

Who Watches Presidential Debates?

A Comparative Analysis of Presidential Debate Viewing in 2000 and 2004

Kate Kenski

University of Arizona

Natalie Jomini Stroud

University of Pennsylvania

Presidential debates are a main feature of present-day presidential campaigns. For voters, they are a source of political learning about candidate issue positions. Fluctuations in the level of debate viewership from election to election and, within an election, from debate to debate invite the following questions: What is the composition of debate audiences? In what ways did the audiences in 2004 differ from 2000? In what ways did the audiences change across debates in a given year? Results from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys show that debate audiences in 2004 were larger than in 2000. In both elections, the first debate garnered the most viewers. The data also show that those individuals inclined to watch a debate in its entirety tended to be older, be more educated, have higher incomes, and exhibit higher levels of partisan attachment than those who did not watch the debates.

Keywords: presidential debates; viewership; audiences; voters; elections

Lasswell framed a classic question in the study of communication in 1948 when he asked, “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effects?” In the study of presidential debates, studies have addressed “who,” “what,” “in which channel,” and “with what effects,” leaving open the question of “whom” debate messages reach. Although political communication studies on presidential debates have focused heavily on the effects of debate viewing (for reviews, see Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; McKinney & Carlin, 2004), surprisingly little attention has been given to the simple and yet important task of profiling the social and political characteristics of debate viewers compared to nonviewers. Without investigating the composition of the debate audience, one cannot assess the extent to which presidential debates have had a direct impact on viewers or have affected the citizenry through indirect means.

Using data from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES), we isolate the characteristics of debate viewers in presidential elections. Our study addresses three questions: (a) What is the composition of debate audiences? (b) In what ways did the audiences in 2004 differ from 2000? and (c) In what ways did the audiences change across the debates in a given year? Results from the 2000 and 2004 NAES show that debate audiences in 2004 were larger than in 2000. In both elections, the first debate garnered the most viewers. The data also show that those individuals inclined to watch a debate in its entirety tended to be older, be more educated, have higher incomes, and exhibit higher levels of partisan attachment than those who did not watch the debates.

Background

Since the first Kennedy-Nixon debate was televised in 1960, millions of people have watched the presidential debates. They have been a feature of every general election since 1976 (for historical background, see Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Kraus, 2000). The 1976 general election presidential debates between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford drew audiences that ranged from approximately 75 to 95 million Americans (Alexander & Margolis, 1978). The 1976 Nielsen figures showed that

the proportion of households watching declined from the first (53.5 percent) through the second (52.49 percent) and third (47.79 percent) presidential debates, with the smallest audience, 35.5 percent of the households, tuning in for the Dole-Mondale contests. In all, 90 percent of households saw at least one debate. The average household in the United States saw 2.8 of the debates. (Alexander & Margolis, 1978, p. 29)

Chaffee (1978) noted that, although not completely explaining the extremely high viewership of the 1976 debates (as viewership for the debates was higher than other televised events, such as the Super Bowl and World Series), people “had little else to watch, since all three networks ran the debates in toto” (p. 332).

Since that time, the media choices available to consumers have expanded greatly. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that in 2000 and 2004, debate viewership was decidedly smaller than in 1976. Although the U.S. population has increased significantly since the 1976 debates, the size of the presidential debate viewing audience has dropped substantially. Nevertheless, the debates are still watched by millions of viewers, making them an important and recognized political spectacle. According to *The New York Times* reporter Jim Rutenberg, in 2004, 62.5 million viewers watched the first presidential debate and 46.7 million watched the second, “nearly 20 million fewer than watched the first debate, but slightly more than watched the first debate between Mr. Bush and Al Gore, the most-watched debate in 2000” (Rutenberg, 2004, p. A22). The final presidential debate in 2004, “despite competition from two baseball playoff games . . . drew more than 51 million viewers—more than watched any of the presi-

dential debates in 2000 or 1996” (Bennet & Rutenberg, 2004, p. A20). Putting these figures in a wider context, Rutenberg (2000) reports,

The least-watched debate on record was the second one between President Clinton and Bob Dole on Oct. 16, 1996. It was watched by 36.3 million people. The most-watched presidential debate on record was the Oct. 28, 1980, confrontation between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. It had an audience of 80.6 million people. (p. A28)

Since their inception, the power and importance of televised political debates have been attributed in part to the fact that they counter people’s predispositions to seek out information that is consistent with their political viewpoints (Lang & Lang, 1977). Political communication research shows that people seek out political information that confirms their held partisan predispositions and tend to avoid information that may challenge their beliefs (Barlett, Drew, Fahle, & Watts, 1974; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). Consistent with that view, Bimber and Davis (2003) found that most visitors to the Gore and Bush Web sites in 2000 tended to share the political outlook advanced by the Web site. During candidate debates, however, individuals are unable to avoid the potentially dissonance-arousing ideas put forth by an opposing candidate. Debates provide a unique opportunity for voters to compare candidates side-by-side (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000). Commenting on the 1960 debates, Lang and Lang (1961) observed, “The televised debates were different from the usual campaign materials in that they created ‘double exposure.’ There was no practical way for a viewer to expose himself to the personality and arguments of one candidate and not the other” (pp. 277-278).

Understanding who watches debates is important because debate viewing increases political knowledge about the candidates (Becker, Sobowale, Cobbey, & Eyal, 1978; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002; Holbrook, 1999; Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000), affects candidate image and trait perceptions (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Lang & Lang, 1961; Zhu, Milavsky, & Biswas, 1994), and influences impressions about “who won” the debate (Tsfati, 2003).

Studies have found that debates have little to no effect on changing or converting voters’ vote intentions (Lang & Lang, 1961). The debates, however, may exert influence on those who do not identify with the major parties (Deutschmann, 1977). In their study of the 1976 election, Hagner and Rieselbach (1978) found that the debates had a strong effect on reinforcing predispositions but also noted that “17 percent of all the respondents who voted identified the debate period as the time during which they decided for which candidate to vote” (p. 176). Although debates increase voter awareness of candidate issues positions, watching debates does not necessarily increase voters’ use of issues positions in making a vote decision (Abramowitz, 1978), although some studies have found higher issue correlations with vote choice among the most highly exposed debate viewers than among those with lesser or no debate viewing (Chaffee, 1978).

Of course, the influence of presidential debates on opinions about the presidential candidates may be mediated through journalists' interpretations and reconstruction of the events in their subsequent coverage. In his study of the second presidential debate in 1976, Steeper (1978) concluded,

Given the amount of publicity given to Ford's East European statements the next day by the news media and the concomitant change that took place, it is concluded that this publicity caused the change. The change probably was too rapid to be caused by interpersonal influence or by the classic two-step process. Rather, this is evidence of direct media influence. (p. 101)

To the extent that studies (e.g., Tsfaty, 2003) find that individuals who watch more of a debate have different interpretations from those who watch less, it is important to recognize that "direct" experience¹ with candidate content matters. Figuring out what type of voter watches debates, therefore, becomes a pragmatic concern for researchers. Identifying the characteristics of likely debate watchers will assist researchers in making sense of debate effects.

Few empirical studies provide details on the debate audience characteristics. In an edited volume investigating the 1960 presidential debates, Katz and Feldman (1977) noted that debate viewers had higher levels of education and were more likely to identify with one of the major political parties. In a small 1976 panel study of Evanston, Illinois, voters, Graber (1978) found that "the decision to watch the debates hinged on the individual's general interest in the election. Those who had the greatest interest in the election . . . were more likely to expose themselves extensively to the debates" (p. 120). Similarly, in a study of Cincinnati voters during the 1976 election, Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber (1978a, 1978b) found that people with high levels of campaign involvement were the ones most likely to watch the debates. A multivariate model revealed that education and age were significant predictors of debate viewing (Bishop et al., 1978a, p. 109). Given the scant attention to the question of who composes the debate audience, we had few a priori expectations based on the literature. Consistent with Bishop et al. (1978a, 1978b) and Graber (1978), however, we suspected that age, education, and political interest would be associated positively with debate viewing. To gain a deeper understanding of who watches debates, we also explored the relationship between debate viewing and household income, race, ethnicity, gender, party identification, partisan strength, ideology, political discussion, and four types of news media exposure.

Methods

The analyses in this study use data from the 2000 NAES (for a copy of the 2000 data set, see Romer, Kenski, Waldman, Adasiewicz, & Jamieson, 2004) and the 2004 NAES. The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania conducted yearlong rolling cross-sectional (RCS) surveys, the largest academic surveys

on political attitudes and behavior conducted of the U.S. population. In 2000, the survey began November 8, 1999, and ended January 19, 2001. In 2004, it began October 7, 2003, and ended November 16, 2004. For both surveys, telephone interviews were conducted with adults in the United States each day. Households throughout the nation were randomly selected using random-digit dialing. Random individuals within each household were selected for interviewing. Callbacks and refusal conversions were employed to maximize responses. Each night, a set number of replicates, random subsamples of the sampled telephone numbers, was released for interviewing to maximize the representativeness of each daily cross-sectional survey. The response rates (RR1) for the yearlong national surveys were 25% in 2000 and 22% in 2004 (for a description of response rate calculations, see American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2004).

The current analysis uses subsets of the NAES data. Cross-sectional segments were taken from the RCS for the 4 days following each of the general election presidential and vice presidential debates in 2000 and 2004. For 2000, the survey dates were October 4 to 7, October 6 to 9, October 12 to 15, and October 18 to 21. For 2004, the dates were October 1 to 4, October 6 to 9, October 9 to 12, and October 14 to 17.

Independent Variables

Demographics. Respondents were asked to indicate several demographic characteristics. Demographic variables used in this analysis include age (years), education (years of school completed), household income (in thousands), race (1 = Black, 0 = other), ethnicity (1 = Hispanic, 0 = other), and gender (1 = female, 0 = male).

Political leanings and orientations. Respondents were asked to indicate their party identification (Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Other) and the strength of that identification (strong or not too strong). For multivariate analyses, party identification was recoded into two dummy variables, one indicating Democratic Party affiliation and one indicating Republican Party affiliation. Political ideology was assessed with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *very conservative* (1) to *very liberal* (5). Political interest was operationalized by asking respondents the following question:

Some people seem to follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there is an election or not. Others are not that interested. Would you say you follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?

Response categories were coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale from *hardly at all* (1) to *most of the time* (4). Respondents also were asked how many days in the past week (0-7 days) they had discussed politics with their friends or family members.

News media exposure. Respondents were asked to indicate how many days in the past week (0-7 days) they watched national network news, cable news, and local

news. They were also asked to indicate how many days in the past week they read a newspaper.

Dependent Variables

In 2004, debate viewing was measured by asking respondents, "Did you happen to watch . . ." the following: (a) "the presidential debate on Thursday, September 30, between George W. Bush and John Kerry focusing on foreign policy"; (b) "the presidential debate on Friday, October 8, between George W. Bush and John Kerry where voters got to ask questions of the candidates"; (c) "the presidential debate on Wednesday, October 13, between George W. Bush and John Kerry focusing on domestic policy issues"; or (d) "the vice presidential debate on Tuesday, October 5, between Dick Cheney and John Edwards?"

In 2000, respondents were asked whether they happened to watch the following: (a) "the presidential debate, October 17, between George W. Bush and Al Gore"; (b) "the presidential debate, October 11, between George W. Bush and Al Gore"; (c) "the presidential debate, October 3, between George W. Bush and Al Gore"; or (d) "the vice presidential debate, October 5, between Dick Cheney and Joe Lieberman?" If survey participants reported watching a debate, they were then asked, "Did you watch all, most, or just some of it?"

Analytical Procedures

Data from each time period were weighted to take account of the household size and number of telephone lines in the residence and to adjust for variation in the sample relating to geographic region, sex, race, age, and education. To understand the relationship between presidential debate viewing and demographic and political variables, cross-tabulations were analyzed. Two-sample proportion tests and mean comparisons using *t* tests were used to evaluate differences between those who did not watch a debate and those watching all of a debate. Because independent variables may share variation in their associations with the dependent variable under consideration, a multivariate model was needed to assess the unique contribution the independent variables made on debate viewing. Multivariate analyses were conducted using cumulative logit models. This type of model is appropriate in this case because the dependent variable (debate viewing) was measured with an ordinal scale.

Results

As Table 1 demonstrates, debate viewing reached its highest level during the first presidential debate of 2004, where nearly 30% of respondents said that they watched *all* of the debate, and more than 63% of respondents said that they had seen at least some of the debate. In both 2000 and 2004, the first debate yielded the largest audience for the given campaign season. The vice presidential debates drew the smallest audi-

Table 1
Debate Viewing

	First Presidential Debate	Vice Presidential Debate	Second Presidential Debate	Third Presidential Debate
2004	10/1-4/04	10/6-9/04	10/9-12/04	10/14-17/04
All (%)	29.84	24.45	27.64	26.48
Most (%)	14.52	13.27	12.86	15.00
Some (%)	19.10	17.75	17.37	17.93
None (%)	36.42	44.49	41.66	40.58
<i>n</i>	1,477	1,272	1,327	1,279
2000	10/4-7/00	10/6-9/00	10/12-15/00	10/18-21/00
All (%)	19.19	12.27	16.97	17.85
Most (%)	15.16	8.82	11.58	12.12
Some (%)	21.21	14.17	20.95	21.86
None (%)	43.77	64.09	49.73	47.86
<i>n</i>	1,190	1,255	1,271	1,207

Note: "Don't know" and refused response percentages not shown.

ences in both 2000 and 2004. Demonstrating the high levels of interest in the 2004 election, more than 24% of adults watched *all* of the 2004 Cheney-Edwards VP debate compared to 19% of voters who watched *all* of the first Bush-Gore debate in 2000.

Tables 2 through 4 compare the group composition of those who watched all of a given debate to those who did not watch any of it. By comparing these two categories, we do not mean to suggest that the relationship between the viewer characteristic and debate viewing is necessarily linear (although in many cases it is). For example, of those who watched the first debate in 2000, 44% of those who viewed all, 43% who viewed most, 31% who viewed some, and 38% who viewed none of the debate identified as conservatives. As this example demonstrates, the percentages do not always follow a linear pattern. For illustration purposes, however, we show only the "all" and "none" categories.

Demographically, there are many differences between those individuals who watched all of a debate and those who did not watch any of a given debate, as shown in Table 2. Debate audiences were not racially and ethnically diverse. For the first debate of 2004, 85% of individuals viewing all of the debate identified as being White, whereas 78% of individuals viewing none of the debate identified as being White ($p < .01$). Again in 2000, more people who viewed all of the first debate identified as being White as compared to those who did not view the debate (88% vs. 83%, $p < .05$). Males were no more likely than females to watch all of the debates compared to none of the debates in 2000 and 2004, with the exception of the third presidential debate in 2004. Mean comparisons between those who watched *all* of a given debate and those who

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of Debate Viewers

	First Presidential Debate		Vice Presidential Debate		Second Presidential Debate		Third Presidential Debate	
	All	None	All	None	All	None	All	None
2004								
White (%)	85.09	77.96	88.91	79.37	81.29	79.87	83.92	79.17
Black (%)	6.10	12.06	5.76	10.77	8.53	11.22	9.60	11.46
Hispanic (%)	6.95	16.45	2.58	15.92	6.41	14.81	5.27	12.97
Male (%)	49.70	47.58	50.58	46.60	49.58	47.89	50.77	43.98
Female (%)	50.30	52.42	49.42	53.40	50.42	52.11	49.23	56.02
Education, mean (SD)	14.09 (2.43)	12.71 (2.60)	13.88 (2.54)	12.83 (2.45)	13.87 (2.72)	13.04 (2.55)	13.94 (2.54)	13.08 (2.46)
Income, mean (SD)	68.17 (49.33)	49.87 (41.53)	69.53 (52.79)	47.48 (40.86)	68.25 (50.04)	55.61 (46.57)	64.51 (50.95)	52.69 (45.15)
Age, mean (SD)	50.94 (17.50)	43.09 (16.70)	53.50 (16.95)	42.36 (16.77)	52.00 (15.46)	42.34 (16.73)	52.36 (18.05)	43.25 (16.75)
2000								
White (%)	88.24	82.69	93.72	81.85	84.30	82.34	88.43	84.89
Black (%)	8.63	10.97	3.06	12.39	10.82	12.82	8.93	9.69
Hispanic (%)	1.77	14.33	2.72	12.27	4.26	12.25	6.88	11.88
Male (%)	48.61	48.52	48.82	45.17	52.33	47.87	49.39	46.29
Female (%)	51.39	51.48	51.18	54.83	47.67	52.13	50.61	53.71
Education, mean (SD)	14.07 (2.49)	12.73 (2.57)	14.05 (2.51)	12.94 (2.58)	13.91 (2.51)	12.69 (2.53)	13.68 (2.53)	12.90 (2.59)
Income, mean (SD)	64.12 (50.85)	42.25 (36.33)	56.12 (40.11)	45.98 (36.91)	60.75 (44.97)	43.49 (36.59)	61.38 (46.34)	41.50 (35.72)
Age, mean (SD)	53.40 (17.20)	40.26 (15.54)	57.31 (16.28)	40.87 (15.78)	55.13 (16.25)	41.49 (15.79)	53.26 (18.01)	42.71 (16.49)

Table 3
Political Leaning of Debate Viewers (in percentages)

	First Presidential Debate		Vice Presidential Debate		Second Presidential Debate		Third Presidential Debate	
	All	None	All	None	All	None	All	None
2004								
Republican	29.69	29.76	36.14	25.11	35.25	27.35	30.71	28.23
Democrat	32.45	31.35	32.63	31.19	35.70	33.30	39.31	31.66
Independent	30.15	23.91	24.61	29.38	21.31	24.54	21.58	23.97
Strong partisan	71.79	58.67	75.62	62.82	79.06	59.59	76.55	57.29
Not very strong	25.60	39.97	22.73	35.42	19.75	38.50	22.11	40.18
Conservative	34.51	33.65	39.52	36.38	38.60	39.05	36.83	40.16
Moderate	39.04	34.29	36.13	39.29	38.38	33.81	34.99	37.85
Liberal	25.51	25.86	23.80	21.96	19.92	23.76	26.35	19.66
2000								
Republican	33.69	20.84	31.45	22.77	33.02	26.62	38.43	21.24
Democrat	29.53	30.31	27.54	29.29	35.81	25.45	29.11	33.69
Independent	30.13	31.20	34.69	31.98	22.82	27.69	23.76	29.41
Strong partisan	67.04	47.19	78.41	51.31	63.77	48.80	70.32	47.53
Not very strong	31.73	49.49	20.31	47.07	34.40	48.32	27.02	51.13
Conservative	44.05	38.14	43.85	34.69	38.75	36.57	43.61	34.03
Moderate	39.10	33.87	40.98	38.46	41.09	37.59	36.60	34.53
Liberal	15.55	22.12	14.04	22.25	18.75	21.48	16.06	24.55

did not watch any of a debate revealed that those who viewed entire debates were more educated, had higher incomes, and tended to be older than those who did not watch the debate.

Table 3 illustrates the partisanship, political ideologies, and strength of partisanship among those who viewed each debate in its entirety versus those who did not view a given debate. Those with strong partisan attachments (Republicans, Democrats, or Independents) were far more likely to view the debates compared to those with weaker partisan attachments. Looking at the first debate in 2004, for example, 72% of those who saw all of the debate described themselves as “strong” partisans compared to 59% of those who did not see any of the debate ($p < .01$). The same pattern ensued in 2000, where strong partisans were more likely to view the debates.

Comparisons of the relationship between major party attachments and debate viewing yield a less straightforward pattern. In 2000, there was a higher percentage of Republicans among those who had seen all of each debate compared those who had not seen any of the debates (first debate: 34% vs. 21%, $p < .01$; vice presidential debate: 31% vs. 23%, $p < .05$; second debate: 33% vs. 27%, $p < .10$; third debate: 38% vs. 21%, $p < .01$). There were similar percentages of Democrats and Independents in the watched-all and the watched-none categories for all of the 2000 debates, with the exception of the second presidential debate in 2000, where there was a slightly higher percentage of Democrats among the individuals who watched all of the debate compared to the individuals who did not watch any of the debate (36% vs. 25%, $p < .01$). The pattern between partisanship and debate viewing was even less consistent in 2004.

Similarly, the relationship between debate viewing and political ideology was not striking. Overall, the percentage of moderates viewing *all* of a debate was similar to the percentage not viewing a debate. In 2000, liberals made up a larger percentage of the nonviewing group than the heavy debate-viewing group. Yet in 2004, the percentage of liberals between the two viewing categories was comparable with the exception of the third presidential debate, in which they made up a larger percentage of the heavy-viewing group compared to the nonviewing group (26% vs. 20%, $p < .05$).

Overall, evaluations of the relationships between the media use and political orientation variables with debate viewing indicate that debate viewers were heavier consumers of news and more interested in politics. Table 4 presents these bivariate relationships. Throughout the debates, those who viewed the entire debate had higher levels of political interest compared to those who did not view any of the debates.² The same pattern holds true for the following variables: political discussion with friends and family, network news viewing, cable news viewing, local news viewing, and newspaper reading.

Although bivariate characterizations of debate viewers provide important information about the makeup of the debate audience, multivariate analyses were conducted to determine which audience characteristics most strongly predict debate viewing. Table 5 presents the results of the cumulative logit models of debate viewing for 2000 and 2004. The models include the six demographic variables, the two major party dummy variables, partisan strength, and ideology. We opted not to include political interest,

Table 4
Media Use, Political Discussion, and Political Interest Among Debate Viewers, Mean (SD)

	First Presidential Debate		Vice Presidential Debate		Second Presidential Debate		Third Presidential Debate	
	All	None	All	None	All	None	All	None
2004								
Political interest	3.46 (0.69)	2.56 (0.98)	3.69 (0.57)	2.62 (0.96)	3.62 (0.59)	2.62 (0.95)	3.65 (0.61)	2.75 (0.98)
Political discussion	4.81 (2.32)	2.06 (2.31)	4.99 (2.39)	2.13 (2.29)	4.62 (2.43)	2.39 (2.38)	4.90 (2.36)	2.50 (2.39)
Network news	3.47 (2.72)	1.29 (2.08)	3.27 (2.73)	1.75 (2.34)	3.21 (2.70)	1.64 (2.18)	3.16 (2.76)	1.47 (2.18)
Cable news	3.96 (2.89)	1.80 (2.42)	3.97 (2.93)	1.91 (2.47)	4.00 (2.85)	1.85 (2.34)	4.03 (2.97)	2.04 (2.46)
Local news	4.35 (2.75)	2.95 (2.84)	4.55 (2.86)	3.25 (2.74)	4.38 (2.77)	3.27 (2.65)	4.41 (2.84)	3.19 (2.84)
Newspaper	4.30 (2.83)	2.42 (2.77)	4.34 (2.92)	2.53 (2.70)	3.91 (2.98)	3.03 (2.84)	4.31 (2.86)	3.14 (2.90)
2000								
Political interest	3.58 (0.67)	2.46 (0.99)	3.64 (0.59)	2.57 (1.00)	3.53 (0.71)	2.48 (1.07)	3.54 (0.73)	2.52 (1.06)
Political discussion	4.38 (2.53)	1.58 (2.00)	4.96 (2.51)	1.79 (2.04)	4.75 (2.46)	1.67 (1.97)	4.63 (2.35)	1.81 (2.06)
Network news	4.51 (2.41)	2.07 (2.43)	4.84 (2.35)	2.45 (2.51)	4.77 (2.58)	2.34 (2.53)	4.58 (2.48)	2.28 (2.55)
Cable news	3.60 (2.82)	1.89 (2.47)	3.70 (2.96)	2.11 (2.50)	4.24 (2.84)	1.90 (2.46)	4.26 (2.83)	1.97 (2.44)
Local news	4.58 (2.65)	3.43 (2.80)	4.64 (2.66)	3.75 (2.68)	5.12 (2.45)	3.34 (2.82)	5.07 (2.43)	3.74 (2.67)
Newspaper	4.95 (2.57)	3.00 (2.80)	5.19 (2.43)	3.27 (2.82)	4.71 (2.80)	2.80 (2.80)	4.39 (2.91)	3.05 (2.87)

Table 5
Cumulative Logit Regression Analysis of Debate Viewers

	First Presidential Debate			Vice Presidential Debate			Second Presidential Debate			Third Presidential Debate		
	B	SE	Significance	B	SE	Significance	B	SE	Significance	B	SE	Significance
2004												
Demographics												
Age	.02	.00	****	.03	.00	****	.02	.00	****	.02	.00	****
Education	.15	.02	****	.09	.03	****	.12	.03	****	.06	.03	**
Household income	.00	.00	****	.01	.00	****	.00	.00	****	.00	.00	*
Black	-.36	.18	**	-.15	.20		-.19	.21		-.11	.19	
Hispanic	-.32	.19	*	-.23	.23		-.31	.24		.06	.20	
Female	-.17	.11		-.18	.12		.01	.12		-.21	.12	*
Political leaning												
Republican	-.28	.15	*	.31	.16	*	.35	.16	**	.14	.15	
Democrat	-.08	.14		.31	.16	**	.22	.16		.23	.15	
Partisan strength	.28	.12	**	.47	.13	****	.50	.13	****	.57	.13	****
Ideology	.01	.06		.04	.07		.08	.07		.10	.06	
Cox and Snell R ²	.11			.13			.10			.080		
n	1,157			974			1,052			974		
2000												
Demographics												
Age	.03	.00	****	.04	.00	****	.03	.00	****	.03	.00	****
Education	.16	.03	****	.14	.03	****	.15	.03	****	.03	.03	****
Household income	.01	.00	****	.00	.00	****	.00	.00	****	.01	.00	****
Black	.31	.21		-.20	.25		-.36	.23		.44	.22	**
Hispanic	-.05	.26		-.61	.33	*	-.09	.25		.07	.23	
Female	.02	.13		-.36	.14	***	-.13	.13		.07	.13	
Political leaning												
Republican	.32	.17	*	.04	.18		.15	.16		.41	.17	**
Democrat	.10	.16		-.02	.17		.36	.16	**	.24	.16	
Partisan strength	.43	.13	****	.48	.15	****	.45	.13	****	.43	.13	****
Ideology	-.05	.07		-.03	.08		-.13	.07		-.08	.07	
Cox and Snell R ²	.15			.16			.14			.12		
n	866			916			921			874		

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

political discussion, and the four news media exposure variables in Table 5 because we wanted to isolate those variables giving insight into viewer characteristics that most arguably preceded debate viewing.³

In all eight models, age and education were statistically significant predictors of debate viewing. Older individuals were more likely to report watching the debates than their younger counterparts. Also, as expected, the more educated respondents were more likely to report debate viewing. Household income was a positive and significant predictor of debate viewing for two of the 2004 debates and three of the 2000 debates. Being Black, Hispanic, or female were not consistent or notable predictors of debate viewing across the eight models.

The robustness of party identification in predicting debate viewing was far from impressive. Being a Republican was marginally associated with debate viewing in three models and was significant at the .05 level in two models. Being a Democrat was significantly associated with debate watching in two models. Strength of party identification, however, was significantly associated with debate viewing in all eight models—of which seven were significant at the .001 level. In contrast, political ideology was not significant in any of our cumulative logit models predicting debate watching.

Discussion

This study examines the composition of presidential debate-viewing audiences in 2000 and 2004. Overall, heavier debate viewers tended to be older, be more educated, and have higher incomes compared to nondebate viewers. The documented relationship between education and debate viewing (Deutschmann, 1977) was repeated in 2000 and 2004, where bivariate analysis revealed that debate viewers tended to be more educated. Even when controlling for other variables in multivariate analyses, age, education, and income continued to be consistent and significant predictors of viewing. At the bivariate level, debate viewers tended to be less racially and ethnically diverse compared to nonviewers. The bivariate relationships between race/ethnicity and debate viewing largely disappeared in the multivariate analyses, however.

Debate audiences tended to have stronger partisan attachments and have higher levels of political interest. In the multivariate analyses, partisan strength was a significant predictor of viewing the debates in all eight samples. When comparing those who watched *all* of a debate to those who watched *none*, some interesting differences appeared in terms of Republican Party identification. Generally speaking, it appears as though Republicans composed a larger segment of the heavy debate-watching group than the nonviewing group. The relationship between party identification and debate viewing, however, was not particularly robust when demographic variables were taken into consideration.

In general, debate viewers were more likely to express interest in politics, to discuss politics with friends and family, and to consume news at high levels compared to people who did not watch debates. Given the type of data analyzed, however, we did not

make explicit causal assumptions about the relationship between interest, discussion, news exposure, and debate viewing.

Debate viewing in 2000 differed from debate viewing in 2004 in one especially notable way. Debate watching was much higher in 2004 than in 2000. The vice presidential debate in 2004, traditionally the least watched debate of a presidential campaign, garnered more heavy viewers than any individual debate in 2000, including the first debate between Bush and Gore.⁴

There were few notable changes in the demographic and political composition of the debate audiences from the first to the last debate in a campaign. Consistent with prior research, the size of the audience declined from the first to the subsequent debates. First presidential debates of the campaign reached the largest audiences. Vice presidential debates were the least watched debates in a given year.

Some limitations to this study should be noted. From the data available, it is not possible to disentangle conclusively why the composition and size of debate audiences change. It could be, for example, that the second presidential debate of 2004, which occurred on a Friday night (all other debates in 2000 and 2004 occurred on mid-week nights), attracted a different audience. Changes in the topics covered (e.g., foreign policy in the first 2004 debate and domestic policy in the third presidential debate) or changes in the format (the town hall format used in the third presidential debate in 2000 and the second presidential debate in 2004) may also result in differences in audience composition. Despite this caveat, some general trends in debate viewing did emerge over the course of 2000 and 2004.

More than 44 years have passed since the first televised presidential debates took place between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon (1992) argue that “presidential debates have nearly become an institutionalized part of the campaign landscape. The public has come to expect them” (p. 18). Our study demonstrates that the debate-viewing public is somewhat static in its demographic composition. Across years and within each campaign season, those who watched debates were older, more educated, and economically advantaged. Although this study did not show that the debates overcame demographic and political divides found across the political participation literature, the higher levels of debate viewing in 2004 compared to 2000 nonetheless are encouraging.

Notes

1. We recognize that *direct* and *indirect* are relative terms to a large extent. By *direct*, we mean that the voter has watched the debate for herself or himself. By *indirect*, we mean that the voter has gathered information from the opinion of others, perhaps through the media or through interpersonal contacts.

2. Political interest was only asked of a random two thirds of those who responded to the survey. Furthermore, this variable was deleted from the survey temporarily between October 8 and October 10.

3. Given that the data analyzed were collected after each of the debates, including measures of political interest, discussion, and news media exposure measures in the analyses became problematic, as one could argue that debate viewing had increased these measures rather than the reverse. Some preliminary analyses of National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) 2004 debate panel data suggested to us that debate viewing

increases interest, discussion, and news media exposure above predebate levels. We therefore opted to focus on demographic and political leaning variables for our multivariate models in this study.

4. Nielsen Media Research data provided at www.debates.org show that the first Bush-Gore debate in 2000 had 46.6 million viewers. In 2004, the vice presidential debate between Cheney and Edwards garnered 43.5 million viewers. NAES data show, however, that when people were asked whether they had watched all, most, some, or none of a given debate, 19% of adults reported watching all of the first Bush-Gore debate in 2000 compared to 24% who had watched all of the Cheney-Edwards debate in 2004.

References

- Abramowitz, A. I. (1978). The impact of a presidential debate on voter rationality. *American Journal of Political Science*, 22(3), 680-690.
- Alexander, H. E., & Margolis, J. (1978). The making of the debates. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 18-32). New York: Praeger.
- American Association for Public Opinion Research. (2004). *Standard definitions: Final dispositions of case codes and outcome rates for surveys* (3rd ed.). Lenexa, KS: AAPOR.
- Barlett, D. L., Drew, P. B., Fahle, E. G., & Watts, W. A. (1974). Selective exposure to a presidential campaign appeal. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 38(2), 264-270.
- Becker, L. B., Sobowale, I. A., Cobbe, R. E., & Eyal, C. H. (1978). Debates' effects on voters' understanding of candidates and issues. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 126-139). New York: Praeger.
- Bennet, J., & Rutenberg, J. (2004, October 15). A television event that delivered high drama and garnered high ratings. *The New York Times*, p. A20.
- Benoit, W. L., & Hansen, G. J. (2004). Presidential debate watching, issue knowledge, character evaluation, and vote choice. *Human Communication Research*, 30(1), 121-144.
- Benoit, W. L., Hansen, G. J., & Verser, R. M. (2003). A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates. *Communication Monographs*, 70(4), 335-350.
- Bimber, B., & Davis, R. (2003). *Campaigning online: The internet in U.S. elections*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Bishop, G. F., Oldendick, R. W., & Tuchfarber, A. J. (1978a). Debate watching and the acquisition of political knowledge. *Journal of Communication*, 28(4), 99-113.
- Bishop, G. F., Oldendick, R. W., & Tuchfarber, A. J. (1978b). The presidential debates as a device for increasing the "rationality" of electoral behavior. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 179-196). New York: Praeger.
- Chaffee, S. H. (1978). Presidential debates: Are they helpful to voters? *Communication Monographs*, 45, 330-346.
- Deutschmann, P. J. (1977). Viewing, conversations, and voting intentions. In S. Kraus (Ed.), *The great debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960, a reissue* (pp. 232-252). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Graber, D. A. (1978). Problems in measuring audience effects of the 1976 debates. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 105-125). New York: Praeger.
- Hagner, P. R., & Rieselbach, L. N. (1978). The impact of the 1976 presidential debates: Conversion or reinforcement? In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 157-178). New York: Praeger.
- Hellweg, S. A., Pfau, M., & Brydon, S. R. (1992). *Television presidential debates: Advocacy in contemporary America*. New York: Praeger.
- Holbert, R. L., Benoit, W. L., Hansen, G. J., & Wen, W.-C. (2002). The role of communication in the formation of an issue-based citizenry. *Communication Monographs*, 69(4), 296-310.
- Holbrook, T. M. (1999). Political learning from presidential debates. *Political Behavior*, 21(1), 67-89.

- Jamieson, K. H., & Adasiewicz, C. (2000). What can voters learn from election debates? In S. Coleman (Ed.), *Televised election debates: International perspectives* (pp. 25-42). New York: St. Martin's.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Birdsell, D. S. (1988). *Presidential debates: The challenge of creating an informed electorate*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, E., & Feldman, J. J. (1977). The debates in the light of research: A survey of surveys. In S. Kraus (Ed.), *The great debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960, a reissue* (pp. 173-223). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kraus, S. (2000). *Televised presidential debates and public policy* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lang, K., & Lang, G. E. (1961). Ordeal by debate: Viewer reactions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 25(2), 277-288.
- Lang, K., & Lang, G. E. (1977). Reactions from viewers. In S. Kraus (Ed.), *The great debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960, a reissue* (pp. 313-330). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas, a series of addresses* (pp. 37-51). Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign* (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- McKinney, M. S., & Carlin, D. B. (2004). Political campaign debates. In L. L. Kaid (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research* (pp. 203-234). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Romer, D., Kenski, K., Waldman, P., Adasiewicz, C., & Jamieson, K. H. (2004). *Capturing campaign dynamics: The National Annenberg Election Survey*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rutenberg, J. (2000, October 19). The 2000 campaign: The viewers; number of debate viewers rise from the first but remains low. *The New York Times*, p. A28.
- Rutenberg, J. (2004, October 12). Dropoff in debate viewers. *The New York Times*, p. A22.
- Steeper, F. T. (1978). Public response to Gerald Ford's statements on Eastern Europe in the second debate. In G. F. Bishop, R. G. Meadow, & M. Jackson-Beeck (Eds.), *The presidential debates: Media, electoral, and policy perspectives* (pp. 81-101). New York: Praeger.
- Tsfati, Y. (2003). Debating the debate: The impact of exposure to debate news coverage and its interaction with exposure to the actual debate. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 8(3), 70-86.
- Zhu, J.-H., Milavsky, J. R., & Biswas, R. (1994). Do televised debates affect image perception more than issue knowledge? A study of the first 1992 presidential debates. *Human Communication Research*, 20(3), 302-333.

Kate Kenski (M.A., University of Pennsylvania) teaches in the Department of Communication at the University of Arizona. She was a member of the National Annenberg Election Survey team at the Annenberg Public Policy Center in 2000 and 2004. She is a coauthor of the book *Capturing Campaign Dynamics: The National Annenberg Election Survey* (2004) and has published articles in the areas of gender and politics, political communication, public opinion, social influence, and research methods.

Natalie Jomini Stroud is a senior analyst at the Annenberg Public Policy Center and doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include political communication, public opinion, and research methods. Specifically, she is interested in selectivity processes, how people make decisions about seeking political information.