidate level but also produce negativity concerning the electoral process altogether by heightening partisan gridlock and the inefficiencies of democracy.

The following chapter explores media influence on the tone of electoral debate agendas to assess the extent in which news negativity occurs in this particular campaign event context

and to identify the conditions which foster such negativity. I explore negativity in two distinct domains: questions with a tone of clash and questions with an attack tone.<sup>34</sup>

### **The News Media and Questions of Clash**

The perception of increasing polarization in politics is growing, and it's a trend partly attributable to the news media's choosing to give more attention to conflict and dispute over compromise and bipartisanship. In doing so, journalists satisfy news values of conflict and objectivity, or what Tuchman (1973) refers to as the "two sides" approach to stories, in their campaign coverage. What's more, scholars have found evidence of clash questions in presidential debates (Carlin et al., 2001).

Questions of clash may help the public discern differences between candidates and parties, but they also prime polarization and emphasize a lack of consensus. This lack of consensus increases public perception of a polarized system and perpetuates negative attitudes about the electoral process. Emphasis of clash satisfies the core news value of conflict and helps attract and retain audiences by offering a more entertaining and dramatic news product. Therefore, we should expect to see format differences depending on the level of news influence from journalists conditioned to manufacture conflict and level of influence from members of the public, who tend to be less adversarial than the press. I propose the following format specific hypotheses:

H1a: Questions in town hall formats are less likely to manufacture clash.

H1b: Questions in press panel formats are more likely to manufacture clash.

H1c: Questions in single moderator formats are more likely to manufacture clash.

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<sup>34</sup> Research assistants coded for a third measure of negativity: cynically-toned questions. However, the subjectivity of the concept routinely hinders inter-rater reliability ( $Kappa = .59, p < .01$ ) and this variable was omitted from further analysis. To mitigate this problem, future research should couple transcript-based coding with the viewing of file footage. This approach is incorporated in my future research agenda.

Similarly, we should expect to see variance in tone dependent on moderator characteristics. Since nonprofit journalists do not share the same competitive pressures as commercial print and broadcast journalists, or cable journalists for that matter, clash should be contained to particular moderator characteristics. Therefore, I also propose the following moderator-specific hypotheses:

H2a: Questions in debates with moderating print journalists are more likely to manufacture clash.

H2b: Questions in debates with moderating broadcast journalists are more likely to manufacture clash.

H2c: Questions in debates with moderating nonprofit journalists are less likely to manufacture clash.

H2d: Questions in debates with moderating cable journalists are more likely to manufacture clash.

H2e: Questions in debates with moderating local journalists are less likely to manufacture clash.

Since moderators do not have complete control over debate agendas and expectations among journalists and between the press and members of the public may differ, I also explore these relationships at the source level. Thus, I offer the following source specific hypotheses:

H3a: Questions from print journalists are more likely to manufacture clash.

H3b: Questions from broadcast journalists are more likely to manufacture clash.

H3c: Questions from nonprofit journalists are less likely to manufacture clash.

H3d: Questions from the public are less likely to manufacture clash.

H3e: Questions from cable journalists are more likely to manufacture clash.

H3f: Questions from local journalists are less likely to manufacture clash.

Lastly, one would also expect that debates with nonprofit sponsorship are less likely to create a polarizing environment since these debates should, theoretically, function without the



profit-driven pressure to produce conflict and drama. Inversely, media sponsored debates should produce greater emphasis on clash. I propose the following sponsorship specific hypothesis:

H4: Questions in debates with media sponsorship are more likely to manufacture clash.

Research assistants coded each case in a dichotomous clash variable, assigning a “1” for the presence of clash and a “0” for its absence ( $Kappa = .74, p < .01$ ). Before analyzing the data, I omit 66 questions posed by candidates to other candidates in since they are unreflective of media influences. These candidate-to-candidate questions were permitted in some portions of primary debates but are more representative of political elite agenda-setting and campaign talking points rather than news media influence. Thus, I omit them from the study. Despite prior literature raising awareness of clash in debates, I find few instances of clash questions (5.2%) across the sample ( $N=98$ ).

Before introducing control variables, I first assess the correlations between the independent variables of interest and clash questions.

### **Debate Format and Clash**

In examining the relationship between debate format and clash I find minimal support for the hypotheses, with an exception for the single moderator format. First, I find no relationship between the press panel format and clash questions; H1b is not supported. Nonetheless, I do find media influence on clash for the single moderator format.

I find a positive relationship between the single moderator format and clash questions,  $r(1,882) = .06, p < .01$ , meaning news media influence on clash does exist in certain contexts. Thus, H1c is preliminarily supported. For the town hall format in which the public shapes the debate agenda, the relationship moves in the expected direction – a negative relationship on clash

questions – but only approaches statistical significance. Therefore, I hesitate to suggest the data show support for H1a.

### **Moderator Characteristics and Clash**

In assessing moderator characteristics and clash, the correlations demonstrate surprising results. The relationship between print and broadcast moderators moves in a negative direction, thus countering expectations (although the print moderator variable fails to reach statistical significance). For debates moderated by a broadcast journalist, I find a negative relationship with clash questions,  $r(1,882) = -.08, p < .01$ . Thus, H2a and H2b are not supported.

Paralleling the findings for the broadcast moderator variable, I also find a negative relationship between cable moderators and clash questions,  $r(1,882) = -.05, p < .05$ . Thus, H2d is not supported. In sum, these correlations demonstrate that clash questions are not attributed to commercial news influences in debates. These results also suggest that nonprofit press influence on debates may not function as expected.

For the nonprofit moderator variable I find a relatively strong and significant relationship for clash questions,  $r(1,882) = .10, p < .01$ . This finding signals a lack of support for H2c and shows that clash questions are strongly linked to debates moderated by nonprofit journalists. This is surprising given that these journalists do not operate under the same commercial demands as those in the print moderator and broadcast moderator variables. I do, however, find support for H2e: local moderators hold a negative relationship with clash questions,  $r(1,882) = -.04, p < .05$ . Although the effect size is minimal, the relationship does support the notion that local journalists are less inclined to manufacture conflict in the form of polarizing clash questions. To expound upon these findings, I explore these relationships at the source level.

### **Question Source and Clash**

At the source level I fail to find any statistically significant relationships between print journalist source and clash, and broadcast journalist source and clash. Therefore, H3a and H3b are not supported. Moreover, I do not observe any significant effects for cable news sources and local news sources. Therefore, H3e and H3f are also not supported. Again, I find strong – and unexpected – effects for the nonprofit source variable. I find a positive correlation between nonprofit journalist source and clash questions,  $r(1,882) = .16, p < .01$ . This relationship counters the expectation of H3c and the effect size at the source level is much stronger than that cited for the nonprofit moderator variable. In terms of questions asked by members of the public, I also observe a positive relationship with clash,  $r(1,882) = .06, p < .01$ . Therefore, H3d is not supported. This finding builds on the overall pattern suggesting that commercial pressures bear little influence on the likelihood of clash questions in the debate agenda. In fact, those unconditioned by such incentives to create clash and conflict are more likely to do so.

### **Sponsorship and Clash**

Lastly, I find a negative relationship between commercial media sponsorship and clash questions,  $r(1,882) = -.08, p < .01$ . Thus, H8 is not supported. However, the finding reflects the pattern of found in the data – a pattern which suggests clash questions are a byproduct of nonprofit news influence rather than commercial media influence.

### **Logistic Regression Model**

The next stage of analysis involved testing the significant correlations in a more robust logistic regression model ( $\chi^2 = 100.42, p < .01, df = 17$ ) inclusive of electoral controls and controls pertaining to debate context.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The Hosmer-Lemeshow test for the clash model does not demonstrate goodness of fit ( $\chi^2 = 19.63, p = .01, df = 8$ ).

These electoral controls include a continuous variable measuring election year, a continuous variable measuring the number of participating candidates, and a continuous variable controlling for competitiveness of the race by measuring the vote count (percentage) spread between the top two candidates. Dichotomous variables coded as “1” or “0” measure presence of an incumbent in the debate, whether the question comes from a general election presidential debate, and whether the question comes from a state-level debate. According to the model (see Table 7-1), several of these controls are significant predictors of clash.

First, year of election holds a positive and significant relationship with clash, meaning more recently held debates are more likely to contain clash questions in the agenda. This seems to coincide with what Prior (2007) refers to as a byproduct of the post-broadcast environment: heightened polarization.

Unsurprisingly, the number of candidates decreases clash questions in the debates since manufacturing polarization and conflict is much easier in a binary, 2-candidate format than in debates featuring multiple candidates across a greater spectrum of political ideologies. Thus, we also see that general election presidential debates are a strong predictor, with questions from these debates being more than twice as likely to resemble clash questions as those asked in other types of debates.

Since these general election debates feature but two candidates, manufacturing clash and forcing candidate divergence is more easily achieved than those including multiple candidates. Candidate incumbency is also a predictor, approaching significance at the  $p < .06$  level. In other words, the forced divergence of clash questions is also a means of sizing up lesser known challengers with incumbent candidates.

Table 7-1. Logistic Regression Model: Predictors of clash questions

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Single moderator	.52	.34	2.32	1.69
Broadcast moderator	-1.07	.83	1.66	.34
Nonprofit moderator	1.62	.91	3.14	5.03
Local moderator	-1.56	1.00	2.41	.21
Cable moderator	-.34	.36	.87	.72
Media sponsor	-1.81**	.54	11.34	.16
Nonprofit source	2.73**	.55	24.73	15.28
Public source	1.19**	.42	8.12	3.29
Electoral controls				
Election year	.04*	.01	6.17	1.04
Candidate No.	-.25*	.11	5.07	.78
Competitiveness	-.02	.02	1.33	.98
Incumbent	.75	.39	3.64	2.11
Presidential (GE)	.78*	.39	3.95	2.18
State-level	-2.12**	.72	8.74	.12
Debate context				
Length	-.00	.01	.08	.99
Response time	.01	.01	1.65	1.00
Foreign policy	-1.11*	.50	4.93	.33
Constant	-74.69**	28.61		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 100.42$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $\log \text{likelihood} = -334.90$ ; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .16$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

The model also includes three controls pertaining to debate rules. The first two continuous variables measure length of the debate (in minutes) and length of allocated candidate response time (in seconds). Neither of these controls significantly predicts clash questions; however, a dichotomous variable controlling for foreign policy debates demonstrates that clash questions are far less likely to be asked in these forums. After introducing these electoral and debate context controls, I find that relationships hold for three of the eight media variables.

The model demonstrates that neither of the format or moderator variables predicts clash questions, meaning the single moderator format, broadcast moderators, nonprofit moderators, local moderators, and cable moderators bear little influence on clash tone in debates. Therefore, H1c, H2b, H2c, H2d, and H2e are not supported by the model. Nonetheless, I find significant relationships at the source level.

First, questions stemming from the public are prone to clash. In fact, public questions sources are more than 3 times as likely to resemble clash as questions from other sources. This finding counters expectations outlined in H3d and although this effect is strong and significant it is overshadowed by the nonprofit source variable, which shows that questions asked by nonprofit journalists are 15 times more likely to adopt a tone of clash than other sources. Thus, H3c is not supported. Related to this finding, commercial media sponsorship reduces the likelihood of clash questions in the debate, countering H4, and demonstrating that nonprofit sponsorship is also a catalyst for clash. To better understand the effect sizes of the public source and nonprofit source variables, I hold all control variables at their mean levels to generate predicted probabilities.

From this logistic regression model I find that when all other variables are held at their mean values, public question sources have a predicted probability of just .045; when public question source is set to “0” this variable holds a predicted probability of .014, resulting in a -

.031 change or overall decline of 68.9%. Nonetheless, frequency of clash questions – even when asked by a member of the public – remains markedly low. In contrast, I find nonprofit sources drive debate questions with clash tones. From this regression model I find that questions from nonprofit journalist sources have a predicted probability of .255, whereas questions from all other sources are .022 (see Figure 7-1). This reflects a -.233 change in predicted probability when moving from a nonprofit source to any other source of debate questions; this change reflects an overall decline of about 91.4%. These results underscore the strength of the effect, demonstrating that nearly all clash questions are attributed to nonprofit journalist sources.

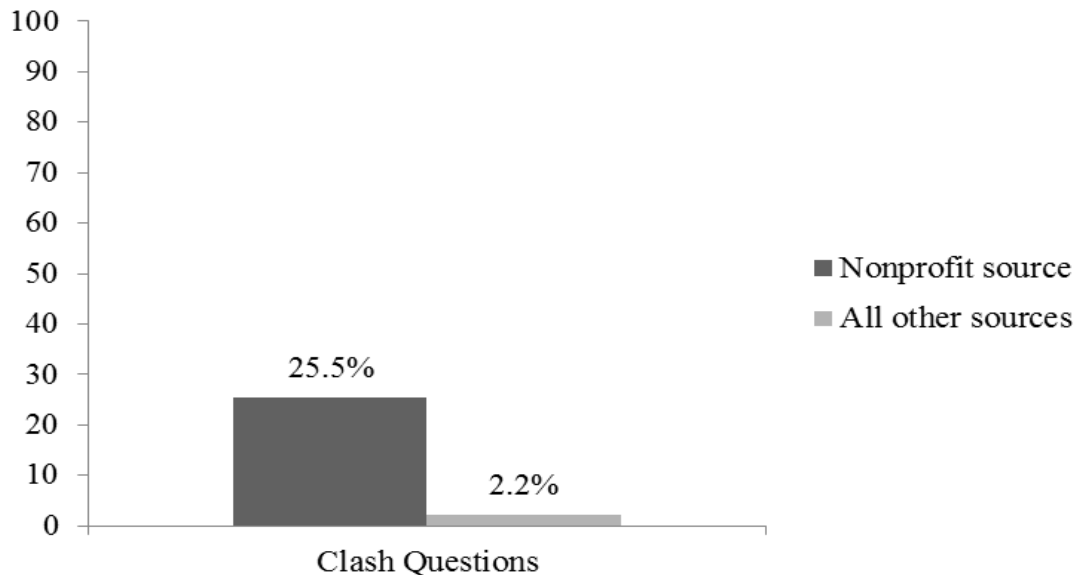


Figure 7-1. Predicted Probabilities: Nonprofit source & clash

### **The News Media and Attack Questions**

A second measure of negativity, the attack question, is often posed in an aggressive, argumentative, or unfair tone. The attack question focuses on the shortcomings and flaws of the candidate; they are unnecessarily negative, meaning they extend beyond the usual watchdog role of journalism. These attack questions create a more conflict-driven and entertaining news focus,

but come at a democratic cost, as they emphasize political negativity and heighten public cynicism (Patterson, 1996; Sabato, 1992; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Forgette & Morris, 2006). This form of negativity satisfies the news value of conflict, but is also tied to commercial pressures and economic incentives. For example, Dunaway's (2013) work has shown that corporate ownership and market competition exacerbate the problem of negativity in campaign news coverage. Thus, we should also expect the reliance on attack questions to vary according to several media characteristics.

First, the level of public vs. press influence should yield distinctions in attack prevalence across format. Scholars have found that members of the public are less adversarial and less likely to attack candidates when given access to them (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Morello, 2005). Since candidate attacks are tied to news routines, news values, and commercial incentives, formats should function differently in terms of the agenda tone. Therefore, I offer the following format-specific hypotheses:

H5a: Questions in town hall formats are less likely to attack a candidate.

H5b: Questions in press panel formats are more likely to attack a candidate.

H5c: Questions in single moderator formats are more likely to attack a candidate.

The news media also influence the agenda through the gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions of the moderating journalist. Since we know that the need to generate entertainment via conflict varies according to commercial pressures, we should also expect variance in the usage of attack questions according to a moderator's news background. For example, we should see fewer instances of attack questioning from moderating journalists who are not burdened by the same commercial pressures as broadcast and print journalists – pressures that are particularly



pronounced for cable journalists scrambling to fill 24-hour news holes. Therefore, I suggest the following moderator-specific hypotheses:

H6a: Questions in debates with moderating print journalists are more likely to attack a candidate.

H6b: Questions in debates with moderating broadcast journalists are more likely to attack a candidate.

H6c: Questions in debates with moderating nonprofit journalists are less likely to attack a candidate.

H6d: Questions in debates with moderating cable journalists are more likely to attack a candidate.

H6e: Questions in debates with moderating local journalists are less likely to attack a candidate.

In order to parse out media influence further, I also test these relationships at the source level. This is important considering that the press panel format invites journalists from all types of professional backgrounds to ask the candidates questions. Moreover, this variable provides a more accurate picture of agenda differences between the press and public, since literature shows members of the public are less inclined to elevate conflict and attack candidates. I therefore offer the following source-specific hypotheses:

H7a: Questions from print journalists are more likely to attack a candidate.

H7b: Questions from broadcast journalists are more likely to attack a candidate.

H7c: Questions from nonprofit journalists are less likely to attack a candidate.

H7d: Questions from the public are less likely to attack a candidate.

H7e: Questions from cable journalists are more likely to attack a candidate.

H7f: Questions from local journalists are less likely to attack a candidate.

Lastly, I explore the relationship between sponsorship and attack questions to further analyze media influence on the tone of debate agendas. Since debates sponsored by nonprofit entities are not beholden to the profit-driven pressures that commercial media outlets are, there may also be less incentive to manufacture conflict in the form of attack questions. Thus, I offer the following sponsorship-specific hypothesis:

H8: Questions in debates with media sponsorship are more likely to attack a candidate.

As with the analyses for clash questions, I omit 66 questions from the dataset that were posed by the candidates to competing candidates in order to isolate media influence. These candidate-to-candidate questions were permitted in some portions of primary debates but are rare occurrences across all formats and such questions are more representative of political elite agenda-setting and campaign talking points rather than news media influence. Thus, I omit them from the study. The attack measure is treated as a dichotomous variable, with research assistants assigning a “1” for questions with an attack tone present and a “0” for its absence ( $Kappa = .71$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Across the sample I find that 11.4% of debate questions ( $N=215$ ) adopt an attack tone. Before introducing control variables, I first assess the correlations between the independent variables of interest and attack questions.

### **Debate Format and Attacks**

When I test the relationship between debate formats and attack questions, a negative relationship emerges between the town hall format and candidate attacks,  $r(1,882) = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . This reinforces the notion that members of the public are simply less adversarial and less conditioned to create conflict when addressing candidates; thus, H5a is supported. For formats with mostly press agenda influence I find a lack of statistically significant effects for the single moderator format, meaning H5c is not supported, but do find moderate effects for the press panel

format. I find a positive relationship between press panels and attack questions,  $r(1,882) = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ . This finding demonstrates support for H5b.

### **Moderator Characteristics and Attacks**

In analyzing the influence of moderator characteristics I find no support for the hypotheses exploring variance between print and broadcast: H6a and H6b. In addition to a lack of findings for medium differences, there is also lack of evidence that nonprofit moderators bear any influence on attack questions. Thus, H6c is not supported. I do, however, find relationships for more nuanced moderator characteristics: cable moderators and local moderators.

As expected, I find a negative relationship between questions asked in debates moderated by local journalists and candidate attacks,  $r(1,882) = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . This finding is unsurprising considering the reduced demands for local journalists to manufacture conflict; this demonstrates support for H6e. The correlations also demonstrate a negative relationship between questions asked in debates moderated by journalists with cable news backgrounds and candidate attacks,  $r(1,882) = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . This relationship counters the expectations outlined in H6d and shows that although the 24-hour news demands may adversely influence the content of cable news' campaign coverage (i.e. horserace, tactics, and strategy), these demands do not seem to bear any ill effects on the tone of questions facilitated by a cable news moderator.

### **Question Source and Attacks**

Although the print and broadcast moderator variables failed to produce any statistically significant relationships with attack questions, the data reveal small effects for these medium differences at the source level. I find a positive correlation between print journalist sources and candidate attacks,  $r(1,882) = .04$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Similarly, I also find a positive correlation between broadcast question sources and attacks, although this relationship merely approaches significance at the  $p < .07$  level. Therefore, I do find preliminary support for H7a but not H7b. Nor do I find support H7e, meaning no relationship is found for the cable journalist source variable. I do, however, find that questions asked by local journalists are less likely to attack a candidate,  $r(1,882) = -.05$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, H7f is supported.

As was the case with the nonprofit moderator variable, the data fails to find any relationship between nonprofit question sources and candidate attacks. In other words, nonprofit journalists do not seem to increase or diminish the likelihood of attacks in the debate agenda. Thus, H7c is not supported. I do, however, find a negative relationship between questions asked by members of the public and candidate attacks,  $r(1,882) = -.07$ ,  $p < .01$ . This demonstrates support for H7d and parallels the relationship between the town hall format and attack questions.

### **Sponsorship and Attacks**

For the final variable I find a lack of effects for sponsorship influence on attack questions. In other words, the data do not suggest a relationship between media sponsorship and attack questions. Thus, H8 is not supported.

### **Logistic Regression Model**

Next, I assess these relationships after introducing a number of covariates in a logistic regression model (see Table 7-2). The model ( $\chi^2 = 64.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 16$ ) includes control variables specific to electoral context and debate rules which may also predict attack questions in the agendas.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The Hosmer-Lemeshow test demonstrates an appropriate goodness of fit for the model ( $\chi^2 = 7.61$ ,  $p = .47$ ,  $df = 8$ ).

Table 7-2. Logistic Regression Model: Predictors of attack questions

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Panel format	.54**	.21	6.79	1.72
Town hall format	-.14	.32	.18	.87
Local moderator	-.97	.51	3.52	.38
Cable moderator	-.43*	.21	4.18	.65
Public source	-.37	.22	2.72	.69
Print media source	.15	.21	.49	1.16
Local media source	-.61*	.31	3.90	.55
Electoral controls				
Election year	-.02	.01	2.55	.98
Candidate No.	-.09	.06	2.65	.91
Competitiveness	-.00	.01	.00	.99
Incumbent	-.02	.24	.00	.98
Presidential (GE)	.37	.28	1.70	1.45
State-level	.05	.37	.02	1.06
Debate context				
Length	.01*	.00	4.99	1.01
Response time	-.01	.00	2.33	.99
Foreign policy	-.69*	.35	3.84	.50
Constant	32.81	22.07		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 64.28$ ,  $df = 16$ , log likelihood = -636.75; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .07$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

The electoral controls include dichotomous variables reflecting whether questions came from a presidential debate context, and also a state-level context. These variables are necessary given the scholarship that has shown particularly negative news coverage for presidential candidates (Cohen, 2008; see Pew, 2012).<sup>37</sup> Since news attacks appear more pronounced for elections on a national stage, state-level campaign coverage may function with more civility. We also know incumbents are scrutinized more by news professionals than challengers in a presidential context (Cohen, 2008) but the work of Arnold (2004) has shown a favorability bias for incumbents in Congress regarding tone of media coverage. Thus, electoral context in addition to a dichotomous variable signaling the presence of a participating incumbent in the debate are necessary controls.

Attacks can also be influenced by how tight an election is; in close races both candidates and news professionals have more incentives to attack. Moreover, news professionals are more drawn to conflict and negativity in competitive races (Arnold, 2004; Dunaway, 2013). Therefore, the spread of the final vote count between the top two candidates controls for competitiveness of the race. Since some scholars (Sabato, 1992; Patterson, 1996; Bennett & Serrin, 2005) contend that today's news environment creates an overly aggressive watchdog role, it is also worth including a measure for election year as attack journalism may be on the rise as content becomes more interpretive and the news environment more competitive. I include a final (continuous) electoral variable based on the number of candidates partaking in the debate, since campaign negativity amps up the closer it gets to an election.<sup>38</sup> Although these controls do not yield statistically significant relationships in the model, they are retained for theoretical purposes.

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<sup>37</sup> See <http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/02/winning-media-campaign-2012/>

<sup>38</sup> See [http://features.journalism.org/2012/11/02/tone-of-campaign-coverage-2012/pej\\_12-11-02\\_campaigncoverage\\_cover/](http://features.journalism.org/2012/11/02/tone-of-campaign-coverage-2012/pej_12-11-02_campaigncoverage_cover/)

Since longer debates and longer time periods allocated for candidate responses may influence the tone of questions, I also include these two continuous debate rules variables which measure length of the debate (in minutes) and length of response time (in seconds). I find that the length of the debate holds a positive relationship with attack questions. The relationship is statistically significant but the effect size is marginal. Nonetheless, just as lengthy campaign seasons lead to more campaign issues narratives over time, as Patterson (1994) notes, perhaps lengthier debates provide ample time for journalists to slip more attacks into the agenda. This relationship may result from the pressure to keep audiences tuned in to lengthier debates. A third (dichotomous) variable controlling for questions asked in debates designated as foreign policy debates results in a negative relationship with attack questions ( $p = .05$ ). In other words, the tone of questions asked in foreign policy debates are more civil than those asked in domestic policy or mixed agenda debates.<sup>39</sup> After introducing electoral controls and debate context variables, I observe some significant relationships between the media variables and attack questions.

Unsurprisingly, the town hall format and public sources of questions hold a negative relationship with attack tone, which falls in line with previous literature about a public which is less adversarial than the press (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Morello, 2005); however, these relationships do not reach statistical significance and H5a and H7d are not supported.

I also find that the local moderator variable reduces debate attacks at a level that approaches significance. More importantly, local journalist source is negatively and significantly ( $p < .05$ ) related to attack questions – even after state-level debates are controlled for. This shows pseudo support for H6e (local moderator influence) and fully supports H7f, which assesses local

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<sup>39</sup> A variable measuring the gender of question source was also tested for an effect but it did not hold a statistically significant relationship with attack questions, nor did it influence the outcomes of any key variables in the model. Therefore, source gender was omitted from the model.

press influence at the question source level. In sum, local journalists are simply less conditioned to emphasize attack questions in debates.

Albeit perplexing, I also find that cable news moderators also hold a negative and significant ( $p < .05$ ) relationship with attack questions. This relationship counters expectations outlined in H6d, as those with 24-hours news pressures actually seem less inclined to facilitate an attack environment. I must temper these findings by adding that no such relationship was found for cable journalists at the source level when running correlations; thus, other influences are likely driving this cable moderator variable. But what, if any, media variables are predictors of attack questions? According to the data, the lone predictor is the press panel format.

First, although print journalist sources preliminarily held a positive relationship with attack questions, this relationship failed to reach statistical significance after introducing covariates in the model. Therefore, I find a lack of support for H7a. Nonetheless, the press panel format yields a positive and significant relationship on attack questions. In interpreting the EXP(B) value, we see that questions appearing in the press panel format are more than 1.7 times as likely to include an attack tone than questions found in single moderator or town hall formats. Using this logistic regression model I also run predicted probabilities for the press panel variable while holding all other variables at their mean levels; I find that questions from press panels have a predicted probability of .127, whereas questions from other formats are .078. This reflects a -.049 change or an overall decline of about 38.6%.

In other words, press panel formats, which not only incorporate the greatest level of press input in setting the agenda but perhaps create a much more competitive news environment than the single moderator format, is a strong predictor of attack questions. This finding demonstrates



strong support for H5b. These relationships between news influences on attacks and clash questions are discussed in greater detail below.

### **Discussion**

In terms of attacks in the debate agenda, few media variables hold a significant relationship with negatively toned questioning. The most striking finding comes from the press panel format, where we see questions in these debates are nearly twice as likely to adopt an attack tone as those questions asked in other debate formats.

This relationship reinforces findings cited in the 2004 election when press panelists routinely emphasized “adversarial” questions (Ben-Porath, 2007). The results presented herein demonstrate a more systemic pattern of attacks in press panels, which may result from the fact that this format provides the highest degree of competitive pressures for journalists because they compete among other leading reporters for bold, memorable questions, as well as soundbites and post-debate attention. Single moderators simply have less pressure to generate a splash since they retain considerable debate spotlight with little effort. Considering the concerns of an overly negative news media in the campaign process (Sabato, 1992; Patterson, 1996; Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Cohen, 2008) this finding reinforces the Commission on Presidential Debates’ (CPD) move to eliminate the press panel format from the general election. Since news negativity disenfranchises the public from the electoral process and produces heightened levels of cynicism toward democracy altogether (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), primary and state-level debate organizers may also wish to follow suit.

Although cable moderators hold a negative relationship with attack questions, countering expectations outlined in the hypotheses, the relationship does not hold for the more telling question source variable. Therefore, I cannot assert that cable journalists are any less inclined to

pose an attack question in debates. The results do, however, suggest that local news professionals operate somewhat differently than the national press corps. Since local news sources reduce the likelihood of asking attacks questions, it seems these journalists are less conditioned to manufacture conflict in the debate arena. Increasingly, however, national news professionals are invited to moderate and serve on panels for state-level debates. The results presented herein suggest that in doing so, this structure may increase the level of attack questions in Senate and gubernatorial election debates. There are also some structural implications stemming from the control variables.

Unsurprisingly, we see that forums designated as foreign policy debates sizably reduces the likelihood of attack questions. Since foreign policy debates are more issue driven than domestic policy or mixed-agenda debates, this finding is intuitive. Also, this finding may be influenced by what some scholars refer to as a rally-around-the-flag effect, meaning the press is more supportive and less negative when covering issues that affect national security or issues related to national crises (Zaller & Chiu, 1996; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). Furthermore, the length also predicts the likelihood of attacks; the longer the debate, the greater the likelihood of attack questions. This finding echoes Patterson's (1994) problems with lengthy campaign seasons. Patterson suggests that journalists simply exhaust covering policy issues early in the campaign and later gravitate to campaign issues – many of which can focus on negative attributes of the candidates. In other words, journalists may be more likely to generate conflict in lengthier debates in order to maintain both audience interest and personal interest in the event.

For the clash variable, a number of controls significantly influence the likelihood of these questions seeking candidate divergence. First, these questions are less likely to appear in state-level debates and foreign policy debates. Fewer participating candidates also predict the

likelihood of clash questions. Since it's much easier for journalists to force divergence between two candidates rather than among several candidates, this is unsurprising – and further reinforced by the presidential control variable which finds clash questions are more than twice as likely in general election presidential debates than in other electoral contexts.

The data show public question sources are a predictor of clash in debates, but after assessing the predicted probabilities, this relationship is far overshadowed by the lone significant media variable: nonprofit sources. In fact, the results show that clash questions are almost strictly a byproduct of nonprofit journalists.

Although clash questions are linked to journalistic norms of balance and objectivity, commercial news professionals are not reliant on this tone of questioning. In contrast, approximately one-fourth of all nonprofit debate questions are likely to resemble clash questions, whereas questions from all other sources have just a 2% chance of adopting a tone of clash. In short, this tone of questioning is almost entirely symptomatic of participating nonprofit journalists in debates. These clash questions are ultimately a double-edged sword. When focused on policy matters, these questions forcing divergence between candidates can help voters discern views and platforms, and subsequently improve public knowledge. These binary clash questions can also increase perceived polarization of not only the two candidates, but the two parties or overall political system. That heightened sense of polarization could also have democratic implications, such as public disengagement or more cynical public attitudes toward politics.

In sum, this chapter explores media influence on tone of debate questions. These findings infer that manufactured news conflict is reduced by parting ways with the press panel format, as these forums are more likely to generate attack questions that perpetuate the problem of an unnecessarily negative news media. These findings also highlight distinctions between national

vs. local news professionals, insofar that local journalists are less likely to manufacture conflict in debates. Although there is a lack of consensus on whether clash questions are civically beneficial, the likelihood of these questions appearing in debates is almost entirely dependent on the participation of nonprofit journalists. Additional research exploring the effects of clash questions is needed before arguing whether these questions are effective and desirable in the debate process.

Thus far, this research has supported the CPD's departure from the press panel format but, as evident from the virtual town hall forums established through the 2007 YouTube-CNN partnership, debate format continues to evolve. Although general election debates have yet to include digital and social media, influence from digital media companies such as YouTube, Google, or Facebook may be just an election cycle or two away. In fact, these social media entities have already begun re-shaping the format and structure of primary debates. How social media influences the debate agenda, however, remains uncertain. In the following chapter, I explore agenda convergence, question content, and question tone through additional variables measuring social media influence.

## CHAPTER 8

### DIGITIZING DEBATES: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2007 CNN and YouTube partnered for two jointly-sponsored presidential primary debates. The events marked the first time digital and social media played a role in organizing and sponsoring electoral debates. Since that time Facebook, MySpace, and Google have partnered with traditional broadcast media to sponsor a debate. In many ways, these sponsorships create virtual town hall debates that grant members of the public direct access to the candidates through digital and social media. Those with particularly sanguine opinions of the internet's democratizing capabilities argue that these virtual forums increase public participation in electoral politics and bring citizens closer to the candidates. Although some research (e.g. Church, 2010; McKinney & Rill, 2009; Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011) has explored agenda outcomes of the two CNN-YouTube debates, we know little about social and digital media's broad influence on debate content. This chapter explores the impact of social and digital media on the debate agenda, specifically its impact on agenda convergence, question content, and question tone.

The biggest obstacle to analyzing the influence of digital and social media on debate content comes from limitations in sample.<sup>40</sup> In the total dataset, just 4% of cases (N=76) were questions asked in a virtual town hall format. Although virtual town halls and traditional town hall formats both solicit a great deal of public input in the debate process, it is unclear whether they function similarly. The analyses in the previous chapters use a town hall variable inclusive of both virtual town halls and those traditional forums that require public attendance in the

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<sup>40</sup> A dichotomous social media sponsorship variable assessed whether a question came from a debate which included a digital and social media sponsor but bore little influence on the convergence, content or tone of question agenda. Thus, further analyses were omitted for this measure.

venue. The research presented thus far has shown that town hall debates are more apt to convergence with public agendas over the agendas of political elite; the data presented herein also suggests that these formats are no less substantive policy-wise than formats with press set agendas. If – and how – virtual town forums differ from traditional town hall formats remains unclear. Parsing out the questions asked in the virtual town halls from the traditional town hall formats, I explore the following research question:

RQ1: Do questions from virtual town halls differ in terms of agenda convergence, content, or tone from questions asked in traditional town halls with the public present before the candidates?

In order to assess agenda distinctions between traditional town halls and virtual town halls, I create two dummy variables pulled from the debate format variable: traditional town hall questions (N=194) and virtual town hall questions (N=76). First, I compare correlations between the two town hall variables and the dependent variables: agenda convergence, content, and tone of questions. I find little distinctions between the relationships with these dependent variables, meaning virtual town hall agendas perform similarly to traditional town hall agendas.

For agenda convergence, I find that both town hall formats hold a positive relationship with questions citing the public. The effect, however, fails to reach statistical significance but nonetheless demonstrates the virtual format performs similarly to the traditional town hall format when it comes to questions addressing public concerns. Inversely, both town hall formats hold a negative and significant relationship with questions citing political elite. I find, however, that traditional town halls have a slightly stronger effect,  $r(1,882) = -.13, p < .01$ , than that of the negative relationship observed for virtual town halls and political elite convergence,  $r(1,882) = -$

.07,  $p < .01$ .<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, the directional relationships of both town hall formats function similarly for both agenda convergence variables.

In looking to content, both town hall variables hold a positive relationship with questions pertaining to policy issues but both also fall short in reaching statistical significance. Inversely, both hold a small negative correlation with questions pertaining to campaign issues but, again, these relationships do not reach statistical significance.

For variables assessing tone, I again find that both formats perform with one small distinction. First, both hold negative but insignificant relationships with clash questions. Both formats also hold negative relationships with attack questions, albeit this effect is stronger for traditional town halls. Although virtual town halls fall short of reaching statistical significance, I observe a stronger negative relationship for the traditional town hall format,  $r(1,882) = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ .<sup>42</sup> This suggests that while neither format functions as a predictor of attack questions, the traditional town halls are more effective in minimizing attacks in the debate agenda than virtual town halls. This distinction is an intuitive one considering that the veil of electronic media tends to reduce the risks and discomfort of attacking someone since the questioners are no longer face-to-face with the candidates they are criticizing. Nevertheless, neither variable is predictive of attack questions when compared to other formats – formats which limit participation in debates to members of the press.

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<sup>41</sup> I also test both town hall variables in a logistic regression model using the same media, debate context, and electoral variables in the convergence chapter. I observe that neither town hall variable reaches statistical significance after including these same covariates. Questions asked by public sources, however, continue to hold a strong negative relationship with political elite cites. Therefore, this public source variable mutes the effects of these town hall relationships; the limiting of political elite cites has more to do with who's asking the question (e.g. members of the public) than the format (e.g. town hall) or delivery (e.g. virtual town hall).

<sup>42</sup> I also test both format variables in a logistic regression model using identical covariates as those used in the chapter on tone. After including other media variables, debate context variables, and electoral controls, neither town hall variable holds a statistically significant relationship with attack questions.

Lastly, I use an electronic submission variable to better isolate social and digital media effects on the debate agenda. We know that some debates operate within a hybrid format structure that includes press panels while also soliciting electronically submitted questions from the public. Since these questions are not included in a town hall variable unless one-third of the agenda includes public questions, a variable parsing out question delivery is also worth pursuing. In doing so, I generate a greater sample of questions asked virtually – a sample which may be better suited to isolate effects unique to social and digital media. Therefore, digital and social media influence is measured through a dichotomous (1/0) variable which indicates whether the question was submitted electronically through the web. Included in the overall dataset were 146 cases which were submitted electronically – representing nearly 8% of the total sample.

### **Digital Delivery and Agenda Convergence**

As with the advent of the traditional town hall debate format in the 1992 U.S. presidential election, the emergence of digital and social media debates prompted new dialogue concerning the role of public input in the debate process. This more inclusionary format connects, albeit virtually, members of the public with candidates for public office. By soliciting questions through digital and social media, the public enjoys a greater stake in shaping the debate agenda. As a result, we should expect that questions submitted through social and digital media should differ from those asked directly in the forum – largely because these questions asked in the forum are asked by members of the press and extant literature has shown the priorities of the press and public seldom align. In other words, press generated questions are more likely to reflect the talking points of political elite than the priorities of the public agenda.

In terms of agenda convergence, we should expect that electronically submitted questions – since they call for public input – should better emphasize public needs and priorities than those



of the political elite. Therefore, we can expect the presence of a virtual question to influence who is being cited. Thus, I propose the following convergence-specific hypotheses:<sup>43</sup>

H1a: Questions submitted electronically are more likely to cite the public.

H1b: Questions submitted electronically are less likely to cite political elite.

### **Virtual Questions and Public Cites**

Before testing the relationship between electronically submitted questions and content that cites public concerns, I exclude 66 cases asked by participating candidates to confine the analysis to press and public sources of debate questions. Testing the remaining sample in the dataset (N=1,884), I observe a strong effect on likelihood of citing public concerns. I find a positive relationship between electronically submitted questions and content citing the public,  $r(1,882) = .14, p < .01$ . This finding suggests electronically submitted questions better reflect public concerns than those asked by questioners present at the forum. Thus, H1a is initially supported.

I next test whether the relationship holds after controlling for a number of covariates which may also influence the agenda convergence of debate questions. The model includes all covariates previously included in the convergence chapter: print moderator, nonprofit moderator, local moderator variables; nonprofit source, public source, broadcast source, cable source, and local source variables; election year, competitiveness (via vote spread), number of candidates, candidate incumbency, and state-level race; and debate length, candidate response time, and domestic policy debate.<sup>44</sup> In spite of these other media variables, electoral controls and variables

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<sup>43</sup> I also tested for a relationship between electronic submissions and questions citing the media but failed to find a statistically significant relationship since this citation variable only includes 19 cases across the dataset. Moreover, there is little theoretical rationale for expecting a relationship between these variables; thus, the media cites variable was omitted from further analysis.

<sup>44</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test does not show an appropriate goodness of fit for the model,  $\chi^2 = 17.93, p = .02, df = 8$ .

measuring debate context, the relationship between electronic submissions and questions citing the public holds.

In looking at the  $\text{Exp}(B)$  value, I find that electronically submitted questions are more than 5 times more likely to cite the public than those asked in a more traditional format that requires the questioner's presence in the forum (see Table 8-1). The effect is both strong and reaches statistical significance. Therefore, H1a is supported. More importantly, the relationship holds even with the public source variable present in the model. Although web submissions could be viewed simply as a proxy for the public question source variable, this finding suggests the technology still has an added influence on the debate question – even slightly more so than when the question comes from a public source. Nonetheless, the predicted probabilities generated from the model shows that while holding all other variables at their mean levels, the likelihood of electronic questions citing the public remain low (see Figure 8-1). I observe a predicted probability of .053 for web-based questions and public cites, whereas questions asked in the flesh yield a probability of .010. This reflects a .043 increase in probability when questions are submitted electronically or an overall change of 81.1%.

### **Virtual Questions and Political Elite Cites**

After omitting the 66 candidate-to-candidate questions, I observe the inverse relationship for questions citing political elite. I find a negative relationship between electronic submissions and questions citing political elite,  $r(1,882) = -.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, questions submitted via digital and social media are less likely to echo the talking points of public officials; thus demonstrating support for H1b. I next test whether this relationship holds after introducing covariates in a logistic regression model (see Table 8-2).

Table 8-1. Logistic regression model: Predictors of public cites

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Print moderator	1.01	.71	2.01	2.76
Nonprofit moderator	-.81	.59	1.89	.44
Local moderator	2.64**	.61	18.81	13.96
Nonprofit source	-2.33**	.84	7.62	.09
Public source	1.32	.68	3.75	3.75
Broadcast source	-1.31*	.63	4.35	.27
Cable source	-1.84	1.05	3.06	.16
Local source	.20	.51	.16	1.23
Electronic submission	1.68**	.55	9.34	5.34
Electoral controls				
Election year	.08*	.03	6.51	1.09
Candidate No.	-.11	.11	.95	.90
Competitiveness	.03	.02	3.74	1.03
Incumbent	.86	.53	2.68	2.36
State-level	1.04	.79	1.69	2.83
Debate context				
Length	-.01	.01	.14	.99
Response time	-.00	.01	.02	.99
Domestic policy	.68	.50	1.83	1.97
Constant	-170.38**	65.14		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 10.56$ ,  $df = 17$ ; log likelihood = -213.06, Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .22$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 8-2. Logistic regression model: Predictors of political elite cites

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Press panel format	.47**	.14	10.59	1.59
Town hall format	-.26	.29	.83	.77
Print moderator	-.22	.33	.45	.80
Local moderator	-.88*	.36	5.79	.42
Cable moderator	-.10	.15	.39	.91
Media sponsor	.47*	.21	5.19	1.59
Nonprofit source	1.93**	.35	31.17	6.89
Public source	-1.59**	.35	20.97	.21
Broadcast source	.29	.16	3.13	1.34
Local source	-.83**	.22	14.83	.44
Electronic submission	-.49	.45	1.18	.61
Electoral controls				
Election year	-.01	.01	2.96	.99
Candidate No.	-.02	.04	.29	.98
Competitiveness	-.01	.01	1.12	.99
Incumbent	.16	.17	.79	1.17
State-level	-.26	.27	.98	.77
Debate context				
Length	.00	.00	.12	1.00
Response time	.00	.00	.78	1.00
Foreign policy	-.28	.15	3.23	.76
Constant	26.44	16.11		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 210.93$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $\log \text{likelihood} = -1,029.56$ ; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .15$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

The model includes all covariates previously included in political elite cites model found in the convergence chapter: press panel format, town hall format, print moderator, local moderator, cable moderator, media sponsor variables; nonprofit source, public source, broadcast source, and local source variables; election year, competitiveness (via vote spread), number of candidates, candidate incumbency, and state-level race; and debate length, candidate response time, and domestic policy debate.<sup>45</sup> After introducing controls, I observe that the negative relationship electronic submissions have with political elite cites fails to reach statistical significance. Thus, H1b is not supported. Next, I explore the influence of these electronic submissions on the content of debate questions.

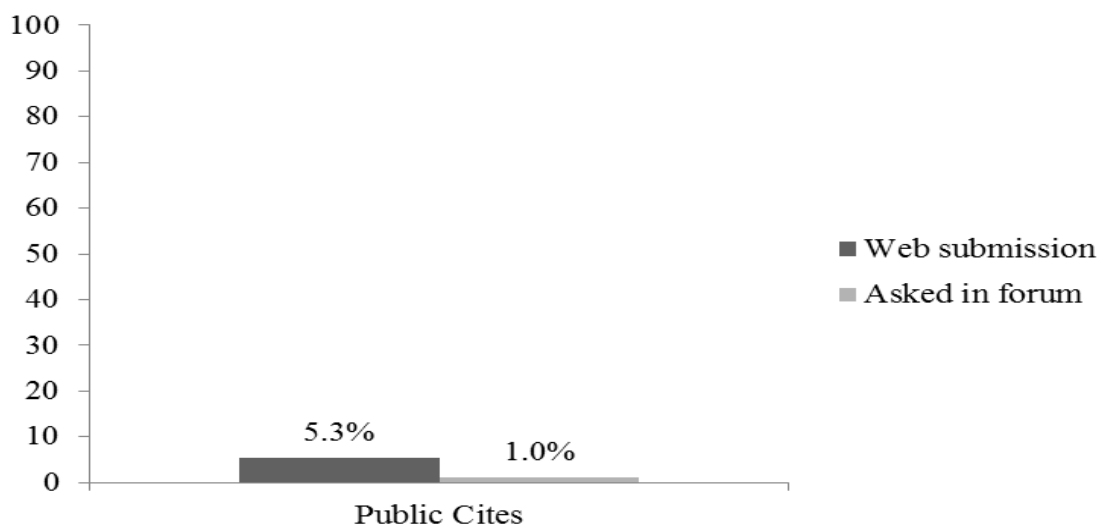


Figure 8-1. Predicted probabilities: Electronic submission and public cites

### Digital Delivery and Agenda Content

We know distinctions exist between press and public agendas during electoral campaigns. The work of numerous scholars (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000; McKinney, 2005) also reinforces the presence of these agenda distinctions in the context of the

<sup>45</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test demonstrates an appropriate goodness of fit for the model,  $\chi^2 = 4.69$ ,  $p = .79$ ,  $df = 8$ .

debates. For example, members of the public are less likely to focus on campaign issues such as strategic narratives and horserace aspects of elections. Since the inclusion of digital and social media in the format of debates heightens the public's agenda-setting role, we should expect the content of questions to vary according to whether it was submitted electronically. Thus, I offer the following content-specific hypotheses:

H2a: Questions submitted electronically are more likely to address policy issues.

H2b: Questions submitted electronically are less likely to address campaign issues.

### **Virtual Questions and Policy vs. Campaign Issues Content**

To test the relationship between electronically submitted questions and policy content, I first run correlations between the two variables. I observe a small effect in the form of a positive relationship between virtual submissions and policy questions,  $r(1,882) = .05$ ,  $p < .05$ . Next, I reverse code the dichotomous variable so that campaign issues are assigned a "1" while policy issues are assigned a "0." Here the inverse relationship is noted; virtual submissions hold a negative relationship with campaign issues questions,  $r(1,882) = -.05$ ,  $p < .05$ . These findings demonstrate preliminary support for H2a and H2b. I then test the relationship in a logistic regression model with a number of covariates.

I test the relationship in a logistic regression model including all covariates included in policy-campaign issues models found in the content chapter: press panel format, single moderator format, local moderator, cable moderator, media sponsor variables; nonprofit source, broadcast source, and cable source variables; election year, competitiveness (via vote spread), number of candidates, candidate incumbency, general election-presidential race, and state-level race; and debate length, candidate response time, and foreign policy debate (see Table 8-3).

Table 8-3. Logistic Regression Model: Predictors of policy questions

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Press panel format	-.32*	.16	3.93	.73
Single moderator format	.32	.19	2.65	1.38
Local moderator	.61*	.26	5.56	1.84
Cable moderator	-.11	.18	.39	.89
Media Sponsor	-.46*	.19	5.66	.63
Nonprofit source	-.92**	.19	21.25	.40
Broadcast source	-.29*	.15	3.95	.74
Cable source	-.07	.19	.12	.94
Electronic submission	.24	.25	.89	1.27
Electoral controls				
Election year	.01	.01	.59	1.01
Candidate No.	.16**	.04	14.48	1.17
Competitiveness	-.00	.01	.07	.99
Incumbent	.17	.17	.93	1.18
Presidential (GE)	.36	.21	3.09	1.43
State-level	.38	.24	2.47	1.46
Debate context				
Length	-.01	.00	1.46	.99
Response time	-.00	.00	.06	1.00
Foreign policy	1.49**	.33	19.91	4.48
Constant	-10.79	15.46		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 107.80$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $\log \text{likelihood} = -1,110.04$ ; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .08$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

After controlling for these variables I find that the positive relationship between electronic submissions and policy content does not reach statistical significance (see Table 8-3).<sup>46</sup> After reverse coding for the policy vs. campaign issues variable (assigning campaign issues a “1” and policy issues a “0”) to run an identical logistic regression model I also find that the negative relationship between electronic submissions and campaign issues content fails to hold as well.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, H2a and H2b are not supported. Finally, I explore the influence of electronic submissions on the tone of debate questions.

### **Digital Delivery and Agenda Tone**

The inclusion of digital and social media in the debate process affords new opportunities for public participation, particularly in providing a greater stake in setting the debate agenda. These digital affordances enhance public input in the agenda, and should therefore have an effect on both question content and tone. Debate scholars have found less argumentation and attacks in questions asked by members of the public (Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Carlin et al., 2001). This is unsurprising considering the public has fewer incentives to generate conflict in debates relative to news professionals operating under competitive pressure and industry routines that emphasize values such as conflict and drama.

Although anonymity on the web is one attribute that some say increases negativity and incivility in politics, social and digital media influence in debates has, to date, required a great deal of transparency. People submitting electronic questions must routinely identify themselves by full name and hometown; of course, those sponsored by YouTube also solicit video footage of the participant. Unless transparency is reduced in future debates, we should expect electronically

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<sup>46</sup> Since the relationships between electronic submissions and the policy issues and campaign issues dependent variables do not hold, and both models tap identical independent variables, I only include a table for the policy issues variable.

<sup>47</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test shows an appropriate goodness of fit for the models,  $\chi^2 = 6.57$ ,  $p = .58$ ,  $df = 8$ .



submitted questions to minimize negativity in the agenda since these questions are more reflective of the public agenda than the press agenda. I therefore offer the following tone-based hypotheses:

H3a: Questions submitted electronically are less likely to manufacture clash.

H3b: Questions submitted electronically are less likely to attack a candidate.

### **Virtual Questions and Clash**

Using the dichotomous electronic submission variable, I test whether there is a relationship between these questions and questions which emphasize clash among the candidates. The correlation shows support for H3a. I find a negative relationship between electronically submitted questions and clash,  $r(1,882) = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . Next, I extend this social and digital media variable to the previously developed model analyzing predictors of clash.

Using a set of independent variables identical to the clash model found in the tone chapter, I run a new regression model inclusive of the electronic submission variable. The model includes the following media variables: town hall format, single moderator format, broadcast moderator, nonprofit moderator, local moderator, cable moderator, and media sponsor. In addition to the source variables (e.g. nonprofit question source and public question source), the model includes covariates accounting for electoral context and debate context: election year, incumbency, number of candidates, presidential debate, state-level debate, competitiveness (measured by spread of final vote percentage), debate length, response time, and foreign policy debate.<sup>48</sup> The model shows that the negative relationship between electronic submissions and clash questions does not hold after introducing the electoral controls, debate context variables, and independent variables measuring media influence (see Table 8-4). Therefore, H3a is not supported.

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<sup>48</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test shows an appropriate goodness of fit for the model:  $\chi^2 = 12.44$ ,  $p = .13$ ,  $df = 8$ .

Table 8-4. Logistic regression model: Predictors of clash questions

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Single moderator	.51	.34	2.25	1.67
Broadcast moderator	-1.06	.83	1.61	.35
Nonprofit moderator	1.64	.92	3.19	5.17
Local moderator	-1.61	1.01	2.53	.20
Cable moderator	-.30	.36	.70	.74
Media sponsor	-1.81**	.53	11.60	.16
Nonprofit source	2.66**	.56	22.59	14.32
Public source	1.07*	.44	5.75	2.90
Electronic submission	-.90	1.09	.69	.41
Electoral controls				
Election year	.04*	.01	5.89	1.04
Candidate No.	-.24*	.11	4.57	.79
Competitiveness	-.02	.02	1.35	.98
Incumbent	.74	.39	3.51	2.09
Presidential (GE)	.77*	.39	3.89	2.16
State-level	-2.03**	.72	7.88	.13
Debate context				
Length	-.00	.01	.03	.99
Response time	.01	.01	1.89	1.01
Foreign policy	-1.11*	.50	4.86	.33
Constant	-73.16**	28.66		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 101.26$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $\log \text{likelihood} = -334.48$ ; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .16$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 8-5. Logistic regression model: Predictors of attack questions

Predictor	B	SE B	Wald	Exp(B)
Media variables				
Panel format	.56**	.21	7.18	1.75
Town hall format	-.07	.33	.04	.94
Local moderator	-.98	.52	3.60	.38
Cable moderator	-.37	.21	3.06	.69
Public source	-.22	.23	.86	.80
Print media source	.14	.21	.42	1.24
Local media source	-.62*	.31	4.08	.54
Electronic submission	-.84	.52	2.64	.43
Electoral controls				
Election year	-.02	.01	2.77	.98
Candidate No.	-.08	.06	1.91	.92
Competitiveness	-.00	.01	.00	.99
Incumbent	.06	.24	.06	1.06
Presidential (GE)	.34	.28	1.38	1.39
State-level	-.15	.37	.16	.86
Debate context				
Length	.02*	.01	5.65	1.02
Response time	-.01	.00	1.79	.99
Foreign policy	-.67	.35	3.59	.51
Constant	34.28	22.33		

Note:  $\chi^2 = 67.33$ ,  $df = 17$ , log likelihood = -635.23; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .07$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Virtual Questions and Attacks

For the dependent attack variable, electronically submitted questions hold a similar relationship to clash. I find a negative relationship between electronic submissions and attack questions,  $r(1,882) = -.07$ ,  $p < .01$ . This finding demonstrates preliminary support for H3b, meaning digital debate questions are less likely to attack candidates than questions asked in the flesh. I then apply the digital and social media variable to the previously developed regression model assessing influences of attack questions.

Utilizing the attack question model from the previous chapter on tone, I incorporate the electronic submission variable in a logistic regression model with other predictors of attack questions. The model includes media variables for press panel format, town hall format, local moderator, cable moderator and source-specific variables for public source, print source, and local media source. The electoral and debate controls are the identical to the regression model developed for the clash variable; they include election year, number of candidates, incumbency, competitiveness (as measured by spread of final vote percentage), presidential debate, state-level debate, debate length, response time, and foreign policy debate.<sup>49</sup> I find that although the electronic submission variable approaches significance (at the  $p=.10$  level) the negative relationship with attack questions does not hold (see Table 8-5). Therefore, H3b is not supported.

## Discussion

To date, debates have survived the era of media choice and fragmentation to continue attracting a mass audience. As debates become more prolific in state-level elections and the presidential primary process, innovation in format is a necessary ingredient in maintaining viewership as the electorate ages. Since 2007 we have seen a number of debates experiment with social and digital media sponsorship. In doing so, debate organizers have offered the public a

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<sup>49</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test shows an appropriate goodness of fit for the model:  $\chi^2 = 2.39$ ,  $p = .97$ ,  $df = 8$ .

virtual town hall environment where citizens across the country can submit questions and partake in the process sans geographical barriers. Digital media companies including YouTube and Facebook enable debate format innovation but as this experimentation in format evolves, we need to also understand how these changes impact debate agendas and, more broadly, electoral process. Although this chapter aims to address these agenda influences, the size of the sample limits our understanding of social and digital media influence on the debate process but this preliminary data does provide a first crack at making sense of this uncharted area of research.

Although cases are limited the data presented herein seem to suggest that virtual town hall debates do not function that differently from traditional town hall formats. This is unsurprisingly given that although both traditional town halls and virtual town halls are more inclusive of the public agenda they are also influenced by elite journalists and their gatekeeping powers (Carlson & Ben-Porath, 2012). In other words, the formats are both bound by similar levels of news influence and press control. In terms of agenda convergence, question content, and question tone I find few distinctions between traditional town halls and virtual town halls. While these two formats parallel one another in their relationships with public cites, political elite cites, policy issues, campaign issues, clash, and attacks I observe one minor distinction: the negative relationship with attack questions is a larger effect for the traditional town hall than virtual town halls.

Considering the literature pointing to evidence of incivility and the web (Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011), this small distinction in effect size for attack questions is unsurprising. Recently online news sources have made strides to curtail incivility running rampant on comment threads; for example, The Huffington Post eliminated anonymous commenting in 2013 and Popular Science eliminated public-generated comment boards

altogether.<sup>50</sup> It is clear that members of the public are simply less conditioned to attack candidates than members of the press but the security and physical distance involved with submitting the question electronically may entice the public to adopt a harsher tone than they would otherwise. Nonetheless, both formats are negatively associated with attack questions.

This chapter also demonstrates that mere sponsorship from social and digital media does not influence the debate agenda. The influence seems more tied to whom the technology involves in the debate process: the public. The electronic submission variable largely operates as a proxy for the public question source variable. In other words, the influence of social and digital media on debate agenda is fueled by the emphasis on public participation. Since these electronic submissions come from citizens, they are less likely to cite political elite and more likely to cite public concerns – a relationship that holds in a more robust regression model. In other words, virtual questions seem to amplify the public voice in the debate process. Although the electronic submission variable fell short of reaching statistical significance for dependent variables pertaining to content and tone, the variable does move in directions with democratically desirable outcomes: a positive association with policy questions, a negative association with campaign issues content, and a negative relationship with attack questions.

As cases in this subsample continue to grow, these are relationships to keep a watchful eye on and relationships that should generate significant effects as the sample grows. The tone variables in particular is an area that warrants additional research as scholars exude caution concerning the web's influence on political incivility and the potential for increased polarization (Papacharissi, 2004; Borah, 2012; Anderson et al., 2013). Since the virtual town hall format

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<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/mediawire/224298/popular-science-eliminates-comments/>; <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/22/tech/web/huffington-post-anonymous-comments/>

prevents anonymity by often requiring a full name, hometown, and/or uploaded video, these digital debates may escape some of the political incivility plaguing the web.

Thus far, the data shows virtual town halls function similarly to traditional town halls, suggesting that public participation is a more influential force on the debate agenda than the technology behind the format. What's more, the opportunity to engage in the debate process online has a tendency to attract segments of the population that historically have been less active and less interested in electoral politics: minorities and youth (Moretti, 2007; Ricke, 2010). The work of Kirk and Schill (2011) has also shown that civic engagement went beyond merely participating in the question submission process of the CNN/YouTube debates but also spilled over into post-debate deliberation on YouTube's debate channel. This is an outcome worth monitoring since scholars have often found that digital media has often heightened political inequity rather than democratized the political process (Papacharissi, 2002; Hindman, 2009; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). As McKinney (2005) argues that traditional town hall debates have restricted levels of public participation in recent election years, it is important to understand whether digital and social media helps to restore some of the public input lost over the last few elections as moderating journalists interject with their own questions and members of the public are required to submit their questions to moderators with greater frequency.

In addition to lowering barriers of entry for participation and engagement, virtual town halls may also reduce overhead for debate organizers. State-level or even local elections could adopt a similar model which would reduce the need for a large venues and render press panels that can take time organizing and negotiating unnecessary. Based on findings from the previous chapters suggesting a greater level of substance and reduced levels of negativity from local

journalists, virtual town hall formats coupled with local moderating journalists may be worthy of exploration in future elections.

In this highly underdeveloped area of electronic media and electoral debates, there is much work to be done. The dataset presented includes 146 cases of electronically submitted questions and even fewer cases for questions found in virtual town halls. Unfortunately, this research will move as slow or as fast as innovation in debate formats proceeds. Stromer-Galley (2006) has found that candidates are more resistant to online interaction with their constituency for fear of the unknown and spontaneity associated with the technology. In knowing that these virtual town halls function similarly to traditional town halls, it may reduce some trepidation candidates have about participating in a debate with a social and digital media presence. This research provides reasons to be cautiously optimistic about these social and digital media ventures; these virtual formats operate similarly to traditional town hall debates, meaning there is no evidence to suggest they detract from the substance of debate agendas or spur increased levels of negativity. Moreover, virtual town halls offer another avenue of public participation and may help maintain public interest in these campaign events.



## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION: FORGING A FUTURE FOR DEBATE REFORM?

In an era of increasing media choice and audience fragmentation, citizens encounter fewer pathways of accidental exposure to substantive campaign news. More importantly, a news media preoccupied with negativity and campaign issues over policy issues present obstacles in creating an informed citizenry. These campaign issues heighten news values of drama and conflict but they seldom coincide with the issues prioritized by citizens in the public agenda. Nonetheless, debates offer more substantive policy information than campaign news, focusing on issues that matter more to citizens; citizens also find the information provided in debates as being more useful than information acquired in news coverage of the campaigns (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). No other campaign events draw as large of an audience as the general election presidential debates; and both state-level races and primaries increasingly incorporate debates in the campaign process. In other words, their value to the campaign information environment and their value to the public cannot be underemphasized. Although debate effects research largely points to democratically beneficial outcomes, society must not be complacent with how these events are structured, formatted, and organized.

Quoting journalist and veteran debate moderator Jim Lehrer, Minow and LaMay underscore the dangers in oversimplifying these campaign events. According to Lehrer, “It doesn’t matter what the format is, it doesn’t matter who the moderator is; anytime you get the candidates for president of the United States on the same stage, at the same time, talking about the same things, it’s good for democracy” (p. Minow & LaMay, 2008, p. 105). The problem with Lehrer’s oversimplification of electoral debates is that once scholars scratch below the surface, it is evident that debates are not uniform campaign events. These debates vary

considerably in terms of length, formats, moderators, agenda scope, and the extent of press influence. Perhaps uniformly “good” for democracy, the findings presented herein suggest some debates are better for democracy than others.

A pioneering force in establishing electoral debates, former FCC Commissioner Newtown Minow is one of many scholars and media critics unsatisfied with the structure of debates including sponsorship models, formats, and the exclusivity of the press’s role in steering the agenda. From James Fallows to Kathleen Hall Jamieson – to former presidents such as George. H.W. Bush, campaign staffers, and other political elite – a chorus of debate criticism has persisted over the years. This research underscores some of these concerns, quells others, and raises new ones. The data presented herein offers negotiating leverage for candidates by isolating predictors of specific question content and tone. More importantly, in isolating predictors of agenda convergence, question content, and question tone, this research holds numerous implications for democracy including how best to cultivate a policy-driven agenda, how best to mitigate news negativity in the debate process, and how best to align the debate agenda with public priorities.

Although there is much work to be done within this agenda-setting arm of political communication, I offer evidence of relationships and patterns that help explain how distinctions in formats, moderators, sponsorship models, and press influence uniquely shape the debate agenda. In other words, Lehrer is incorrect in his assertions; I find that under certain conditions debate formats matter, moderators matter – and that these variables hold implications for the content of debate agendas, the tone of debate agendas, and how effectively these agendas capture the information needs of the public.

## Summary of Key Findings

Before detailing key findings and patterns it is also important to recognize relationships absent from the data. One comforting finding is the lack of horserace emphasis in the debate agenda. The literature on campaign coverage demonstrates that horserace narratives are overwhelmingly dominant, particularly as races draw closer to the date of the election.<sup>51</sup> Although imperfect, the debate agenda is more policy-focused than mainstream news coverage of campaigns; 70% of cases in the dataset contained a primary focus of policy issues over campaign issues content. I also find little evidence of “pack” journalism in the debate context, with only 19 cases of “intermedia” agenda convergence in the dataset. In other words, debate questions are citing news headlines less frequently than media outlets do in the process of covering elections; members of the public and political elite in particular are cited more often than other media sources in debate questions.

### Broadcast vs. Print Journalist Agendas

In literature addressing campaign coverage, broadcast media is criticized more often for lacking substance and focusing on game-frames and strategic narratives of the race over policy. In the context of debates, this distinction between print and broadcast coverage seems less pronounced. Research (e.g. Chaffee & Frank, 1996; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011) has shown that print journalists are more focused on policy issues when covering campaigns, print agendas are more likely to converge with candidate agendas (Ridout & Mellen, 2007), and print journalists operate in a medium with less spectacle and incentive to attack candidates. Thus, agenda convergence, content, and tone distinctions between print and broadcast were expected; however, the data suggest constraints of the medium matter little in the context of debates. I find no significant differences between moderating print journalists and

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<sup>51</sup> See <http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/02/winning-media-campaign-2012/>

moderating broadcast journalists for any of these dependent variables. These null findings persist at the question source level with one exception: broadcast journalist sources hold a positive relationship with campaign issues content and a negative relationship with policy issues; this relationship is not observed for print journalist sources.

The finding reinforces prior literature noting that print media fair better in devoting coverage of more substantive policy matters. Nonetheless, this finding is the lone distinction between the two media, suggesting that in mediated electoral debates constraints of the medium bear minimal influence on the actions and agendas of participating members of the press. Participating print journalists find themselves in an environment which more closely resembles broadcast; these journalists are on-camera, face tighter time constraints than accustomed to in the print world, and tempted by the soundbite nature of broadcast media. In other words, mediated electoral debates offer broadcast journalists home-court advantage and it is the print journalists forced to adapt to that medium's constraints. This offers a possible explanation for minimal distinctions between mediums for the dependent variables. I observe much more consistent media influence within the format variables.

### **The Problems with Press Panels**

This research consistently demonstrates a number of flaws with the press panel format. I find that press panel formats are predictive of questions citing political elites, demonstrating a preference for the talking points of candidates over the concerns of the public. More importantly, press panel formats diminish the likelihood of a policy-focused agenda and, instead, function as predictors of campaign issues – issues that emphasize gaffes, character, strategy, and tactics rather than issues that directly impact the public. What's more, press panel agendas are decidedly more negative. Press panel debates hold a positive relationship with attack questions. Journalists

participating in press panel formats operate under greater competitive pressures. Newton Minow and Craig LaMay (2008, p. 107) characterize these pressures as a power struggle over the spotlight: “Journalists asking questions at a presidential debate are aware they may get only one bite of the apple – a place in history – so they want to make it a good one. They may want to anger a candidate, or they will give speeches in the form of questions, or they will ask rhetorical questions.” In other words, these journalists are featured alongside a number of prominent national reporters; in panel formats journalists have the added pressures of retaining some of the spotlight on a crowded stage, generating soundbites for post-debate coverage, and bolstering their professional clout.

For some panel debates, that means as few as two or three question opportunities to make a splash. These added pressures of participating alongside competing prominent journalists seems to exacerbate some of the problems observed in campaign news coverage, delivering a campaign event that generates more emphasis on candidate attacks and less emphasis on policy issues than other formats. These findings underscore Jamieson and Birdsell’s (1988) finding that panel formats create an attack environment. These findings also render their recommendation to eliminate the press panel format particularly prophetic 25 years removed from their research. They contended, “Eliminating the panel would reduce the focus on the politics of the campaign and minimize as well the invitation to produce news” (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988, p. 202).

### **Commercial vs. Nonprofit Journalists**

Although I fail to find consistent patterns related to agenda content for the sponsorship variable I do observe that when debates include a commercial media sponsor the agendas hold a negative relationship with policy issues and, inversely, a positive relationship with campaign issues. This finding is unsurprising given that campaign issues are more adept at reflecting

coveted news values of conflict and drama; this finding also makes a case for implementing a sponsorship model sans commercial media. It is worth noting that sponsorship does not encompass all possible agenda influences from the production side of debates. Producers may also play a role in influencing the agenda through direct dialogue with the moderator; nonetheless, producers are not acknowledged as an influencer during the question-generating process described by veteran moderator Jim Lehrer (2011) in his book *Tension City*. Despite the finding that commercial media sponsorship deters policy questions, nonprofit journalists appear more problematic to the substance of debate agendas than any production-level influence.

The data reveal that nonprofit journalists consistently underperform when compared to commercial journalists. First, nonprofit sources are predictors of political elite agenda convergence but actually diminish the likelihood of questions citing public concerns. Nonprofit sources were also the most influential media variable in predicting campaign issues content but focusing on the campaign in strategic terms purges policy issues from the agenda; thus, nonprofit journalists hold a negative relationship with policy questions. Neither of these patterns are observed for commercial print media or commercial broadcast question sources. Moreover, clash questions are almost uniquely a byproduct of nonprofit journalists: nonprofit sources are 15 times more likely to manufacture clash in debate questions. It is important to note that clash questions forcing divergence between candidates are not necessarily bad for democracy; these questions that emphasize polarization may help foster learning but there is also evidence to suggest this tone also decreases levels of public engagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Forgette & Morris, 2006).

Bottom line: commercial journalists conditioned to cover elections under more challenging profit-driven pressures are no less substantive and no more negative than nonprofit

journalists with fewer institutional incentives to emphasize more entertaining aspects of races through dramatic campaign issues content and negativity. In fact, the data presented herein suggest nonprofit journalists diminish substance and heighten polarization, underscoring earlier research finding that nonprofit journalists ask policy and hard news debate questions more infrequently than commercial journalists (Turcotte, forthcoming). Therefore, it is possible that content and tone differences between commercial and non-profit journalists are overstated, that commercial journalists perceive their role in debates in a more civic-minded way, or commercial journalists are simply less conditioned to manufacture campaign issues content and negativity in a campaign event aired across outlets. Thus, any commercial pressures felt by these journalists may relate more to professional advancement and prestige than institutional media pressures resulting from market competition and audience retention.

### **Optimism for Local Journalists**

Although few distinctions were found between print and broadcast media influence on the debate agenda, this research suggests proximity of the participating journalists yields patterns worthy of our attention. Local journalists varied from national journalists in a variety of ways. First, local moderators and local question sources limit agenda convergence with political elite. Although questions citing exogenous influences were somewhat uncommon, when local journalists did cite an exogenous source that source cited was more balanced between public and political elite sources, whereas national press corps were more likely to echo the political elite. In addition to being somewhat more in tune with public concerns, this pattern is further solidified by the content of questions appearing in debates with moderating local journalists. Local moderators were predictors of policy content; inversely, local moderators diminished the likelihood of campaign issues in the debate agenda. Again, this suggests local journalists are

more in tune with public priorities since members of the public seldom focus on campaign strategy and tactics when addressing candidates (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). What's more, local moderators and local press question sources both held a negative relationship with attack questions.

For those concerned about the abandonment of policy issues content in campaign news coverage – and for those concerned about the increasingly hostile and negative media environment during elections – these results should pique some interest. The data suggest that local journalists are less conditioned to emphasize campaign issues and less conditioned to manufacture negativity through question attacks than journalists in the national limelight. This finding seems to support the literature suggesting that local news is not dominated by sensationalism (Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986). In sum, while we may see little difference in substance and tone between mediums, I find that reporter proximity matters – even after controlling for state-level races.

### **Public Agenda Influence**

Theoretically, debates provide an invaluable service to the public. Debates are often touted as a way to provide constituents with greater access to the candidates and a greater stake in the electoral process. Nonetheless, as is the case with campaign news coverage, the public agenda isn't necessarily represented in the debate agenda. Campaign issues more focused on character, strategy, and tactics continue to surface in the debate agenda. Moreover, questions citing the talking points of political elite are more prevalent than those citing public concerns. And despite grumblings of a news media too focused on the negative, debate questions can even heighten emotion and drama through candidate attacks – attacks the public is simply less interested in than the press. In hopes of better representing public information needs, the advent



of the town hall format in 1992 reinvigorated discussion about the level of press vs. public influence in setting the debate agenda. This research adds new layers to this discussion in a number of ways.

First, the format variables demonstrate that the town hall formats are no less substantive than the formats where members of the press are squarely responsible for setting the agenda. Town hall formats are not predictors of campaign issues, nor are they predictors of polarizing clash questions or negative candidate attacks. At the source level, I also find little evidence of the public setting a less informative agenda than journalists. Public question sources are not predictors of campaign issues nor are they predictors of attack questions. Although the data show a small association with polarizing clash questions, nonprofit sources almost exclusively account for this particular tone of questioning.

In any case, the public involvement in the debate process is not exacerbating any of the news coverage criticisms: saturation of campaign issues focus and negativity bias. Although public agenda convergence remains rare, public question sources are, naturally, more inclined to cite public concerns. These findings also underscore the points made by previous scholars that when provided access to candidates, members of the public ask responsible questions and focus on issues that directly impact public life – sometimes more effectively than members of the press (Fallows, 1996; Kaid, McKinnedy, & Tedesco, 2000; McKinney, 2005; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011). In other words, town hall debates or any format that involves a high level of public input in the agenda do not diminish the substance of the agenda and may even generate more interest and more civility than debates with agendas solely set by members of the press. As debate organizers experiment with social and digital media offering news avenues of public input in the agenda-setting process, these findings support further innovation in this area.

Since town hall debates and public question sources bear little threat on the substance or tone of debate agendas, and since they bring the agenda somewhat more in line with public priorities, debate organizers should continue forging ahead with developing virtual town halls through digital and social media. The findings herein note that virtual town halls function similarly to traditional town hall formats. To date, there is no evidence to suggest that either format inclusive of public input is a detriment to the substance or tone of the agenda. Even when parsing out questions submitted electronically, this variable serves more as a proxy for public question sources. As is the case with public question sources, electronically submitted questions, too, are predictors of content citing public concerns and limit the likelihood of political elite agenda convergence. In other words, members of the public care little about the talking points of candidates and other political elites. Moreover, they are no less policy-focused than journalists.

Although this research does not reveal any utopian findings related to content and tone of questions from debates inclusive of public input, it certainly puts to rest any looming concerns about a public set agenda being less informative and less policy focused. While additional research on social and digital media influence is a necessity as these formats evolve, the evidence presented herein should quell any public or candidate fears about these innovations in format or assumptions that they are any less substantive than traditional town hall formats. To date, virtual town hall formats operate similarly to traditional town halls and questions submitted via the web are merely a proxy for public questions.

### **The Future of Debate Research**

Although this project compiles data from all general election debates and includes subsamples across electoral contexts, there are some questions the dataset cannot answer. First, it is important to note that the presented models only account for some of the elements predictive

of question convergence, content, and tone variables; other variables may also inform these relationships. For example, literature suggests that podium vs. sit-down debates influence the debate agenda of candidates and the tone of candidate responses (Carlin et al., 2009). As such, it is also possible that these format variables influence questions posed to the candidates. Perhaps participants standing at a podium command more press respect than those sitting alongside the moderator, resulting in variance of tone, or simply the sheer proximity between the moderating journalists and the candidates situated in a table format limits negativity in the debate agenda. Nonetheless, this is a variable worth including in future agenda analyses.

Another debate variable worth controlling for is the number of total questions asked in a debate. This would ultimately test another key recommendation from Jamieson and Birdsell (1988), who advocated that debate agendas narrow the range of issues selected and focus on a few issues in greater depth and with less restrictive time constraints; they argue that this approach is advantageous to creating a more informed electorate. Thus, including this variable in agenda research would also test whether issue breadth in debates is predictive of policy-centric agendas and better suited for reducing negativity. If moderating journalists are afforded but a few questions in debate, these journalists may be more selective about topics they address and stick to issues that matter more to the public. Thus, this variable should be measured in future analyses.

Future research should also establish a measure for viewing audience to determine whether particular agendas are more adept at attracting audiences than others. Although easily measured in datasets using strictly general election debates, this becomes more problematic for datasets using cases across electoral contexts. Some scholars (Fallows, 2008; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011) have also been quick to criticize the prevalence of hypothetical questions in the

debate agenda. This, too, is an under-tested variable in the debate context and is worthy of inclusion in future projects. While democratic implications of hypotheticals are unclear, it is evident that candidates loathe these types of questions which tend to over or under-simplify matters and force candidates into catch-22s and, as observed in the 2012 Obama-Romney foreign policy debate, candidates often refuse to respond to them.

Beyond introducing additional variables, future research must also aim to better capture elusive concepts. For example, the cynicism variable is worth continued exploration. While it is evident that debate agendas include cynically toned questions, the subjectivity of the concept renders isolating predictors of this variable difficult. Future research should advance beyond textual coding to also include file footage of the question. In doing so, researchers will have more tools to assess the presence of cynicism by gauging inflection, pitch or reviewing body language, expressions, and gestures. This two-pronged approach to coding should improve inter-rater reliability measures and advance research in this area. This variable is of particular importance since exposure to cynical news coverage of elections disengages the public in the political process (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Forgetting & Morris, 2006). Lastly, continuing the data collection process for future debates and expanding the dataset will allow for stronger inferences as the subsamples of state-level debates and cases from digital and social media debates grows.

Although the work of Carlin, Morris, and Smith (2001) has shown that even the structure or format of a question can influence a candidate's response, I must also temper the findings in this research by noting that patterns of convergence, content, and tone in the debate question agenda does not necessarily guarantee such patterns are present in the candidate agenda. Candidates may respond to an attack question with civility; candidates may respond to a

campaign question with a policy response; candidates could react to a question citing public concerns with a response citing talking points of political elite – or the inverse may be true of any of these scenarios. In the next phase of research I intend to expand on the analysis to discern if and under what conditions candidate agendas mimic that of the question agendas. The substance of question agendas is of little importance unless they steer the discourse in related areas.

What's more, future research must explore how the findings presented herein influence audience engagement and policy learning. Since particular rules, formats, and moderators implicate certain agenda expectations, these variables may ultimately influence the extent of public learning or engagement in debates. This question can only be addressed through systemic experimental methods over multiple election cycles and electoral contexts. In the interim, the research presented herein advances our understanding of debate agendas, particularly in relation to how the news media influence these agendas. More importantly, these findings not only hold implications for strategic communication, as candidates navigate the contentious negotiating process of debates, but also hold implications for democracy by offering solutions to ensuring a policy-heavy agenda and one that best reflects the concerns of the public and also solutions for minimizing debate negativity.

### **Implications for Campaigns and Strategic Communication**

The negotiating process of debate rules, formats, and moderators often has a common primary goal: minimize spontaneity and maximize predictability. This research reduces the element of surprise in the debate agenda by alerting candidates to conditions and predictors of question content and question tone. By understanding the conditions that create negativity in the debate agenda, candidates may be better suited to negotiate for particular types of journalists

who are less reliant on clash questions and, more importantly, attack questions. Inversely, some candidates – particularly challengers – may stand to benefit from an attack-oriented question agenda. Understanding predictors of clash questions may also benefit candidates looking to distance themselves from a particular competitor or party. Candidates wishing to reach a particular segment of the electorate may also push for a virtual town hall debate, since these attract younger voters who are typically less electorally engaged than older segments of the population. These younger voters also lean left in their political views; thus, candidates may also have ideological motivations to push for certain formats over others. These results also offer new insight into predicting the likelihood of policy agendas and agendas driven by campaign issues – issues that both members of the public and candidates often deem distractions during the electoral process.

When moderator Jim Lehrer continually pressed Bob Dole to address “character” concerns (i.e. sex scandal allegations) about President Clinton during the 1996 debates, Dole curtly responded that he was running for president on his own record and issue platforms. In 2008, Hillary Clinton responded similarly when asked to criticize her opponent on more personal levels. Most recently and perhaps most famously, Newt Gingrich went on a diatribe against CNN anchor John King (and the news media more broadly) for asking about allegations of his open marriage arrangement during a Republican primary debate in the 2012 election. In sum, candidates routinely chastise the news media for focusing on superficial campaign issues over policy issues and accentuating negativity to a level in which it distracts from electoral process and hinders the ability of public officials to govern. As a large body of research (e.g. Patterson, 1994/1996; Sabato, 1992; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011) suggests, their criticisms have merit.

With insight into predictors of policy issues, let the candidates place their money where their mouths are. Candidates can leverage this research to advocate for rules, formats, and moderators that predict a policy-focused debate agenda. This knowledge enables candidates to move beyond moments of grandstanding by providing tools in which to negotiate. If candidates are serious about confining the debates to policy issues (and I make no claims as to whether they are), they should seriously consider advocating more influence from local press and less involvement from national-level celebrity journalists. In doing so, this research also suggests an added emphasis on local press involvement carries democratic benefits as well.

### **Implications for Engagement, Learning, and Democracy**

This work has illuminated the nuances behind the debate agenda in ways that can help ensure public input remains a priority and help improve levels of knowledge and engagement. For example, certain debate elements are predictive of policy issues. These elements must be emphasized and guaranteed a prominent role in the debate process. There are a couple of ways to achieve this. First, the data suggest that nonprofit journalists fare no better than commercial journalists in cultivating a policy-centric agenda. In fact, not-for-profit journalists are less likely to focus on policy. Debate organizers may want to minimize participation from nonprofit journalists who, like national journalists from commercial media, remain celebrities nonetheless. At the very least, we should monitor the performance of nonprofit moderators since the research herein suggests that the patterns finding more substantive coverage from nonprofit media than commercial news fails to hold in the debate context. One of the ways in which we can help preserve policy-centric debates is by granting local journalists a greater stake in the agenda-setting process.

This research shows that local journalists away from the national limelight are more conditioned to question the candidates about policy issues over campaign issues. Despite this finding, local journalists are rarely included in general election debates. More troubling, primary debates are increasingly relying on national level “celebrity” journalists to moderate (Schroeder, 2000). This also seems to parallel trends in state-level debates which are increasingly being pitched as national-scale news events featuring moderating journalists from national news outlets. Just as Farnsworth and Lichter (2011) found that network news performs more poorly than other types of media in emphasizing horserace, strategy, and tactics in its campaign coverage, these journalists from national news outlets reduce attention to policy issues in the debate agenda.

Inviting more local press to partake in debate moderating not only helps maintain a high level of policy in the agenda but also reduces the negativity so often blamed for public disengagement in electoral process. These findings reinforce scholar Mark McKinnon’s (2012) call for retaining local control over primary debates. He notes, “Partnering state party organizations are not equipped to battle the broadcast behemoths driven by ratings and their own agendas” (McKinnon, 2012, p. 6). As debates continue being pitched as national events, scholars, campaigns, and the public should call for more local press input – not less.

Research has shown that when it comes to informing the public, citizens rank debates as being more informative and helpful to them than campaign news (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000; Carlin et al., 2009). Nonetheless, the news media often assume the public is more drawn to the entertainment aspects of campaign issues covering the game of politics, gaffes, and scandals. Thomas Patterson (2013) wholly disagrees with such an approach. He says, “Americans interests in issues is also more substantial than they may be given credit for, as is clear from the questions



they ask in public gatherings or on call-in shows in which they have the chance to quiz politicians directly. Rarely do they ask politicians about strategy or tactics, or inquire about the latest gaffe or scandal. They want to know what politicians intend to do about the problems they face. It's a line of inquiry that journalists only occasionally pursue, in part because they are more interested in political strategy and in part because they are not deeply informed about most issues" (Patterson, 2013, p. 120).

Patterson calls for reform: a knowledge-based approach to journalism. He argues that if journalists were well-versed in the policy issues they are covering the media will deliver more substantive information to the public. For debates, including reporters from particular policy beats rather than recognizable national anchors could improve the policy focus of agendas. For example, education reporters, energy reporters, foreign affairs correspondents etc. may be better suited to address public concerns than celebrity journalists. This proposition may be a challenging one considering the decline of beat journalism (Jones, 2009), but the participating journalists should hold considerable reporting expertise of the items outlined in the debate agenda. Parsing out more specific agenda themes beyond foreign and domestic policy may also improve the level of press expertise. Holding shorter debates reserved for more specific policy issues such as entitlements, education, crime, or healthcare etc. would enable organizers to link the agenda topics with journalists specific to these beats – and would create an environment more conducive to the depth of discourse called for by Jamieson and Birdsell (1988).

Debate organizers must also include format considerations and their implications for democracy. Press panel formats in particular are consistently less effective in emphasizing policy agendas and tend to foster more negativity. Although the Commission on Presidential Debates eliminated this format from the general election after 1992, it persists in the primary process and

state-level debates. We must move away from this format in order to limit negativity and best promote substantive policy matters in the agenda.

Negativity in news coverage isn't going away, especially as profit pressures mount and as mobile and digital technology make it easier for people to capture impropriety (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Thus, it is even more paramount that we insulate well-watched campaign events from the off-putting drama and conflict so pervasive in campaign news coverage. Exposure to an attack-driven debate agenda may not only disengage the public from the political process but may also threaten public news trust and media credibility, credibility that has faced considerable blows over the last several years, particularly on the national news level (Gronke & Cook, 2007). According to Kovach and Rosenstiel, "Journalists like to think of themselves as the people's surrogate, covering society's waterfront in the public interest. People see sensationalism and exploitation, and they sense that journalists are in it for a buck, or personal fame, or perhaps worse, a kind of perverse joy in unhappiness" (2001, p. 75). So, what exactly is the answer to creating informative and civil debates? How much press influence is desirable in these campaign events and should we demand more public input in the process?

Several scholars have demanded a more active public role in the debate process (Schroeder, 2008; McKinney, 2005; Minow & LaMay, 2008). In fact, Newton Minow and Craig LaMay (2008) go as far as calling for an end to press moderators, citing press debate bias toward "controversy" as a hindrance to public discourse. In the 2008 Democratic primaries Hillary Clinton challenged Barack Obama to a debate without a moderator; he unsurprisingly declined.<sup>52</sup> The moderating journalist, although free to ask whatever he or she sees fits, paradoxically offers a level of familiarity and comfort to the candidates. Candidates can anticipate the content and tone of the debate based on personal predispositions or topics the journalist previously focused

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<sup>52</sup> See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/26/clinton-challenges-obama\\_n\\_98777.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/26/clinton-challenges-obama_n_98777.html)

on, candor during prior interviews and, more broadly, news values that the press routinely responds to. Therefore, a debate sans moderating journalist is a format that breeds more spontaneity than most candidates feel comfortable with; it is unlikely that multiple parties and candidates would agree to such a format.

Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) advocate an approach that does not eliminate the press moderator but restricts their roles, operating more as a time-keeper or fact checker than an agenda-setter. If we continue to retain press moderators, as we are likely to do, we should also give more consideration to what kind of moderator we want – what kind of moderator best serves the public needs. As Kirby Goidel (2013) notes, Jim Lehrer was lambasted for his passive, hands-off approach to moderating the first Obama-Romney debate in 2012; inversely, Candy Crowley received criticism for a more aggressive style moderating the town hall debate between the two candidates, interjecting with follow-up questions and clarifying Romney's mischaracterization of President Obama's response to the attacks in Benghazi.<sup>53</sup> These examples underscore an important debate: do we want press moderators to act as aggressive truth seekers or passive, objective observers? In other words, is the public better served by a timekeeper or fact-checker?

Perhaps a model most conducive to meeting the public needs is a model that draws heavily from the public in setting the agenda but with the presence of a moderating journalist to keep candidates accountable to the questions, keep candidates honest about the facts presented, and keep candidates civil. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) also advocated a fact-checking function of debates. A side panel of news fact-checkers who could then alert the moderating journalist to egregious factual errors or mischaracterizations would benefit the policy discourse.

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1012/82076.html>; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/20/candy-crowley-mistake-presidential-debate\\_n\\_2725224.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/20/candy-crowley-mistake-presidential-debate_n_2725224.html)

Experimentation in moderators is also worthy of pursuit. To date, only members of the press have moderated presidential debates and these journalists almost always serve as moderators for state-level debates. Business leaders, academics, or representatives from nonprofit organizations may be more in tune to public concerns than members of the national press. At the very least, we must find a way to incorporate more participation from local journalists – even if that means passing on journalists who are recognizable public figures.

Another area ripe for improvement is the town hall format and formats inclusive of public input. The research presented herein suggests there is little to fear from a public set debate agenda; public questions are more in line with public concerns than the talking points of political elite. What's more, public questions are no less policy-focused than questions from journalists. Debates are unique in that they include the interests of candidates, the media, and the public (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). Theoretically, however, debates were designed to promote the public agenda, engage and educate the electorate, and address the policy concerns of the constituency. This is why town hall formats offer a unique service; they heighten public interests while minimizing media and candidate interests. For debates to effectively achieve this, more experimentation with digital and social media is necessary.

The CNN-YouTube debates not only created an agenda driven by the public but also created a deliberative moment akin to the 1996 National Issues Convention held in Austin, Texas. People turned to YouTube channels to comment on candidate responses and platforms of policy issues addressed in the debate. These YouTube channels provided an alternative to the post-debate coverage of mainstream media, coverage chiefly focused on the performance of the candidates and campaign issues versus policy responses. In other words, these digital and social media formats can offer information services to the public that persists long after the 90-minute

debate. Social media also creates a water cooler experience in which people follow the debates while scrolling through their social media accounts; people post, read, and interact with others in real time as the debates are happening. As Schroeder (2008) observes, debates are infrequent enough to be considered “must-see TV.”

Future debates must continue capturing the entertaining aspects of these campaign events. These debates package campaign information in a public spectacle that attract mass audiences inclusive of those less interested and less informed about politics. Social media elements will help debates sustain that collective appeal, not only because they enhance the public’s agenda-setting influence but also because they enhance the visual stimulation of debates through video uploads (sometimes entertaining or artistic), social media profiles, and personal narratives and pleas to focus on issues that matter more to the people. Just as mainstream media had to grapple with the interactivity and affordances of online and digital platforms to retain news audiences, debate organizers must grapple with emerging media in order to ensure debates remain relevant in an evolving media landscape. In a media era of news grazing, debate organizers must embrace social and digital media elements to guarantee longevity of these civically valuable campaign events. This research suggests that in doing so, we see no immediate threat to the substance of debate agendas nor do we see any immediate threats to the civility of agendas.

Another area worth experimenting with is the debate’s agenda themes. Domestic policy debates and town hall debates offer a wide spectrum of potential issues on the agenda; the foreign policy debates offer a more narrowly tailored agenda. Foreign policy debates often go into issues in greater detail and include fewer total questions. The spectrum of possible foreign policy issues is more event-driven and more constrained than domestic policy or mixed-agenda debates. This research demonstrates that foreign policy debates are the most substantive policy-

wise and far less likely to include superficial campaign issues questions and far less likely to include attack questions than those operating under a domestic policy or mixed-agenda theme. Moreover, these findings may explain why the public learns more from foreign policy debates than domestic policy or town hall debates (Turcotte & Goidel, 2014).

Adopting Jamieson and Birdsell's (1988) recommendation to create debates focused on issue depth over issue breadth could make domestic policy debates even more beneficial since the narrowly-focused agenda of foreign policy debates suggests more substantive content *and* heightened levels of public learning. Debates with themes specific to the economy, education, healthcare, energy etc. may provide more substantive content and foster greater levels of public learning. This approach is worthy of exploration. While debate rules, formats, and moderators are negotiable what is non-negotiable is the preservation of these important campaign events.

Debates provide a public service that mustn't be undervalued. Debates inform and engage citizens with varying levels of political knowledge and interest in electoral politics. By design, debates offer a venue for focusing on public priorities and policy concerns – a venue even more necessary as traditional media struggle to maintain profits and shift to more entertaining styles of campaign news coverage. Scholars (Patterson, 1994/2013; Fallows, 1996; Skewes & Plaisance, 2005) have called for a more “issues” focused approach to campaign news coverage. Since the news is privately owned, scholars have little leverage over how elections are covered and what little input the public has in news content is chiefly through purchasing power in the form of viewership or subscriptions. Considering debates are not only organized by media outlets but also nonprofits, campaigns, and parties, these campaign events encompass multiple stakeholders and include input from sources extending beyond the news media. Thus, influencing the agenda

of these campaign debates is a more feasible goal than influencing the content of campaign news which is so often reflective of competitive pressures and bottom lines.

There are numerous ways in which organizers, political parties, the public, and news professionals should consider preserving the beneficial effects of these campaign events. As previously suggested, a greater emphasis on local news professionals in the process will hand over the agenda to news personalities less motivated by professional advancement and news personalities who are less influenced by insider politics and political elites than national-level journalists covering the Capital. We must also consider the sheer number of debates held in any given election, the timing of these events, and their formats.

The number of primary debates has ballooned in recent years; this should give us cause for concern. As Schroeder (2008) observes, the infrequency of debates render them collective experiences and that infrequency also reduces the barriers of participation. An overload of campaign debates elevates barriers of participation and threatens the uniqueness and spontaneity of the event. Therefore, debates should be held but held selectively with numbers that are manageable and during periods in which a wider spectrum of the public is attentive to elections (e.g. later in the election cycle). Moreover, organizers should consider mandating more foreign policy debates in the primary process. Although the Commission on Presidential Debates reserves one of four general election debates as distinctly foreign policy, few primary debates squarely focus on foreign policy agendas.

Beyond local press influence, frequency, and timing of debates, these campaign events must continue to evolve in format and structure – and they must continue to draw influence from the public if they are to continue generating public interest. Town hall formats and social media components increase public input and interest in electoral politics. Although organizers of

primary debates have toyed with including digital and social media elements in the process, technology plays a limited role in general election debates and state-level debates. I recommend that the CPD incorporate a social media debate in the general election; this debate could be in addition to or in lieu of the traditional town hall format since the data suggest these formats operate similarly. The CPD may want to consider including a second town hall, which would supply a new opportunity to include a virtual town hall format in the general election but would also afford the possibility of holding separate and distinct town halls for both domestic policy and foreign policy issues.

Since incorporating social and digital media may be less practical for organizers of state-level debates with limited budgets and limited access to technology, hybrid formats may better suit public needs for more localized elections. This format calls for periods in which a local news professional (through a single-moderator arrangement) and members of the public have the chance to address the candidates; this can easily be executed through social networking site submissions. Such an approach requires little overhead, and enhances the entertainment value of the debates by the public knowing that the moderator also draws questions from the electorate. In other words, people will tune in for the suspense of whether their question is drawn and whether their name – or the name of peers – is announced on live television. The more the public remains front-and-center of these campaign events, the more likely it is that mass audiences will continue to support these debates – even if participation merely satisfies a symbolic purpose (since news professionals continue to serve as gatekeepers and select which of the public questions are worth devoting the agenda to).

The public has continuously tuned in to debates more so than other campaign events and routinely ranks these events as more informative than other avenues of campaign information. It



is evident that mediated debates offer something becoming increasingly absent from campaign news coverage: policy discourse. Moreover, this policy discourse is packaged in a visually appealing way, a way that embeds policy in entertaining spectacle while providing a collective experience that motivates the public to watch. It is the job of scholars, organizers, parties, and campaigns to ensure these campaign events live up to their expectations. With an era of accidental exposure waning and a public increasingly dissatisfied with news coverage of campaigns, it is a democratic imperative that we not only continue to lower the barriers of participation in debates but also preserve electoral debates as a last bastion of policy discourse – and a last bastion of addressing public priorities in a civil and civic-minded way. This research begs not only for the preservation of these debates but insists on ways we can improve them.

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## APPENDIX A

### VARIABLE CONCEPTS AND EXAMPLES

#### Question Content

**Soft News:** Content pertaining to infotainment; professional traits, values, family – may also include more ambiguous topics such as philosophical principles or personality traits. Information focuses more on human interest, lifestyle or personal characteristics angles.

Example: “Senator Dole, we've talked mostly now about differences between the two of you that relate to policy issues and that sort of thing. Are there also significant differences in the more personal area that are relevant to this election?”

**Hard News:** Content pertaining to substantive policy or political issues – may include voting record, plans, platforms or policy views. Information relates to public affairs.

Example: “The outsourcing of American jobs overseas has taken a toll on our economy. What plans do you have to put back and keep jobs here in the United States?”

**Campaign Issue:** Content focused on candidate personality, statements and behavior on the campaign trail. Campaign issues often include mistakes or gaffes made by the candidate but can also include strategic topics such as ground game, ads, polling, fundraising etc.

Example: “Have you noticed a contradiction or hypocritical shift by your opponent on positions and issues since he was nominated?”

**Policy Issue:** Content is focused on grappling with policy problems. Similar to hard news content, these questions may include voting records, plans, platforms and other policy views; information relates specifically to a public affairs matter.

Example: “You said that if Congress would vote to extend the ban on assault weapons, that you'd sign the legislation, but you did nothing to encourage the Congress to extend it. Why not?”

**Personal Character:** Content is focused on *personal* attributes including but not limited to religion beliefs, health, sexual conduct, family values. They may include lifestyle topics and personality traits.

Example: “We've come, gentlemen, to our last question. And it occurred to me as I came to this debate tonight that the three of us share something. All three of us are surrounded by very strong women. We're all married to strong women. Each of us have two daughters that make us very proud. I'd like to ask each of you, what is the most important thing you've learned from these strong women?”

**Professional Traits:** Content is focused on *professional* attributes such as education and experience as well as more ambiguous attributes such as integrity, electability, leadership qualities or management style.

Example: “Vice President Gore, you have questioned whether Governor Bush has the experience to be President of the United States. What exactly do you mean?”

**Horserace:** Content focused on the competitive aspects of the race such as polling and performance or results of previous elections, primaries etc. In other words, content focused on who is ahead and who is behind.

Example: “Mr. President, why have you dropped so dramatically in the leadership polls, from the high 80s to the 40s? And you have said that you will do anything you have to do to get reelected. What can you do in 2 weeks to win reelection?”

**Strategy/Tactics:** Content focused on campaign operations, including campaign events, goals, attacks and political advertising. Examples include comments made on the campaign trail, gaffes, media interviews and accusations – or any content primarily focused on electoral strategy and candidate/campaign tactics.

Example: “You, your running mate, your campaign officials have charged that Vice President Gore exaggerates, embellishes and stretches the facts...Do you believe these are serious issues? This is a serious issue that the voters should use in deciding which one of you two men to vote for on November 7th?”

#### Question Tone

**Candidate Cynicism:** Content tone that accentuates self-interest over collective interest; it questioning the agenda and motives of elected officials. Cynicism means the absence of trust. Candidate-level cynicism may include strategy and tactics content, gaffes, broken promises, character flaws, mudslinging, pandering, “flip-flopping,” scandal and dirty money.

Example: “The amount of time the candidates have spent in this campaign trashing their opponents' character and their programs is depressingly large. Why can't your discussions and proposals reflect the genuine complexity and the difficulty of the issues to try to build a consensus around the best aspects of all proposals?”

**Institutional Cynicism:** Content tone that suggests the overarching political system is broken. Content may include references to Washington gridlock, politics as usual, special interests and voter apathy – they are more broadly constructed claims not reflective of any particular candidate.

Example: “Many of the legislative functions of the federal government right now are in a state of paralysis as a result of partisan gridlock. If elected, in your case, if re-elected, in your case, what would you do about that?”

**Clash Present:** Content that solicits conflict or difference of ideas, positions or traits. These questions ask that candidates draw comparison between or among the opposition. They often demand that a candidate characterize the views and stances of his/her opponent(s), emphasizing distance or polarization between the candidates.

Example: “All right. So having heard the two of you, the voters have just heard the two of you, what is the difference? What is the choice between the two of you on education?”

**Attack Present:** Question tone that directly or implicitly portrays one of the candidates in an unfavorable light. Contains a negative emphasis that goes beyond the usual policy-seeking clarifications and due diligence.

Example: “President Bush has derided John Kerry for putting a trial lawyer on the ticket. You yourself have said that lawsuits are partly to blame for higher medical costs. Are you willing to say that John Edwards, sitting here, has been part of the problem?”

## APPENDIX B DATASET AND SAMPLE

### *U.S. General Election Presidential Debates, 1960-2012*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	<i>Moderator</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>N</i>
09/26/60	Press panel	Nixon/Kennedy	Howard K. Smith	CBS	10
10/07/60	Press panel	Nixon/Kennedy	Frank McGee	ABC	13
10/13/60	Press panel	Nixon/Kennedy	Bill Shadel	ABC	13
10/21/60	Press panel	Nixon/Kennedy	Quincy Howe	ABC	7
09/23/76	Press panel	Carter/Ford	Edwin Newman	NBC	16
10/06/76	Press panel	Carter/Ford	Pauline Frederick	NPR	14
10/22/76	Press panel	Carter/Ford	Barbara Walters	ABC	16
09/21/80	Press panel	Reagan/Anderson	Bill Moyers	PBS	6
10/28/80	Press panel	Reagan/Carter	Howard K. Smith	ABC	14
10/07/84	Press panel	Reagan/Mondale	Barbara Walters	ABC	21
10/21/84	Press panel	Reagan/Mondale	Edwin Newman	NBC	29
09/25/88	Press panel	Bush/Dukakis	Jim Lehrer	PBS	23
10/13/88	Press panel	Bush/Dukakis	Bernard Shaw	CNN	22
10/11/92	Press panel	Bush/Clinton/Perot	Jim Lehrer	PBS	18
10/15/92	Town hall	Bush/Clinton/Perot	Carole Simpson	ABC	15
10/19/92	Press panel	Bush/Clinton/Perot	Jim Lehrer	PBS	17
10/06/96	Single moderator	Clinton/Dole	Jim Lehrer	PBS	19
10/16/96	Town hall	Clinton/Dole	Jim Lehrer	PBS	20
10/03/00	Single moderator	Bush/Gore	Jim Lehrer	PBS	21
10/11/00	Single moderator	Bush/Gore	Jim Lehrer	PBS	22
10/17/00	Town hall	Bush/Gore	Jim Lehrer	PBS	20
09/30/04	Single moderator	Bush/Kerry	Jim Lehrer	PBS	18
10/08/04	Town hall	Bush/Kerry	Charles Gibson	ABC	20
10/13/04	Single moderator	Bush/Kerry	Bob Schieffer	CBS	20
09/26/08	Single moderator	Obama/McCain	Jim Lehrer	PBS	8
10/07/08	Town hall	Obama/McCain	Tom Brokaw	NBC	20
10/15/08	Single moderator	Obama/McCain	Bob Schieffer	CBS	11
10/03/12	Single moderator	Obama/Romney	Jim Lehrer	PBS	12
10/16/12	Town hall	Obama/Romney	Candy Crowley	CNN	17
10/22/12	Single moderator	Obama/Romney	Bob Schieffer	CBS	14

### *U.S. Vice Presidential Debates, 1976-2012*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	<i>Moderator</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>N</i>
10/15/76	Press panel	Mondale/Dole	James Hoge*		10
10/11/84	Press panel	Bush/Ferraro	Sandy Vanocur	ABC	28
10/05/88	Press panel	Quayle/Bentsen	Judy Woodruff	PBS	22
10/13/92	Single moderator	Quayle/Gore/Stockdale	Hal Bruno	ABC	8
10/09/96	Single moderator	Gore/Kemp	Jim Lehrer	PBS	18
10/05/00	Single moderator	Cheney/Lieberman	Bernard Shaw	CNN	16
10/05/04	Single moderator	Cheney/Edwards	Gwen Ifill	PBS	20
10/02/08	Single moderator	Biden/Palin	Gwen Ifill	PBS	20
10/11/12	Single moderator	Biden/Ryan	Martha Raddatz	ABC	20

\**Print media moderator*

*U.S. Primary Presidential Debates, 2000-2012*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Party (candidates)</i>	<i>Moderator</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>N</i>
12/13/99	Hybrid	Republican (6)	Tom Brokaw	NBC	28
12/06/99	Press panel	Republican (6)	Judy Woodruff	CNN	32
10/22/99	Single moderator	Republican (5)	Cokie Roberts	ABC	12
10/27/99	Town hall	Democratic (2)	Bernard Shaw	CNN	24
01/26/00	Press panel	Republican (5)	Bernard Shaw	CNN	35
02/15/00	Single moderator	Republican (3)	Larry King	CNN	24
02/21/00	Hybrid	Democratic (2)	Bernard Shaw	CNN	18
09/25/03	Press panel	Democratic (10)	Brian Williams	NBC	42
10/09/03	Hybrid	Democratic (9)	Judy Woodruff	PBS	20
10/26/03	Press panel	Democratic (9)	Gwen Ifill	PBS	35
11/24/03	Single moderator	Democratic (7)	Tom Brokaw	NBC	31
12/09/03	Press panel	Democratic (9)	Ted Koppel	ABC	24
01/04/04	Press panel	Democratic (7)	Paul Anger*		58
01/22/04	Press panel	Democratic (7)	Brit Hume	FOX	49
01/29/04	Single moderator	Democratic (7)	Tom Brokaw	NBC	29
06/28/07	Press panel	Democratic (8)	Tavis Smiley	PBS	8
07/23/07	Town hall**	Democratic (8)	Anderson Cooper	CNN	38
08/07/07	Hybrid	Democratic (7)	Keith Olbermann	MSNBC	35
09/27/07	Press panel	Republican (6)	Tavis Smiley	PBS	11
11/28/07	Town hall**	Republican (8)	Anderson Cooper	CNN	38
01/05/08	Press panel**	Republican (6)	Charles Gibson	ABC	10
01/05/08	Press panel**	Democratic (4)	Charles Gibson	ABC	15
01/10/08	Press panel	Republican (6)	Brit Hume	FOX	27
01/30/08	Press panel	Republican (4)	Anderson Cooper	CNN	22
01/31/08	Press panel	Democratic (2)	Wolf Blitzer	CNN	21
02/02/08	Town hall**	Dual party (4)	Gideon Yago	MTV	36
06/13/11	Hybrid	Republican (7)	John King	CNN	56
09/22/11	Press panel**	Republican (9)	Brett Baier	FOX	37
10/11/11	Press panel	Republican (8)	Charlie Rose	PBS	39
10/18/11	Single moderator	Republican (7)	Anderson Cooper	CNN	27
11/12/11	Press panel	Republican (8)	Scott Pelley	CBS	28
01/07/12	Press panel	Republican (6)	Diane Sawyer	ABC	24
01/08/12	Press panel**	Republican (6)	David Gregory	NBC	29
01/19/12	Single moderator	Republican (4)	John King	CNN	18

*\*Print media moderator*

*\*\*Includes digital/social media sponsorship*

*State-Level Campaign Debates, 2003-2010*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Election/State</i>	<i>Moderator</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>N</i>
09/23/03	Town hall	Gubernatorial (CA)	Stan Statham	CBS	10
10/17/04	Single moderator	Senate (SC)	Tim Russert	NBC	21
10/21/04	Press panel	Senate (IL)	Ron Magers	ABC	12
10/10/06	Single moderator	Senate (MA)	Chet Curtis	NECN	9
10/16/06	Hybrid	Gubernatorial (MI)	Chuck Stokes	ABC	13
11/02/06	Single moderator	Gubernatorial (MA)	Cokie Roberts	ABC	16
05/19/09	Press panel	Gubernatorial (VA)	Chris Cillizza*		19
04/07/10	Press panel	Gubernatorial (IA)	Matt Breen	NBC	12
09/16/10	Town hall	Senate (UT)	Ken Verdoia	PBS	11
10/03/10	Single moderator	Senate (KY)	Chris Wallace	FOX	16
10/06/10	Press panel	Senate (FL)	George Stephanopoulos	ABC	10
10/07/10	Press panel	Gubernatorial (OH)	Jerry Anderson	CBS	10
10/10/10	Press panel	Gubernatorial (MI)	Nolan Finley*		23
10/10/10	Single moderator	Senate (IL)	David Gregory	NBC	15
10/11/10	Single moderator	Gubernatorial (MD)	Denise Koch	CBS	8
10/13/10	Press panel	Senate (DE)	Wolf Blitzer	CNN	30
10/14/10	Single moderator	Senate (NV)	Mitch Fox	PBS	18
10/19/10	Press panel	Senate (IL)	George Stephanopoulos	ABC	22
10/21/10	Press panel	Senate (PA)	Jim Gardner	ABC	12
10/25/10	Press panel	Gubernatorial (FL)	John King	CNN	23

*\*Print media moderator*



## VITA

Jason Marc Turcotte, a Maine native, received his bachelor's degree in Communication and Political Science at Roger Williams University in 2004. He worked several years as a journalist covering local and state news, technology, and later real estate and development, before earning a master's degree in Media, Culture, and Communication from New York University's Steinhardt School in 2010. He will receive his Ph.D. in Media and Public Affairs from the Manship School of Mass Communication at LSU in May 2014. He has accepted an assistant professor of journalism position in the Communication Department at California State Polytechnic, Pomona, where he will begin working in Fall 2014.