DOES FORMAT MATTER?
AN ANALYSIS OF THE
2008 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

by
Amanda Diane Rosenberg

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Approved:  
Lindsay H. Hoffman, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved:  
Joseph A. Pika, Ph.D.  
Committee member from the Department of Political Science and International Relations

Approved:  
Danilo Yanich, Ph.D.  
Committee member from the Board of Senior Thesis Readers

Approved:  
Alan Fox, Ph.D.  
Director, University Honors Program
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** ........................................................................................................ vi
**ABSTRACT** ..................................................................................................................... vii

## Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................. 1

Presidential Debate History .............................................................................................. 3

Format Changes in Presidential Debates ........................................................................ 9
The Impact of Presidential Debates .................................................................................. 10
Debate Effects .................................................................................................................... 15

Attitudes .......................................................................................................................... 15
Knowledge and Participation ......................................................................................... 18
Spotlight on the Young Voter Population .......................................................... 20

2 METHODS ..................................................................................................................... 24

Design of the Study ......................................................................................................... 25
Conduct of the Experiment ............................................................................................ 26
Treatment Conditions ..................................................................................................... 28
Measures .......................................................................................................................... 29

Attitudes .......................................................................................................................... 29
Knowledge ....................................................................................................................... 30
Participation ...................................................................................................................... 31

3 RESULTS ...................................................................................................................... 33

4 DISCUSSION .................................................................................................................. 37

Summary of Results ....................................................................................................... 37

Debates v. No Debates .................................................................................................... 37
Traditional Debate v. Enhanced Town Hall Debate ....................................................... 38
LIST OF TABLES

1 Results for H1-H7 ................................................................. 36
Each presidential debate is different, with different candidates, issues, and overall formats. 1992 marked a major turning point in debate format, with the introduction of the town hall debate, which utilized questions from the audience instead of journalists. The 2008 town hall debate was enhanced with the inclusion of Internet questions, increasing the potential audience size enormously. There has been an extensive amount of research conducted about debate effects, finding that viewers do learn from debates and their behaviors are affected. Results show that viewers who view debates express greater interest in participating in the campaign process than those that did not view a debate. But because the Internet has not previously been included in a presidential debate, and there haven’t been many elections that have included different debate formats, little research has looked at the differences format has upon its audience. In particular, few scholars have examined the effects of such format differences, including the acquisition of political knowledge and motivation to become involved in the campaign process. The current study examines these attitudes, knowledge, and behavioral intentions by comparing reactions to a traditional debate to those of the town hall debate with emailed questions, along with a control group in a controlled experiment conducted in real time. Results suggest that viewers of debates,
rather than the control, had significantly greater intention to participate in the campaign. When comparing the traditional and town hall debate, I found that the town hall debate viewers had more positive evaluations than those of the traditional debate. However, although the town hall debate produced more favorable ratings from its viewers, knowledge and intention to participate were not found to be affected by debate format. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

During the 1992 national election, Bill Clinton’s campaign challenged traditional debate format by introducing a new kind of debate: the town hall format, in which candidates were asked questions posed by an audience of undecided voters, instead of from a panel of journalists. This change in format has appeared in every election cycle since. In 2008, presidential debates changed again, with the introduction of a new mode in the town hall format: the Internet. Instead of limiting questions from those lucky enough to be selected for the in-house audience, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) included questions submitted by e-mail from any applicant (Commission, 2007). This project will explore effects on viewers of different debate formats, by analyzing results from a controlled experiment—in real time—during the 2008 presidential debate series. Results have implications both for the future of presidential debates and for an informed citizenry. After all, presidential debates are a key tool for many people to decide who their leader will be in the near future; any learning that can be derived from debates can only promote public knowledge and welfare, and allow for more educated decisions.

The 2008 presidential primary season marked the initial launch of the Internet into the debate process. Viewers saw the introduction of video questions submitted by
Internet users in both Democratic and Republican primary debates, sponsored by YouTube and CNN. This innovation allowed for real voters’ questions that “had an authentic feel that is too often lacking in the scripted words of paid professionals” (Cohen, 2007). This format allowed viewers to relate to the citizen-questioners and perhaps even see their own values reflected in their questions. Research demonstrates that the ability to connect with the questioner is a main reason why some viewers prefer the town hall style of debate (Meyer & Carlin, 1994). Meyer and Carlin found that many viewers responded favorably to the town hall style debate because they were able to feel more connected to the political process, and it could have been themselves asking questions directly to the candidates.

The introduction of the Internet in the town hall presidential debate in 2008 created a new variable that campaign representatives may attempt to take advantage of in order to help their candidate “win” the debate (Yawn & Beatty, 2000; Jones, 2005). Representatives try to utilize, enhance and add new variables in campaigns in order to try and boost their candidate’s position in the race. In 2008, Obama’s senior campaign strategist, David Plouffe, recognized the power of the Internet as a way of reaching millions of people; he was able to spread the message behind the Obama campaign to people all over the world, all the while uniting them for Obama’s cause (Plouffe, 2009). The addition of the Internet into the town hall debate is a feature that could be a catalyst that propels a candidate in the race, if they are able to use the Internet to their advantage. By expanding the audience through e-mailed questions, viewers may get
more out of the debate because they might feel more connected to the event. If a viewer relates better to one format over another, they may comprehend the presented information easier, which may lead to higher levels of learning. Moreover, if a person favors one format over another, it may lead to a heightened interest in the campaign, impelling them to participate in the campaign at higher levels. This study aims to discover whether political knowledge, intention to participate in the election process, and overall attitudes are affected by debate format. Because the Internet marks new territory in debate studies, our study specifically looks at whether the inclusion of the Internet in the town hall debate has any impact on these variables. Past research has skimmed the surface of debate format effects (e.g., Meyer & Carlin, 1994; McKinney & Banwart, 2005), and the introduction of the Internet into one debate format creates a brand new variable to study. The increased interactivity of the 2008 town hall debate broadened viewers’ ability to partake in the debate itself, and may have been more appealing and engaging to watch, with effects on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

**Presidential Debate History**

Before evaluating how the introduction of a new debate format variable might impact audience knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, it is useful to examine the history of presidential debates and research on debate effects. This section will illustrate the commanding presence that presidential debates have in the United States, and demonstrate why it is important to study them.
Television changed the face of presidential debates in 1960, as John F. Kennedy’s performance in the first televised debate created the impression that image matters just as much as policy stances in a presidential campaign (Kraus, 2000). The 1960 presidential debate was the first to be televised, because it was the first election to follow a dramatic increase in television use. In 1952, only 51% of Americans reported using the television as their primary means for information, compared to the newspaper (79%) and the radio (70%). By 1960, over 87% of Americans reported using the television as their primary source of information (Dover, 1994). Coupled with this dramatic increase in use, television ownership soared. By 1976, when the next presidential debate took place, over 98% of homes in America owned televisions (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988), which led campaign representatives to turn to this medium to broadcast their candidate’s platforms and engage in confrontations. Thus, the debate over debates began.

Both candidates, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, felt that a televised debate would be beneficial for their respective campaigns (Kirkpatrick, 1979). Nixon had previous success with a televised speech about his family and, in particular, his dog Checkers. He was also a skilled debater, making it seem that he would be quite at ease in a televised debate. Kennedy, on the other hand, was fighting allegations of inexperience and the prejudice against his Catholic religion; he wanted a televised debate to prove his capability to lead as well as show that his religion would not hinder his ability (Kirkpatrick, 1979). Even though a televised debate had never happened
before, both candidates had their ideas about debate format, and recognized the important of minute details. For example, Nixon did not want any audience reaction shots, left profile shots, or shots of either candidate wiping perspiration off their faces, while Kennedy was in favor of audience shots and was upset that the room was too cold and that there were too many lights (Kraus, 1962); all of these seemingly negligible aspects were negotiated thoroughly because all persons involved knew that format mattered for each of the candidates’ performances. The candidates feared that any minor flaw would be captured by television cameras and could possibly hurt their chances in the election.

The introduction of the television into debates made it necessary for presidential candidates to not only have strong ideas to lead the country, but also a presidential appearance to do so as well (Kraus, 1962; Keeter, 1987; Jones, 2005). Both candidates needed a stage in which they could discuss their ideas openly, while simultaneously demonstrating how they would accomplish their goals through their body language and overall presentation. The attention to format detail in the 1960 debate from both campaigns demonstrates how campaigns seek to control all possible variables in order to best enhance the situation for their own candidate. Format matters just as much now as it did then, and will continue to do so, as long as presidential hopefuls keep debating.

Many television viewers thought Kennedy “won” the 1960 debate, mainly because television is audiovisual, allowing viewers to both hear the message and see
its delivery, effectively doubling the power of the message, as opposed to an audio- or visual-only message (Graber, 2001). Television viewers saw Kennedy as an attractive, charismatic, and enthusiastic candidate who was neither too young nor inexperienced; conversely, they perceived Nixon as older, less attractive, and not as confident as Kennedy (Tiemens, 1978; Hinck, 1993). Some historians point to the colors of suit that each candidate wore as an indicator of perceived winner: the contrast of Kennedy’s dark suit against the pale gray background helped him appear strong and assertive, while Nixon’s light gray suit blended into the background (Kraus, 1962). Although suit choice is not a defining characteristic of presidential criteria, the use of television aided in the establishment of overall presidential character and candidate image as a major requirement to get to the White House.

During presidential campaigns, viewers are likely to watch debates in particular in order to get a feel for how a candidate would perform as the President of the United States; a candidates’ platform can only be implemented if the citizens of the country feel that they are first capable of carrying out the many duties of the office (Lang & Lang, 1962; Hinck, 1993). Instead of relying on one-sided presentations, such as news reports of the campaign and campaign advertisements, voters can tune in to debates to intentionally hear the different platforms of each candidate (Chaffee & Dennis, 1979; Jamieson, 1987). Debates are usually the only campaign events that match the candidates up with one another, so that viewers can both hear and see the differences between them. The television gave voters a chance to see how they articulate their
policies and values. Debates "may be deemed worthwhile simply for the fact that they match up candidates with a huge national audience," (Swerdlow, 1984) in which viewers can decide for themselves which candidate would best serve as president.

Despite predictions that televised debates would become the norm after 1960, debates did not occur for the next three presidential election cycles: 1964, 1968 and 1972 (Jones, 2005). It wasn’t until the 1976 campaign that the top presidential candidates agreed to debate, as they both saw it advantageous to their campaigns to participate, and presidential debates have continued in every election cycle since. The four debates series from 1976 to 1988 were all similar in format, with the top presidential candidates debating in the traditional style of debate. Each election is remembered for different issues, such as the issue of third party candidates in 1980 (Hinck, 1993) and the first third party candidate to be included in debates with both the Democratic and Republican candidate in 1992 (Jones, 2005). These were turning points in debate format, because different variables affected how each campaign prepared for the debate because the format was changing. Although the traditional format was set in each cycle, the campaigns were concerned over the details they could control. They recognized that any slight change in format, whether it be the number of candidates allowed or the type of question asked, would in some way affect their candidate’s viability in the election.

The 1988 debates introduced a new topic to explore in debate effects: the debate questions. Research shows that debates do offer a sound stage to hear the
candidates’ platforms, but one of the most frequent criticisms concerned the members of and the questions posed by the panel of journalist-questioners. Their queries almost always seem to follow the pattern of a short, fact- or assertion-filled speech, followed by a “How do you react to that?”-type of question, often designed for a “gotcha” moment (Shroeder, 2008). In addition, viewers found that journalists and other panel members appear to have different agendas than the average citizen, as many of the journalists are also representing the network or news outlet for whom they work; panelists may ask controversial questions in order to create an intense atmosphere that could generate a good story in the evening news broadcast or the next day’s newspaper. This situation was certainly the case in 1988, when Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis, whose platform stance was overtly against the death penalty, was asked bluntly by a panelist if he would still oppose the death penalty if his wife, Kitty, were raped and murdered. The insolence of this particular question is long in line of the agendas set by journalists in order to get a good story (Shroeder, 2008). Hinck and Hinck (2002) found that the number of attacks in candidate language was affected by the moderator and his handling of the debate in the third presidential debate in 1992.

Research shows that an audience of undecided voters is less likely to ask argumentative, accusatory and leading questions (Eveland, McLeod & Nathanson, 1994). Perhaps the problems of journalist-asked questions led Clinton’s campaign to propose the town hall style of debate. His campaign realized the importance of format in debates, and knew that Clinton’s natural charisma would certainly come across well
while talking directly to citizens. Clinton’s campaign not only attempted to
manipulate current format decisions, but took the initiative to introduce an entirely
different type of format.

Format Changes in Presidential Debates

In addition to the new town hall format, the 1992 debate series incorporated
other styles of debate, such as a debate led completely by one moderator and another
that was led by single moderator for half of the time and a panel of journalists for the
other half. This variety of debate formats allowed voters to get a real feel for how the
candidates would perform as president, because they had to respond well in a variety
of environments (Carlin & McKinney, 1994).

Since 1992, multiple debate formats have been included in each debate series,
including panels of journalists, single moderators, and the town hall style. These styles
all change with different panel members and different moderators, as each host creates
a unique atmosphere, but overall they remain relatively stable. McKinney’s research
(2005) analyzed the town hall style debate in 1992, 1996, and 2000, finding that the
first debate in 1992 was the closest setting where citizens were allowed direct access
to the candidates. In 1996, the town hall debate did not allow audience members to
ask any clarifying follow-up questions, and in 2000, audience members had to submit
their questions to the moderator beforehand, who would then pick the best questions
for each topic introduced. The enhanced town hall debate in 2008 followed this trend
of question restriction, in that moderator, Tom Brokaw, had sole discretion about which Internet questions he wanted to read to the candidates, and no follow up questions were allowed. Although the town hall debate is not a pure conversation between the candidates and the audience members, it is still the closest format that allows the candidates to speak directly to citizens, and for citizens to get their questions answered.

An analysis of presidential debate history illustrates how debate format matters because candidates want to take advantage of the opportunity. Even before televised debates became a standard part of presidential campaigns, the presidential hopefuls in 1960 realized the importance of format; their campaigns believed that the smallest details could have huge effects on the overall image of their candidate. Format was an issue in all debates from then on, in that there were small changes in each series. Even though the major turning point in debate format wasn’t until 1992, format was always a pressing issue during debate negotiations. Format matters because format helps frame the candidate’s image and message.

The Impact of Presidential Debates

Despite some hesitations to engage in debates, leading candidates have participated in presidential debates regularly since 1976, making them an expected part of presidential process. Benoit, McKinney and Holbert (2001) determined that presidential debates tend to draw more attention than any other campaign event, so it
seems favorable for candidates to engage in and take advantage of such a situation. Because the campaign process focuses a lot of attention on the debates, many people depend on them for their campaign information, and use debates as their primary source of learning (Kraus, 2000). When it comes to the effects of the debates, there is evidence that attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors can be influenced by viewing debates.

First, when it comes to cognitions, most of the research in this area has examined debate effects on knowledge. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) and Lemert (1993) found that there is a difference in who learns best from a debate—finding that those who are already politically knowledgeable learn the most—but holds that debates do promote learning for all viewers. Highly knowledgeable people are already aware of the current issues and are usually more familiar with names and position-holders, allowing them to understand the debate conversation better than people that are less aware of current political discussions (Lemert, 1993; Holbrook, 1999). Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert (2001) found that viewing debates usually reaffirms previous vote choice for people who have already decided whom to vote for, but holds that debates do offer overall learning, especially for people who have not yet decided. Research shows that debates provide an informative platform for undecided voters to make educated decisions about whom to vote for (Kraus, 2000; Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert, 2001).
Other research has discovered that the order of debates affects learning, in that the “primacy effect” allows for more learning in the first debate than debates following, because there is more new or unknown information in the beginning than later on (Holbrook, 1999). By the second or third debate, information may be repeated, thus restricting learning. Holbrook (1999) also found that learning is affected by the type of candidate in the race, whether they are nationally known, like an incumbent president or vice president, or if they are only known at the state level, like a representative or a governor. Studies show that there is more learning about lesser-known candidates, like candidates known mostly at the state level, simply because there is more to learn about them. Zhu, Milavsky, and Biswas (1994) found that more learning occurred about the third party candidate, Ross Perot, in 1992, than of Bill Clinton or George H.W. Bush. If an incumbent president or a nationally known politician is running, the majority of people would recognize them as the president of the previous four years, and have some opinion of them; there is not as much information for a highly known candidate to offer viewers, restricting learning about themselves as a candidate and their platform.

Political knowledge research shows that there is a noticeable divide in the definition of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993). The researchers cite Barber’s (1969) definition of knowledge as “what government is and does,” as an accurate base of political knowledge, but expand it to include information about the selection of public officials. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) assert that voting is often
a citizen’s most significant political power, because they themselves are casting a ballot to select a candidate for office; a citizen has more power in the voting booth than with actual policy-making, where they have to depend on the actions of the elected official. Because context is important in voting, knowledge questions about the selection of candidates for office have to change for each election. Different issues and topics are more salient in some election years than others, so the questions must be updated and kept relevant. Based on this research, I used Carpini’s established political knowledge test to measure civic knowledge about the government as a whole, and developed a measure to examine issue knowledge test to measure how knowledgeable citizens are about the current issues of the election.

Based on the research that shows that debates promote learning (e.g., Lemert, 1993; Holbrook, 1999; Benoit, McKinney & Holbert, 2001), and that there is a fundamental difference in the type of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993), I hypothesize that:

H1) Exposure to a presidential debate will result in more correct answers on the political knowledge scale than no exposure.

H2) Exposure to a presidential debate will yield more correct answers to issue knowledge questions than no exposure.

Second, when it comes to political participation, Swerdlow (1984) suggests that “the debate should also encourage public participation. This could be achieved through a format that allows voters to participate in the selection of debate topics and questions, and that encourages and intrigues them to pay careful attention while they
watch” (p.15). Research has looked at the role of debates in the provocation of political participation. McKinney and Chattopadhyay (2007) found that there is a positive relationship between watching debates and the activation of citizens' various civic and democratic tendencies. Research suggests that debate viewing promotes learning and tends to heighten viewers' interest in the campaign, pushing them to find out more information, discuss the campaign with friends, and/or plan to vote. I hypothesize that:

H3) Exposure to a presidential debate will result in an increased intended behavior to participate in the political process than no exposure.

If a candidate refuses or hesitates to participate, it would be noticeable and highly publicized by the media. Such negative publicity may cast doubt as to why they are refusing, and then, in turn, if they are capable to serve as president. This threat of negative exposure is why participation by leading candidates in presidential debates is becoming an expected part of national elections, even though the debates have yet to become mandatory (Kraus, 2000). Candidates can still technically decline any debate challenge, but the general format of each debate has been regulated by the CPD since 1987.

These hypotheses examine the effects of debates in general in the 2008 context. But the primary purpose of this study is to examine the introduction of a new variable in the presidential debates: the inclusion of the Internet as a question-asking tool for citizens. General debate effect studies lump all debate formats together, but there is
reason to believe that differences arise from the format itself. The formats are quite distinctive—because of the type of questioner—and this feature may truly affect the same variables of cognition, attitudes, and behaviors.

Debate Effects

Attitudes

The interactive town hall debates began in 1992, so there have only been four presidential election cycles since. This small number of election cycles means that there has not been a lot of research conducted specifically to analyze the introduction of audience interactivity in debates. But we can compare reactions to hard versus soft news, because in many ways, the traditional debate—with journalist moderators and fixed questions—resembles a hard-news format, while the interactive or town hall style debate is more “soft” in nature.

Hard news, often defined as the coverage of breaking events involving top leaders or major issues (Baum & Jamison, 2006), is comparable to the traditional debate format because both programs are driven by the agendas of journalists. Hard news and traditional debates are seen as more sophisticated and of a higher quality than soft news and town hall debates, because their subjects are more intellectual and scholarly. Hard news shows include programs found on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News, such as *State of the Union, Hardball or America’s Newsroom*, while soft news programs include the Oprah Show, Good Morning America, and The View, among
many others. Candidates that appear on hard-news programs are often rigorously interviewed by paid professionals in the political arena, either journalists or television personalities. Subjects discussed are dominantly campaign and platform related, rarely focusing on the candidate’s personal life or personality; these shows are issue-oriented (Baum & Jamison, 2006).

Soft news shows, on the other hand, are often personality-oriented, often lacking a public policy component by instead featuring “sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, and dramatic subject matter” (Baum & Jamison, 2006), and can be easily paralleled to the town hall style debate because questions are asked of the candidate by a non-journalist host and audience members. "Soft news outlets are in the business of making information highly accessible. This makes such information easier for politically unsophisticated consumers to understand and hence, presumably also more appealing to them” (Baum, 2003). Viewers who tune in to soft news outlets search for a connection to both the host and guest, and average citizens often see Oprah and Regis Philbin as “trusted friends,” deeming their interviews with candidates as credible, even if they do not focus on politics during the interview (Baum, 2005). These shows focus more on the candidate as a person. Oprah Winfrey explains:

“Over the years, I have found that not interviewing politicians about the issues worked for my viewing audience. I try to bring issues that people understand through their hearts and their feelings, so they can make decisions” (Feder, 2000).
In addition to a likeable host, some soft news shows, like the Oprah Show in particular, sometimes include questions from the audience, allowing show attendees to interact directly with the guest.

It is important to note that many people do not remember specifics about the programs they tune in to; rather, they remember the emotions about the topic or the candidate that they felt while watching the program (Baum, 2003). This finding suggests that many voting Americans may remember more from a soft news program rather than a hard news show, even if the latter would provide more knowledgeable information about a candidate’s platform, because they would remember their feelings about the program instead. Most people use heuristic cues to compensate incomplete information (Baum & Jamison, 2005), such as the emotions or attitudes they felt while watching the program. If viewers cannot comprehend hard news shows, their attitudes about the program will be more negative. Hence, viewers may learn more from the town hall style debate rather than the traditional debate format, because the information is presented in an easier way to recall. As Graber (2001) points out, “long-term retention usually requires deliberate effort” (p.18), meaning that if a viewer does not specifically make an effort to watch a hard news show or traditional debate, they will probably not retain its provided information. And because they mainly focus on facts, the viewer may not remember much about the candidate, whereas in a soft news show or the town hall debate, a viewer can rely on how they felt about the candidate after watching, because the focus is on personality, not hard facts.
The format of the questions asked in one versus the other debate format could also influence viewers. When questions are phrased in an incompatible way with a person’s retention processes, learning may be hindered. Graber (2001) points out that a person that is not politically knowledgeable may have a harder time understanding and learning from a hard news format, because the programs and questions asked are framed in a sophisticated, “already-in-the-know” way. She goes on to suggest that when ordinary citizens frame questions for debate candidates, audience members may report better comprehension as compared to journalists’ questions, supporting the argument for the effectiveness of soft news shows as well as town hall style debates. Stevens (1992) cited the “Oprah effect” of the town hall style debate, because it showcased ordinary people’s gut-level concerns in a style that was compatible with their manner of thinking. With a better command of the information presented in a soft news style, more positive attitudes naturally follow. Focusing on the more favorable impression of soft news, I hypothesize that:

H4) Viewers of the town hall debate will have more positive evaluations of that debate than viewers of the traditional debate.

All in all, studies have shown that viewers respond with more favorable observations to programs that are more casual and focus on the personality traits of the candidates, as opposed to hard news outlets that predominantly highlight a candidate’s policy stances. These conclusions are analogous to research findings on debate
effects, as town hall style debates are very similar to soft news shows and traditional debates are relatable to hard news programs.

Knowledge and Participation

Past research has looked at debate effects, but it was not until after the 1992 national election that any research could look at specific debate format effects, because of the introduction of the town-hall debate. Carlin and McKinney (1994) examined exactly this, by looking at how the debate formats affected voter thoughts, behavior, and learning. They conducted their experiment by creating focus groups all over the country to discuss each debate right after it aired, including three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate, of which three were the traditional format, with varying questioners (one with a panel, one with just a single moderator, and the last with half panel, half single moderator) and one was the new town hall style debate. Their study found that overall, the focus group participants favored the town hall debate because it “was seen as more relaxed and more democratic, and allowed for more openness, honesty, and personality exposure for the candidates” (p.78). There was a “theme of accountability,” (p.79) as viewers found that the candidates could not skirt the questions and issues raised by potential voters in the audience as easily as they could evade a journalist’s query.

Even though some of the questions posed by citizens in the town-hall debate were poorly phrased, these errors were forgiven by viewers because they were asked
by citizens like themselves (Meyer & Carlin, 1994). On the whole, viewers found the questions asked in the town hall debate, despite their constructional flaws, were more in line with their own agendas and values than the questions posed during the more traditional debates.

Similarly, Eveland, et al. (1994) found that undecided voters were just as capable as journalists in asking questions about salient campaign issues. As I mentioned earlier, Graber (2001) purports that a more colloquial frame of questions in a debate contributes to higher overall viewer comprehension. If viewers understand the material better when ordinary citizens pose the questions (Graber, 2001), and these citizen-questioners effectively ask questions about the most important issues of the time (Eveland, et al., 1994), it is allowable that the town hall style debate will report higher levels of knowledge than the traditional debate.

**Spotlight on the Young Voter Population**

A unique aspect of this study (Meyer & Carlin, 1994) involved one focus group that was comprised of only college students. This focus on youth is important in debate studies because the youngest age group that is able to vote, ages 18 to 24, are the least represented in every election cycle (Delli Carpini, 2000). In Carlin and McKinney’s study, young people were found to similarly prefer the town hall debate over the traditional debates. The authors specifically outlined their results detailing why the students favored the town hall debate format:
"First, the town hall format was able to encourage candidates to offer specific answers to important questions...The presence of real voters also moderated the level of personal attacks, and kept the debate focused on the issues...Second, having audience members asking the questions introduced issues that were important to voters. Questions from 'actual voters' forced the candidates to relate to 'real people' and address their concerns...The majority of the students felt the questions asked in Richmond were more genuine and representative of voters' concerns than issues questions composed by journalists...Third, student voters felt that the Richmond format forced the candidates to actually debate each other....Other students said the format seemed to take the candidates out of their element and forced them to answer questions 'off the top of their head'" (p.195-96)

Carlin and McKinney found that the student voter desires to be involved in the political process, and the town hall format allowed students to feel more connected to the candidates by relating to the actual voters asking the questions.

The young voter is the focus of our study for many reasons. As Delli Carpini (2000) points out, “parties and candidates see little reason to devote their resources to reaching out to young Americans given that this age cohort is less likely to vote than older Americans” (p. 244). Our study looks at how the Internet can be used as a tool in presidential debates to help encourage more American voters to participate in the political process, as it may encourage, inform and stimulate young voters in particular.

McKinney and Banwart (2005) led a study in 2004 that focused directly on young voters and their views on presidential debates. By watching both a traditional primary debate and also a town hall style primary debate, sponsored by CNN and MTV, the authors gauged how well participants related to each debate format, and if they preferred one over the other. The latter debate also allowed questions via e-mail or text message, in addition to questions from the young audience. This study marks
the first official entrance of the Internet into a debate, albeit a primary debate that was designed and specifically set up for young voters, not the general population.

McKinney and Banwart (2005) found that both formats covered issues that were relevant to young voters, even though young voters did not have any control over the subjects covered in the traditional debate, and had complete control over the town hall debate agenda. This finding suggests that young Americans are just as likely to find the same issues important as older Americans. Thus, the fact that young Americans vote at lower rates cannot be attributed to a lack of interest in the political process. Issues important to young voters remain relatively consistent throughout the entire campaign cycle and their most salient issues are not that different from those of older voters (Tedesco, McKinney & Kaid, 2007). The young participants did not think candidates discussed the issues better in either debate over the other, but they did report a better sense of connection to the candidates in the town hall debate, maybe due to the “numerous appeals” from the candidates specifically to young Americans.

The relevance of young people to the present discussion is that this cohort is unique in their low levels of turnout in elections (Delli Carpini, 2000). Further, because the Internet was utilized in 2008 by both campaigns at higher levels and the Internet was added to the town hall debate, it is interesting to look at the youngest eligible voters because they are also the age group that uses the Internet at the highest levels. The primary hypotheses of this study are based on the fact that the age group with the highest usage of the Internet has the lowest voting participation. Studies have
shown that young Americans have more access to the Internet than older American and use the Internet at higher rates (Project Vote Smart, 1999; Pew, 2009), so it is plausible that young voters may be more partial to a debate that integrates the Internet into its questions. The Internet may provide a means for young voters to connect to the political process. Delli Carpini explains:

"The Internet and related technologies provide ways for sustaining, expanding, and improving the quality of this [civic] engagement...To the extent that the Internet can reach this segment of the youth population, provide information on how to translate this interest into action, and provide relatively easy, attractive ways to do so, it is possible that some percentage of this group could become more [politically] engaged" (p.347)

This previous research is the primary basis for the present study. I expect to find similar results as both Carlin and McKinney (1994) and McKinney and Banwart (2005), in that young citizens, in particular, will prefer the Internet-enhanced town hall style of debate over a more traditional version. In turn, I predict they will gain more political and issue knowledge and increased intention to participate. Based upon the research cited here, I hypothesize that:

H5) Exposure to the town hall debate will result in more correct answers to the political knowledge scale than exposure to the traditional debate.

H6) Exposure to the town hall debate will yield more correct answers to candidate platform questions than exposure to the traditional debate.

H7) Exposure to the town hall debate will result in increased intended behavior to participate in the political process than exposure to the traditional debate.
Chapter 2

METHODS

I examined these predictions with a controlled experiment using undergraduate students as subjects. A total of 178 students from a large Eastern university participated in this study. Of the 178 students, 66.5 percent were female and 33.5 percent were male, with a mean age of 19 years. Race among respondents was distributed as 79 percent white, seven percent black and 14 percent reported other. 52.0 percent of participants identified themselves as Democrats, 27.2 percent as Republicans, 17.5 percent as Independents, and 2.8 percent as other. 43.0 percent of participants described their political views as moderate, 36.9 percent as liberal, and 20.1 percent as conservative. The students were divided randomly into three groups: the first served as a control group, the second viewed the 2008 town hall presidential debate on October 7, 2008, and the third viewed the second 2008 tradition presidential debate on October 15, 2008. Both debates featured the two prominent candidates from the Republican and Democratic parties, Senator John McCain and Senator Barack Obama, respectively. Each group was shown a video clip (the entire debate or the control clip) in the evening from approximately 9:00pm-10:30pm. All students were enrolled in introductory sociology, communication, or political science classes and students received extra credit for participation. These classes were chosen so as to
obtain a diverse spectrum of students from many prospective fields of study. We did not choose upper level classes in political science or communication, because those students may not exhibit normal observations of debates due to learned class material or particular interest in the topic. Of the respondents, 94 percent reported majors other than political science, communication, or sociology. The Human Subjects Board approved the experiment in August 2008.

**Design of the Study**

In order to obtain real-time reactions to the debates, students were asked to meet at a designated location to view the debate or control video instead of asking the students to watch the debate in their own time. If the latter option was chosen, students may not have watched the debate at all, may not have been focused during the entirety of the debate, may have watched the debate at a later time, may have been influenced by commentators or others in the room, or be influenced by a multitude of other factors. Having the students amassed together to watch the video clip in real time controls these potential outside variables.

Fein, Goethals, and Kugler (2007) recognized that there is value in real-time debate research, because debates are so inherently context-based. One cannot fully study a debate if its participants are not connected to the current situations and find the same issues salient. The authors used the 1984 presidential debates as part of their study, and acknowledged research may not be externally valid because their subjects
viewed the debate about a decade later, and were thus not connected to the candidates or the subject matter.

Kraus (2000) also recognizes that political campaigns are held in a specific context and time, with specific issues that are relevant only to citizens that are living within the context of the debate. Having students watch the debate in real time makes this study more externally valid because the students themselves had a personal stake in the outcome of the election. Students may have constructive observations about the 1980 presidential debate, for example, but their observations would be at least slightly removed from those that were living during and were affected by that debate. Being a part of the context of the debate definitely affects the salience of issues and thus overall observations of the debate.

**Conduct of the Experiment**

All students were given a printed pre-test questionnaire at the time that they signed up to participate in the study in early September, 2008. The total number of pre-tests completed was 279. Each student that signed up and filled out the pre-test was given a random number from 1 to 683. Participation was voluntary, and once they were assigned their number, anonymous. These in-class pre-tests contained two sections: a political knowledge section and an issue knowledge section that contained current information about the 2008 candidates’ platform stances. I decided to give the students this pre-test with knowledge items at least two weeks before the actual
viewing of a debate so as to not influence their debate-watching observations. If I asked a question about a candidate’s position on healthcare, for instance, right before the student was to watch the debate, he or she may be primed to listen for positions on healthcare, and may not have been so perspicacious naturally. Also, I had the students immediately fill the questionnaires out in person because I did not want the students to have any sort of outside aid to improve their answers to the knowledge questions.

Students were then divided into the three groups according to their random numbers, roughly broken up into thirds. Due to sample attrition, the total number of students was 178. Students were informed of their group assignments and were asked to attend a specific viewing session on one of the three evenings. The three evening sessions followed the same structure: an experimental pre-test, the viewing of a video clip, and a post-test. Before viewing the video clip on their assigned evening, students were given a printed experimental questionnaire. This questionnaire contained questions about demographics, current political behavior and interest, and about their own and their parents’/primary caretakers’ political affiliations. Participants were asked about their prior political participation over the past twelve months. Then, students viewed the entire debate or control video. Afterwards, the students were given a final printed post-test, which included the exact political and issue knowledge questions from the in-class pre-test and the exact intended political behavior questions from the experimental pre-test. The behavior questions were modified to ask if the student planned do x-activity in the near future instead of asking if they have
completed x-activity in the past twelve months. The two prior voting questions were omitted and replaced with one question about intention to vote in the 2008 election.

The post-test also included questions about overall debate observations, such as space to write open-ended comments and a ranking section where students could choose on the scale of 1-10 certain adjectives to describe the debate, such as boring, stimulating and informative. Students could also write in other adjectives that they felt described the video clips that were not included in the ranking section. Finally, students were asked if they would be willing to be contacted after Election Day and fill out a short questionnaire about voting and participation.

Treatment Conditions

The first group (n = 60) served as the control group and was held in the evening of Tuesday, September 23rd, 2008, three days before the first presidential debate. I included a control group so as to test my first set of hypotheses, but also because of the recommendations of McKinney and Chattopadhyay (2007), who noted that a control group would have been helpful in analyzing debate effects.

The decision to hold the control group before any debate took place was made so that these students would not have any knowledge of the debates, either by watching a debate directly or watching news coverage of the debate. The students were shown the film, *Sixteen Candles*, because it was comparable in length to the
standard debate time (approximately 90 minutes) and did not contain any relevant political material.

The second \((n = 59)\) and third \((n = 59)\) groups watched the town hall and traditional debates on October 7th and October 15th, 2008, respectively. In each group, roughly half of the students watched the debate on PBS and the other half watched the debate on CNN. The town hall debate was moderated by NBC news anchor, Tom Brokaw, and the traditional debate was moderated by CBS news anchor, Bob Schieffer. It is important to note that the 2008 campaign included three presidential debates: two traditional debates and one town hall style. The second traditional debate was chosen for this study for one main reason: students who watched the town hall debate (the second debate) may have watched the first traditional debate and I did not want them to have an unfair advantage watching their debate. Thus, I chose the second traditional debate with the knowledge that participants in each treatment group had an equal chance of having watched the first traditional debate. Finally, after the debate, students in each of these two groups were asked to assess the performance of each candidate and to determine who they felt “won” the debate.

Measures

Attitudes. A favorability measure was included only in the post-tests. Participants were asked to rate the video that they just viewed on a scale from one to ten for adjectives and their opposites. For example, participants were asked to choose
how “boring” the video was. Selecting a “1” would be extremely boring and selecting a “10” would be extremely not boring. A multiplicative variable was created for this variable (M= 4.41, SD=1.90). Means were assessed to gauge overall how participants felt about what they just watched. Means closer to zero would mean that the video was uninteresting and boring and means closer to ten would mean that participants found the video stimulating and though-provoking. See Appendix A for question wording.

**Knowledge.** To measure political knowledge, I used four knowledge items from Delli Carpini’s established test. The study found that a lengthy test of political knowledge, including both general civics knowledge and current office holders, yielded similar results to a much abbreviated test, thus the formation of a five-question test. We chose the first four questions and omitted the fifth question for space issues. Future research should include all five questions. See Appendix B for question wording.

In order to measure issue knowledge, we created a measure that asked students to respond to a policy platform by choosing either John McCain or Barack Obama as the candidate that holds the policy stance. All questions were mutually exclusive and taken from the candidates’ own campaign websites prior to the debates. The topics included Iraq, the economy, healthcare, education, foreign policy, and energy. The questions did not incorporate personal information of either candidate and focused
solely on the candidates’ policy stances. Issue knowledge questions were pilot-tested with a separate introductory communication class of undergraduate students, and questions were removed if the incorrect answer rate was too low (Weaver & Drew, 1995). Respondents’ scores were calculated as the number of correct answers out of the total number of questions \((n = 14)\) in the post-test. Of the total questions, there were seven policy stances on various issues for each candidate. The order of the questions was randomized so as to not contain a particular pattern of answers. See Appendix C for question wording.

For each of the two knowledge measures, additive indexes were created to measure how many correct answers for both political and issue knowledge questions from the post-test. Answers were classified as correct (coded 1) and incorrect (coded 0). For political knowledge, an index of the four questions was compiled \((M = 2.92, SD = .90)\), with a score of zero meaning no correct answers and a score of four meaning all four questions correct. For issue knowledge, an index of the fourteen platform questions was compiled \((M=10.46, SD=2.35)\), with a score of zero meaning no correct answers and a score of fourteen meaning all fourteen questions were answered correctly.

**Participation.** In order to measure current and future political behavior and participation, we asked students in the experimental pre-test to check yes or no to a list of political activities if they participated in them at least once over the past twelve
months. These activities included traditional forms of participation, such as attending a political rally for or against a particular candidate and whether or not the student voted in the last election. Other participation items were introduced to adapt to the ever-changing and increasing usage of new technology, particularly by students. Two examples of more modern types of political participation are blogging about a specific candidate or campaign issue and posting an “online yard sign or sticker” on a participants’ MySpace or Facebook profile. In order to measure future political behavior, we asked these same questions, but tweaked the question to ask how likely the participant would engage in these activities over the next twelve months, on a scale of 1-10, with ten being extremely likely and one being extremely unlikely. See Appendix D for question wording.

For this measure, a multiplicative index was created for all post-test responses (M=4.50, SD=1.75) in order to measure how likely the students were to engage in political activities in the next year. A mean closer to zero would be that the students were not likely to engage in these activities and similarly, a mean closer to ten would indicate high likelihood of such engagement.
Chapter 3

RESULTS

All data were entered into and analyzed via SPSS. Answers were tracked via random numbering which was kept consistent throughout all pre- and post-tests. The information captures individualistic trends as well as trends inter- and intra-group. Data were entered so as to evaluate individual groups and also debate-exposure in general versus no debate-exposure.

H1 and H2 hypothesized that watching a presidential debate would have a positive effect on both political knowledge and issue knowledge than not having watched a debate. To test these two hypotheses, I employed independent sample t-tests to evaluate the mean scores to political and issue knowledge questions from the post-test. I created an additional variable that included the two debate groups together in one group, and the control condition as a separate group, and used this new variable as the grouping variable. The results for H1 were not significant \( t(176) = -.240, p = ns \) and the results for H2 were not significant either \( t(176) = -.756, p = ns \). Both H1 and H2 were rejected. In other words, there were not significant differences in knowledge gain between the control and the treatment groups.

H3 suggested that watching a presidential debate would serve as an impetus to participate in the politics, in particular activities relating to the campaign. To test this
hypothesis, I first created a new variable for the post-test participation question. Participants were asked to respond *how likely* they would participate in an activity in the next 12 months. I recoded answers of 1-5 as “will not participate,” a 0 score, and answers of 6-10 as “will participate,” a score of 1. I then created an additive scale. I excluded the intention to vote in the election because voting is a type of political participation that occurs at much higher rates than other forms of participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993). I did not want to taint the participation measure by including an activity that would skew the data. With the additive scale created, I ran an independent samples *t*-test, with the same grouping variable as before. The results for H3 were significant (*t*(152.46) = -2.42, *p* < .05) and thus, H3 was supported, such that participants in the debate conditions were more likely to report intention to participate than participants in the control condition.

H4 hypothesized that the viewers of the town hall debate would rate it with more positive evaluations than viewers of the traditional debate. For this measure, I created a multiplicative scale for the adjectives scale portion of the post-test and ran an independent sample *t*-test. The results for H4 were significant (*t*(111) = 2.37, *p* < .05), suggesting that there is a definite difference in favorability between the two debate format types. H4 was supported, such that participants in the town hall debate group viewed that debate more favorably than those who were in the traditional debate group.
H5 and H6 hypothesized that participants watching the town hall debate would acquire more political and issue knowledge than participants watching the traditional debate. To test these hypotheses, I first created a new variable that separated the subjects who viewed the town hall and traditional debate into two groups, excluding the control group. This variable was necessary in order to test the hypotheses, which didn’t make predictions about the control condition. I created additive scales for all the political and issue knowledge questions, from both the pre- and post-tests. I then employed a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance to test each hypothesis. For H5, the results were not significant, suggesting that there are no differences in political learning between the two types of debate formats, Wilks Lambda = 1.0, $F(1, 116) = .10, p = ns$. H6 did not find significant results either (Wilks Lambda = 1.0, $F(1, 116) = .23, p = ns$). Like the previous hypothesis, results showed that there were no distinguishable differences in issue knowledge between the formats. Both H5 and H6 were rejected. In other words, there was no difference in knowledge, both in general civics and specific issues, between viewers of the town hall and traditional debates.

H7 suggested that participants who viewed the town hall debate would report greater intention to participate than those who viewed the traditional debate. Concurrent with the logic behind H5 and H6, H7 was based on the idea that the participants that viewed a debate in which there were more elements in which to relate, the more knowledge they would gain and the more impetus they would feel to get
involved in the campaign. To test this hypothesis, I created a new measure for the pre-
test past participation measure, excluding the 2006 voting question. I also used the
new variable for participation that I created for H3, which converted intention to
participate into “will participate” or “will not participate” categories, and also
excluded the intention to vote in 2008 question. I ran a mixed between-within subjects
analysis of variance test and did not find significant results (Wilks Lambda = 1.0, $F(1, 114) = .44, p = ns$), suggesting that format does not affect a viewer’s intention to
participate in the political system, thus rejecting H7. In other words, debate format did
not affect the extent to which viewers will participate in the political system.

Table 1. Results for Hypotheses 1 through 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Town Hall</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes</strong></td>
<td>-----</td>
<td><strong>4.83</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.97</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.88)</td>
<td>(1.97)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Civics Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.90</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.93</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.95</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
<td>(.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.27</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.51</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.58</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.48)</td>
<td>(2.86)</td>
<td>(2.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.95</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.98</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.00</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.39)</td>
<td>(3.45)</td>
<td>(3.32)</td>
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</table>

Notes. Scores represent means and standard deviations in parentheses.

*a* indicates that the Town Hall and Traditional scores were significantly different at $p < .05$. *b* indicates that the debate conditions combined had significantly different scores from the Control condition, $p < .05$.  

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36
Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine whether the format of a presidential debate affects overall attitudes, knowledge, and intention to participate in the political process. Research shows that debates do matter, in that they serve as major sources of information during campaigns (e.g., Lemert, 1993) and that they may propel individuals to participate at higher rates (e.g., McKinney and Chattopadhyay 2007). A summary of the results, limitations of the study, directions for future research, and discussion follow.

Summary of Results

Debates v. No Exposure

Overall, results show that presidential debates are not an exercise in futility. Our results do not support past research for knowledge acquisition from debate exposure, but we believe the limitations of our experiment perhaps hindered the results of our knowledge hypotheses. Participation was determined to be affected when participants viewed a debate compared to those that were exposed to the control stimulus. Debates are the only campaign event in which the candidates appear together on the same stage, distinguishing them as the prime opportunity for people to
tune in and learn about the most salient issues and the stances of the candidates.

Research (Chaffee & Dennis, 1979; Jamieson, 1987; Benoit, McKinney & Holbert, 2001) also shows that the people that tune into a debate are watching for a reason, and although there are many, some likely reasons are to find out whom to vote for, to find out what the most important issues are, or to effectively “meet” the top candidates.

We hypothesized that any debate exposure would lead to higher intention to participate compared to no exposure because the people that watch debates are looking for answers, and once they find them—or are at least titillated—they will continue their interest in the campaign in some form of participation. Our results support this logic, as debate-viewers reported levels of intended participation 33 percent higher than the control group.

Traditional Debate v. Enhanced Town Hall Debate

Overall, results show that the format of the two debates did not have a significant effect on knowledge and intention to participate in the political process. Our hypotheses were based on previous research that found that people learn more—and learn better—when they are able to identify with the person asking the questions. Results do show that town hall-viewers had more favorable attitudes of that debate more than the viewers of the traditional debate; the unique elements of the town hall style, such as the citizen-questioners, the e-mail question opportunity, and the general freedom of the stage for candidates, are all ways in which viewers were able to relate
to the debate itself. Prior research (e.g., Meyer & Carlin, 1994; McKinney & Banwart, 2005) shows that people favor the traditional format less for reasons such as the harsh, leading types of questions asked by paid professionals, and the fact that candidates are restricted to staying behind podiums at all times. According to the research by Baum, et al (2003; 2005; 2006), I purported that material that is easier to understand and more enjoyable to watch would be related to our knowledge and participation measures. Baum, et al, contended that, in order to learn or be provoked to act, people must find something in the material agreeable and relatable. Learning cannot happen if the viewer cannot fully comprehend the material. H7 hypothesized that viewers of the town hall debate would rate it more favorably, and, in turn, would have acquired more knowledge and would intend to participate at higher levels (H4-6). This study provides mixed evidence on debate format effects.

Limitations and Future Research

2008 – The Effects of a Historic Election

Although it was ideal to test these hypotheses in the midst of closely watched campaign, this context also led to a major limitation of this study. 2008 was a historic election on many fronts: the first African American presidential candidate, an extremely lengthy Democratic primary season, Governor Sarah Palin as the first woman on a Republican presidential ticket, and Obama’s decision to not take public financing in the general election, among many other things. The media coverage of a
presidential election is always high, but in 2008, it was unprecedented. Coverage of the campaign dominated American life for almost two years, due to the early start of the primary season, in which both Republicans and Democrats had multiple candidates fighting for their party’s nomination. The parody of Sarah Palin by Saturday Night Live’s Tina Fey constantly kept the spotlight on the campaign, especially among youth.

Because of this heightened attention on many parts of the campaign, knowledge was already high for our sample. The means of our pre-test knowledge measures yielded large majorities of correct answers before exposure to any stimulus, control or debate. Across our sample, participants answered an average of nearly three out of four political knowledge questions correctly and an average of approximately ten out of fourteen issue knowledge questions correctly. The differences for both types of knowledge between the three groups were negligible. Because our participants were answering over 70 percent of issue knowledge questions correctly going into the experiment, there was little room for learning. As such, we did not report any significant results for any of our knowledge hypotheses.

Design of the Study

A prevalent limitation to this study was the use of a student sample, although I attempted to get the widest variety of student majors and interests by using participants from introductory classes. Future research should utilize a more representative sample. My second major limitation was the manipulation of the two debate formats.
The traditional debate followed the established customs employed since the first presidential debates, but did not use separate podiums. Instead, the candidates sat down at the same table, across from the moderator. This shift made the debate more intimate, in that the candidates were sitting closer together than they would have been on stage behind podiums, and created a more casual atmosphere. The town hall debate also was less of a manipulation that we expected. The heated primary season oversaw a slew of primary debates, including the much covered YouTube debates, in which any person could send in a video of themselves asking a candidate(s) any question they’d like. Although I knew that the presidential debate would not include any videos, we expected that the Internet questions would be a much bigger part of the debate than they were. The YouTube debate questions were at times controversial, and the style of the questions themselves was certainly unique. The inclusion of Internet questions in the 2008 town hall debate did not produce the same obvious “wow factor.” The differences between the debate formats were not as drastic as we thought they would be, making it harder to discern between them, and certainly a possible reason for our insignificant results.

I do contend that my decision to have our sample watch the debates live is valuable for future research. If I had the students watch the 2008 debates after the fact, or showed them debates from an earlier election, we would have known that the 2008 debate (or whichever we used) did not have much discrepancy between the debate formats. Future research may want to choose an election year that held starkly
different debate formats to accurately analyze their respective effectiveness. But the ability to have the students watch the debates in context is a choice I made that is valuable to our field for the very reason that people don’t normally watch debates after they happened. The distinguishing way to analyze the debates and learn from them is to study them in the context they happened. A past election year that had distinctive debate formats may not yield accurate results, because viewers would not be connected to the important issues of the time, which, undoubtedly, would be the topics of the debates. Future research should consider this dilemma, and continue the study of debate formats.

Conclusion

The inclusion of the Internet in both primary and general election debates was groundbreaking, in that the style and content of the questions posed by Internet users opened up a whole new territory for research. The sheer size of the debate audience was increased, and the access to the debate was opened up to any interested person with Internet access. The YouTube debates in particular allowed citizens to express their queries as creatively as they pleased; many of the questions were posed in ways that haven’t ever been seen in debates. Although not as dramatic as the YouTube questions, the Internet-submitted questions in the town hall debate still offered a unique opportunity for the average citizen, in that any question had the potential to be
selected. This increase in virtual audience members was more democratic in nature because more people had the ability to involve themselves in the debate.

The Internet was utilized more in the 2008 campaign than ever—not only in the debates, and not only by the campaigns, but by the average citizen as well. Pew Research Center reported that approximately 75 percent of American adults used the Internet in 2008, up 10 percent from 2004 (Pew, 2009). Both campaigns of Obama and McCain recognized this pattern and used the Internet heavily as a tool to spread their message, reach out to new supporters, and raise money. The utilization of the Internet has only increased over the past election cycles: its steady incline in use is likely to continue in the future. Participants in the next election will probably use the Internet even more, in ways that have not yet been exploited. It is likely that the Internet will continue to be included in at least one debate, and maybe even the YouTube aspect of the primary debates will be extended to the general election debates as well.

Future research should continue to study presidential debates—and the inclusion of the Internet in particular—because debates remain a highly publicized campaign event that draws in huge audiences. And with the advent of the Internet and YouTube, people are able to tune into debates through new mediums, whether it be live coverage or after the debate aired. Debates can be quite pivotal in campaigns, and candidates and their representatives will continue to participate in and manipulate every variable they can, in order to frame their candidate as best as possible. Because
debates are the most watched campaign event (Benoit, McKinney and Holbert, 2001) and most people use debates to obtain political information (Kraus, 2000), research should continue to analyze debate effects so that we can study whether or not people are actually gaining anything from exposure. People do not watch a debate without a reason, so researchers should continue to study their effectiveness, in areas such as behavior, cognition, and overall attitudes.

This study also has implications for the study of democratic society. An informed citizenry that participates in the election process is a goal for a democracy, because it would mean that its citizens are knowledgeable, engaged, and concerned. Studying the methods that people use to become informed and active citizens is just as important as being an informed, active citizen. Researchers should strive to learn from past debates in order to figure out how to improve them to be more accessible, understandable, and inspiring in the future.

Debate format is just one area for researchers to study, albeit an important area. One of the most fundamental differences between the debates is the overall format—traditional or town hall. It is important to find out whether significant effects can be found in one format or another, especially when new variables are added into the mix, because it allows for a democratic society to be conscious of the best methods of cognition. 2008 was a historic election year on many fronts, and it is worth remembering the increased interactivity of the town hall debate as one of the major
innovations, as well as the value of this experiment in that it was conducted during the context of the presidential election.

Overall, this research provides a first glance at the effects of enhanced debate format on audiences, but it is likely that we will see continued change in both the type and variety of formats, as well as their effects on audiences in future elections. It is hoped that the methods and findings employed in this study encourage scholars to continue research in this area.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
ATTITUDES MEASURE

Please fill out the spaces with any thoughts (positive or negative) about the video clip you just watched. You may fill in as many as ten thoughts. Responses can be words, phrases or sentences and don’t worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar. Please write clearly and separate your thoughts in each space provided.

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</tbody>
</table>
Please rate the video clip that you just watched by circling one number on the scale of 1-10. Circling a “1” would mean that you thought the adjective on the left accurately describes your feeling of the video clip and circling a “10” would mean that you thought the adjective on the right accurately describes your feeling of the video clip.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Not Adjective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>Not Boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>Not Informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>Not Entertaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>Not Interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating</td>
<td>Not Stimulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understandable</td>
<td>Not Understandable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought-provoking</td>
<td>Not Thought-Provoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>Not engaging</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE MEASURE

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you do not know an answer, don’t worry and please leave it blank.

1) Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Dick Cheney?

________________________________

2) Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?
(Please circle A, B or C)

a. The President
b. The Supreme Court
c. Congress

3) How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

________________________________

4) Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives?

________________________________
## APPENDIX C

### ISSUE KNOWLEDGE MEASURE

The following questions are about the 2008 presidential election. Please choose either the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, or the Republican candidate, John McCain, by checking your answer in the column. If you do not know an answer, don’t worry and please leave it blank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Barack Obama</th>
<th>John McCain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Regarding national security, which candidate has agreed to talking to Iran’s President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, without preconditions to confront the country on its nuclear program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Regarding same-sex marriage, which candidate is opposed to legalizing same-sex marriages, but still in favor of civil unions?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Regarding immigration, which candidate wants to talk with Mexico in order to promote economic development there, which would in turn decrease illegal immigration?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Regarding the economy, which candidate proposes increasing taxes for American making over $250,000 and doubling the capital gains tax?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Regarding energy, which candidate does NOT support the Windfalls Profits Tax, which would provide a $1,000 Emergency Energy Rebate to American families?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Regarding the second amendment, which candidate supports the right of law abiding citizens to keep and bear arms?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Regarding energy, which candidate is in favor of nuclear energy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Regarding the war in Iraq, which candidate plans for a staged withdrawal of the troops?</td>
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<td>9. Regarding abortion, which nominee would consider be considered “pro-choice”?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
10. Regarding healthcare, which candidate is in favor of universal healthcare for all Americans?

11. Regarding the war in Iraq, which candidate wants to keep troops abroad until the mission is accomplished?

12. Regarding education, which candidate supports vouchers that give parents the right to select their child’s school?

13. Regarding the economy, which candidate currently supports the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as it is, which encourages trading between Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. by eliminating tariffs?

14. Regarding the war in Iraq, which candidate voted for the “surge,” which increased troop levels in Iraq in early 2007 and has reduced sectarian violence?
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPATION MEASURE

Please check “yes” if you have participated in the following activities since fall, 2007 at least once. Check “no” if you have not participated in the activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…participated in student government or debate team?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>…attended a speech or debate on, for example, a political, economic,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>environmental, cultural or social topic?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…participated in a political club on campus (e.g. College Republicans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>or Democrats, UDVotes, Politically Incorrect)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…participated in any other club on campus that had an economic,</td>
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<tr>
<td>environmental, cultural or social focus?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…wore a campaign button or T-shirt, put a campaign sticker on your</td>
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<td>car, or placed a sign in your yard for or against a particular candidate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…inserted a campaign application or added a candidate as a friend on</td>
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<tr>
<td>your Facebook or MySpace profile?</td>
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<td>…signed any petitions (online or on a hard copy) to show your</td>
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<tr>
<td>support for or against any candidate or policy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…went to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners or things</td>
<td></td>
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<td>like that in support of a particular candidate?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>…did any other work for one of the parties or for a candidate (such as</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>going door-to-door, walking in a parade, petitioning or making phone</td>
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<tr>
<td>calls)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…contacted a political official (e.g. representative or senator)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…posted any comments online (on a blog or a website) or written a</td>
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<tr>
<td>letter to the editor of a publication to express your political views?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>…talked to people about a political topic and/or tried to show them</td>
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<tr>
<td>why they should vote for or against one of the presidential candidates?</td>
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<tr>
<td>…visited or created a website in support of a particular candidate or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>issue?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you were 18 on November 7, 2006, did you vote in the national election that year? (Please leave blank if you were not 18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you will be 18 on November 4, 2008, do you plan to vote in the national election? (Please leave blank if you will not be 18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>