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Political Engagement through Debates: Young Citizens' Reactions to the 2004 Presidential Debates

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Abstract:

This study examines how exposure to a televised debate affects young citizens' normative democratic tendencies, attitudes that have been linked to increased civic and political participation, including voting behavior. The authors also are interested in the confidence young citizens express in the political knowledge they possess—their political information efficacy—and specifically how confidence in one's knowledge may be affected by exposure to such a sustained and "information-rich" source of campaign information as a 90-minute candidate debate. Findings reveal that debates strengthen, at least in the short term, democratic attitudes and also strengthen young citizens' levels of political information efficacy.

In late September through mid-October 2004, an average of 53.4 million viewers watched President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry in each of their three televised debates (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004). This assemblage of viewers, in fact,

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represented the largest audience for presidential debates since 1992, perhaps a portent that a more interested and engaged electorate would turn out in greater numbers come Election Day.¹ Indeed, in November 2004, voters recorded their highest level of participation in a presidential election since 1968, with nearly 60% of eligible voters casting their ballot. Young citizens—along with all segments of the electorate—also went to the polls in greater numbers. Although the rate still trailed that of older voters, turnout for 18- to 24-year-olds was at 42%, an increase from 36% in 2000 (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2004).

Certainly, during the 2004 presidential campaign, a national movement was afoot to get young citizens involved in the political process. From MTV's "Rock the Vote" and "Choose or Lose" to P. Diddy and Lil' Kim's "Vote or Die" advertising blitzes, voting was marketed to young citizens as the "cool" thing to do. This drive to recruit more young voters stemmed largely from the growing lament that our youngest citizens had become the least represented segment of the electorate at the ballot box. Until the November 2004 election, only about one third of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds regularly voted in presidential elections, compared to approximately 65% of those 25 and older, and as Levine and Lopez (2002) document, the gap in participation between young and older voters had continued to expand since 18-year-olds were first granted the vote in 1972.

Can we conclude, therefore, that the many persuasive attempts and national media campaigns designed to mobilize younger voters were successful? In fact, we have little empirical evidence to help us understand if—and perhaps even more important, *how*—specific political messages might work to persuade young citizens to vote. The current study seeks to provide some answers to the perplexing problem of youth engagement in politics. Although it would be impossible to fashion a study that captures young citizens' exposure and reactions to the full range of political and civic engagement appeals that make up a presidential campaign, our analysis isolates young citizens' reactions to a specific campaign message—the televised presidential debate. As McKinney and Carlin (2004, p. 204) note, presidential debates generate the largest viewing audience of any single televised campaign event. Furthermore, as Pfau (2003) points out, debates, with their attendant media hype and extensive

journalistic coverage, may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the attention of “marginally attentive” citizens—a segment of the populace we feel includes a great many young citizens.

Our primary interest is to better understand how exposure to a televised debate may affect young citizens’ latent or normative democratic tendencies, attitudes that have been linked in previous research to increased civic and political participation, including voting behavior. We also are interested in the confidence that young citizens express in the political knowledge they possess—their *political information efficacy*—and specifically how confidence in one’s political knowledge may be affected by exposure to such a sustained and “information-rich” source of campaign information as a 90-minute candidate debate. Finally, through longitudinal analysis, we seek to understand not only the immediate effects of debate exposure to normative democratic attitudes and information efficacy but also how these attitudes may remain stable or evolve throughout the course of a campaign.

Next, we provide a brief review of studies examining the effects of debate exposure on democratic political attitudes, as well as a review of the very few investigations examining the longevity of debate effects. Following this assessment of the relevant literature, we posit a series of hypotheses and research questions and present findings from our longitudinal study that suggest debates do strengthen, at least in the short term, democratic attitudes and also strengthen young citizens’ levels of political information efficacy.

Review of Literature

Debates and Democratic Attitudes

A number of studies have examined campaign debates’ possible latent effects whereby exposure to candidates engaged in televised debates may activate citizens’ various civic and democratic tendencies. In general, although this line of research remains underdeveloped, most findings do suggest that debate viewing positively affects attitudes of civic engagement and thus can strengthen our political and electoral processes. Specifically, debates have been found to heighten viewers’ interest in the ongoing campaign (Chaffee, 1978; Wald &

Lupfer, 1978), to encourage citizens to seek out additional campaign information following their debate viewing (Lemert, 1993), and to encourage greater participation in the campaign, as demonstrated by viewers' talking to others about their preferred candidate and increases in reported likelihood of voting (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979a; Patterson, 2002).

Of particular relevance to the current project, a few studies have found debate viewing enhances citizens' sense of political efficacy and support for political institutions (Chaffee, 1978; Katz & Feldman, 1962; McLeod, Durrall, Ziemke, & Bybee, 1979b; Sears & Chaffee, 1979), although one study (Wald & Lupfer, 1978) found that viewers became significantly less trusting of government following their debate viewing. However, Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco (2000) found that debate exposure resulted in a significant lowering of political cynicism levels, and their analysis also revealed a clear link between cynicism and voting—specifically, nonvoters' political cynicism was significantly higher than that of voters. Pfau, Houston, and Semmler (2005) also found debate viewing to promote such normative outcomes as increased "political expertise"—which included awareness, knowledge, and interest in politics—and increased likelihood of participating in the political process, including voting.

In one of the very few studies to focus specifically on the effects that a presidential debate may have on *young* citizens, McKinney and Banwart (2005) examined college students' reactions to a presidential primary debate designed expressly for young voters—MTV's 'Rock the Vote' debate that took place in the fall of 2003 and featured the Democratic presidential primary candidates. In this comparative study, young citizens also were exposed to a "traditional" primary debate not targeted explicitly to youth voters. McKinney and Banwart found that the youth-targeted debate, significantly more so than a traditional debate, encouraged greater identification between young citizens and the candidates, and viewers of the 'Rock the Vote' debate expressed greater political efficacy, heightened political trust, and decreased political cynicism.

Our interest in the ability of debates to affect democratic attitudes and behaviors is in line with Pfau's (2003) recommendation for future debate research when, speaking of normative democratic

outcomes, he concluded, "There are no other more important effects that scholars could document" (p. 32). With the current study, we are particularly interested in achieving a clearer understanding of how this important form of campaign communication may affect young citizens' attitudes and behaviors. As argued previously, debates are likely to penetrate the awareness of marginally attentive voters—the very segment of the populace, we believe, that includes large numbers of young citizens. Also, with much of the extant debate-effects research based on general populations of debate viewers, with a notable exception being the McKinney and Banwart (2005) study discussed previously, a primary goal of the current investigation is to expand our knowledge of specific debate effects on young citizens. Within the broad rubric of democratic attitudes and values, our particular attention in this study will focus on what Delli Carpini (2004, p. 398) points to as the principal attitudes of democratic engagement, which include political efficacy, political trust, and the counterpart to political trust, political cynicism. Drawing on specific findings from existing research as a guide, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1: Young voters' political efficacy will increase significantly after viewing a televised presidential debate.

Hypothesis 2: Young voters' political trust will increase significantly after viewing a televised presidential debate.

Hypothesis 3: Young voters' political cynicism will decrease significantly after viewing a televised presidential debate.

Political Information Efficacy

Along with our interest in those normative democratic attitudes and values that have been shown to produce a more engaged—and more likely to vote—citizen, we also are interested in another cornerstone of participatory democracy, the *informed* voter. Whereas others have focused a great deal of attention on the cognitive elements of political information, chiefly the acquisition and processing of requisite political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Popkin, 1991), we are more interested in the attitudinal component of knowledge attainment—specifically, how confident one is in what he or

she knows. Recently, Kaid, Tedesco, and McKinney (2004; see also Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007), have advanced the concept of political information efficacy. This attitudinal concept is grounded in important theoretical links between general political efficacy and one's feelings of confidence in the political knowledge he or she possesses. Whereas traditional political efficacy has been defined as an individual's feeling that he or she has the ability to influence the political process (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954), the concept of political information efficacy is defined as the level of confidence one has in his or her political knowledge and that one possesses sufficient knowledge to engage the political process through such behaviors as voting.

The development of political information efficacy as an important factor in young voters' behavior stems from a decade of research examining young citizens' reasoning for their civic engagement attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Kaid et al., 2000, 2004, 2007). Through analysis of thousands of young citizens engaged in focus group discussions conducted throughout the United States during the 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential elections, the leading explanation provided by nonvoting young citizens was that they lacked sufficient knowledge to participate as an informed voter.

In their initial empirical testing of political information efficacy, Kaid et al. (2004) utilized both National Election Studies [NES] survey data and a pilot experimental investigation that showed younger voters (those 18 to 29) reported significantly less confidence in their political knowledge than older voters; also, lack of confidence in one's political knowledge is significantly related to voting or not voting. Although additional studies have been conducted using political information efficacy as a variable of analysis (Kaid et al., 2007), we have a very limited understanding of a televised presidential debate's effect on young citizens' information efficacy. In their comparative study, examining exposure to both presidential ads and debates, Kaid et al. (2005) found that debates may be more helpful than ads in strengthening young voters' political information efficacy. As one of the most information-rich sources of campaign information, debates offer sustained exposure (typically 90 minutes) to issue and candidate-image information and thus provide the potential to alleviate one's concern that he or she is ill-informed about the candidates and

campaign issues. Yet with little existing research to form a prediction of debates' potential effect on political information efficacy, we posit the following general question:

Research Question 1: Will exposure to a televised presidential debate have a significant effect on young citizens' political information efficacy?

The Longevity of Debate Effects

Although watching a 90-minute televised debate may very well induce certain immediate effects, are such cognitive or attitudinal changes lasting? Unfortunately, as McKinney and Carlin (2004) note in their comprehensive review of presidential debate research, we have very little detailed knowledge of any lasting effects from debate exposure—lasting at least until Election Day—and what little evidence is available along these lines suggests that debate effects are short-lived. Specifically, the few debate studies that have employed a repeated-measure or panel design, following respondents' post-debate responses through postelection, reveal that specific debate effects evaporate rather quickly. From their examination of both issue-knowledge gains and formation of candidate-image perceptions, Miller and MacKuen (1979) reported that there was "minimal long-term debate impact on candidate evaluations . . . [and] most important, it is apparent that the effect of any debate lasted only a few days" (pp. 288-289). Similarly, Sears and Chaffee's (1979) analysis of the 1976 presidential debate also found "little lasting impact...on evaluations of the candidates or perceptions of the candidates' attributes. Each debate yielded some temporary benefit to the candidate who was the consensus 'winner,' but this advantage seemed to dissipate fairly quickly" (p. 244). Finally, Wald and Lupfer's (1978) examination of debate viewing's latent effect of strengthening intent to vote also concluded "that such an effect was only temporary.... One week later, this effect had largely disappeared" (p. 348).

Although in the short term, debates may be able to positively affect viewers democratic attitudes—whether by heightening one's sense of political efficacy or political trust or by cynicism—or perhaps even lead one to feel more confident in the knowledge he or she possesses, are these changes at all enduring? Our longitudinal analysis

employs a panel design that tracks young citizens who viewed a presidential debate to postelection, thus allowing us to answer the following general questions:

Research Question 2: Will young voters' postdebate attitudes of political efficacy, trust, and cynicism remain stable or change by the end of the presidential campaign?

Research Question 3: Will young voters' postdebate feelings of political information efficacy remain stable or change by the end of the presidential campaign?

Method

The data for this study were collected throughout the fall 2004 presidential campaign from a subset of participants who took part in a larger study of presidential debates. Participants for the current project each viewed one of the three presidential debates, and these same study participants were contacted again following the November 2, 2004, election. Our analysis is based on a 3-point longitudinal design, with Time 1 measuring participants' predebate viewing responses; Time 2, postdebate responses; and Time 3, postelection responses from our panel participants. The three presidential debates took place during a 2-week period (from September 30 to October 13), and postelection responses were collected during a 3-week period following the election (November 6 to 30).

Sample

The respondents in our panel were 32 undergraduate students from six large southeastern and midwestern universities. Six participants viewed the first presidential debate on September 30, 5 viewed the second debate on October 8, and 21 viewed the third debate on October 13. The total sample consisted of 9 men (28%) and 23 women (72%) whose mean age was 21 (with ages ranging from 18 to 29). The partisan affiliations of the sample included 44% Republican, 34% Democrat, 19% Independent, and 3% Other. Finally, the sample was 81% Caucasian, 6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% Multiracial, 3% African American, and 3% Spanish or Hispanic origin.

Procedures

Participants were enrolled in basic communication courses at all universities and received credit for taking part in this research. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous. In each of the three debate-viewing sessions at all universities, respondents first completed printed pretest questionnaires on the evening of the debate in the viewing lab that included demographic information and a series of items designed to measure the respondents' political efficacy, trust, cynicism, and information efficacy. The respondents then watched the 90-minute debate live; immediately following the debate, without exposure to any postdebate media commentary, the respondents completed a posttest questionnaire, which included repeated measures of all pretest items.² As part of the postdebate testing, participants were asked if they would be willing to share their e-mail addresses so that researchers could contact them again at some point later in the campaign to learn what they were thinking about the campaign and candidates. Following the election, participants indicating a willingness to be recontacted received an e-mail with a link to an online survey that contained repeated measures of all pre- and postdebate viewing items.

Variables and Instruments

To measure young citizens' normative democratic attitudes, we used a scale consisting of eight items adapted and expanded from the NES conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. Variations of these statements—provided in our Results section—have been used in numerous political communication studies (e.g., Kaid et al., 2000; Kaid, Johnston, & Hale, 1989; McKinney, Spiker, & Kaid 1998; McKinney & Banwart, 2005; Spiker, 2005; Spiker & McKinney, 1999; Wald & Lupfer, 1978). For each of the eight items, participants responded to a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A confirmatory factor analysis revealed acceptable loadings for the three discreet factors of *political efficacy*, *trust in politicians*, and *political cynicism*.³

A four-item scale was used to measure political information efficacy. This scale was constructed from items used traditionally to measure internal political efficacy reflecting one's attainment of

requisite political information as well as level of confidence in political knowledge (Acock et al., 1985; Clarke & Acock, 1989; Finkel, 1985; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). The scale included the following internal efficacy items: "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics," "I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people," and "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country." Additionally, the fourth item stated, "If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for." The combined scale achieved high reliability levels across all testing periods, with a Cronbach's alpha of +.85 at Time 1, +.93 at Time 2, and +.90 at Time 3.

Results

Normative Democratic Attitudes

Our first set of hypotheses predicted that debate exposure would produce beneficial effects on young citizens' attitudes of political efficacy, trust, and cynicism. Namely, we predicted that following debate exposure, young citizens' political efficacy and trust would increase and their cynicism would decrease. Paired sample *t* tests were conducted to evaluate changes in pretest and posttest mean scores (where *p* values less than .05 are reported as significant). Results indicate that although change did occur for each of these three attitudes, and in the predicted direction, a significant change occurred for only one of the three variables, political cynicism (see Table 1). Young citizens were significantly more cynical before they watched the debate ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.82$) than after watching the debate ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(31) = 2.282$, $p = .030$. Again, keep in mind that our item response pattern was 1 = *disagree strongly* and 5 = *strongly agree*; thus, following their debate viewing, respondents recorded significantly stronger disagreement with the statements "One never knows what politicians really think," "Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on," and "Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a political campaign is over."

Young citizens' political efficacy increased following debate exposure. Reported efficacy levels before the debate ($M = 1.92$, $SD =$

0.78) were lower than postdebate levels ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.77$), and this change in political efficacy approached significance, $t(31) = 1.938$, $p = .062$. Thus, following their debate viewing, respondents expressed greater disagreement with the statements "Whether I vote or not has no influence on what politicians do" and "People like me don't have any say about what the government does."

Finally, debate exposure had very little effect on young citizens' trust in politicians. Participants' mean trust scores registered a negligible change, from 3.33 to 3.27, indicating that after watching George W. Bush and John Kerry debate one another for 90 minutes, these young citizens disagreed only slightly less with the sentiments "Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think," "One cannot always trust what politicians say," and "One cannot be confident that politicians will do the right thing."

Political Information Efficacy

Our first research question asked if viewing a presidential debate would have a significant effect on young citizens' political information efficacy. Table 1 shows that information efficacy increased significantly following exposure to a presidential debate, as participants' predebate information efficacy was lower ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.88$) than their reported information efficacy following the debate ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(31) = -3.170$, $p = .003$. With information efficacy items phrased in a positive manner (see Method section for item wording), a significant increase in this score indicates respondents became more confident in their political knowledge.

Longitudinal Analysis

Beyond the immediate effects of debate exposure, we also were interested in understanding how young citizens' democratic attitudes might evolve during the course of the campaign. We first asked, in Research Question 2, if young citizens' postdebate attitudes of political efficacy, trust, and cynicism would remain stable or change by the end of the presidential election. The Time 3 (postelection) mean scores in Table 1 reveal that by the end of the campaign, young citizens' political efficacy ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.05$) dropped significantly from its postdebate viewing level ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.77$), $t(31) = -2.80$, $p =$

.009; and young citizens' political cynicism following the election ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.78$) was significantly higher than it was at Time 2 following debate viewing ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(31) = -2.66$, $p = .012$. Although young citizens became slightly less trusting of politicians by the end of the campaign, this does not reflect a significant change following their postdebate viewing.

Our fourth research question asked if young citizens' postdebate feelings of political information efficacy would remain stable or change by the end of the presidential campaign. Although young citizens' information efficacy did continue to increase from Time 2 to Time 3, this was not a significant increase. However, young citizens' level of postelection political information efficacy ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.880$) was significantly higher than their predebate level ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.782$), $t(31) = -4.494$, $p = .001$.

Discussion

Our hypothesized outcomes for postdebate democratic attitudes were only partially confirmed. Young citizens did become significantly less cynical following their debate viewing, and their feelings of political efficacy increased at a level approaching significance. However, debate exposure had very little influence on young citizens' trust in politicians. When examining the pattern of attitude change across time, and particularly change in attitudes from postdebate to postelection, we see that young citizens actually "lost" any beneficial effects they acquired from their debate exposure. The significant attitude changes from Time 2 to Time 3 reveal that young citizens' levels of efficacy and cynicism, for the most part, simply returned to their predebate levels (in comparing predebate to postelection scores, Time 1 to Time 3, we found no significant difference on any of the three democratic attitude measures).

This "loss" of debate-viewing "gains" in democratic attitudes is similar to Mutz and Reeves's (2005) findings regarding the effects of televised incivility on political trust. Their experimental study revealed that even brief—20-minute—exposure to political incivility reduces political trust; yet when contacted approximately 1 month later, participants' political trust had "bounced back...to the level of trust [they] had before incivility in the laboratory" (p. 12). When we

consider the apparent malleability of young citizens' democratic attitudes across the course of the campaign, and particularly their "bounce back" from postdebate gains, we are less inclined to agree with Miller and MacKuen's (1979) suggestion that debate effects may be short-lived because "the public's memory is just not very long" (p. 290). Rather, we tend to agree with Geer's (1988) assessment that "actually, the effect of debates may be short lived because the campaign continues, not because the electorate simply forgot about the debates" (p. 489).

That the young citizens in our study reported their lowest levels of political efficacy and highest levels of cynicism following the election may very well speak to the campaign that continued after debates ended in mid-October. In fact, the postdebate period is typically regarded as the "hot phase" of the fall campaign. During the last couple of weeks leading up to Election Day, candidates will unleash their heaviest barrage of ads and sharpest opponent attacks to draw clear distinctions that might motivate their base voters. This campaign message environment may very well work to erase any beneficial attitudinal gains resulting from earlier debate exposure and particularly work to increase one's level of political cynicism.

When examining the trends in our longitudinal analysis we were actually rather surprised to find young citizens reporting their lowest levels of efficacy at the conclusion of the campaign. Our initial speculation had us examine our panel's reported presidential vote choice, speculating that such decreased efficacy might reflect disheartened voters who had supported a defeated candidate. However, with nearly all of our participants claiming to have voted (31, or 97%), their presidential choice was almost exactly split with 16 (50%) voting for John Kerry and 15 (47%) voting for President Bush. Thus, even if a postelection decrease in efficacy was spurred by disheartened Kerry supporters, the nearly equal number of triumphant Bush supports in our sample would likely balance this tendency.

Another potential—and we feel plausible—explanation for these young citizens' decreased efficacy might be explained by the time frame during which we asked our panel to register their postelection responses, the few days immediately following the election. It is interesting that a prevailing media interpretation of the election's

outcome promulgated during this period expressed initial disappointment in—and even criticism of—the performance of young voters in the 2004 vote. For example, on Thursday, November 4 (following John Kerry's eventual concession speech delivered on Wednesday, November 3), National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* hinted that Kerry's defeat could have come at the hands of younger voters:

This year's elections saw a big increase in efforts to get young voters to the polls. Some thought John Kerry could ride a wave of youthful first-time voters into the White House.... With P. Diddy, Eminem, and a host of other entertainers commanding young people to "vote or die," the thought was this would be a record turnout for young voters. Well, it was... sort of. (Burbank, 2004)

This report went on to point out that although the total number of young voters did increase, their percentage of the overall vote total remained the same as their 2000 contribution because of the fact that all segments of the voting population increased. A *New York Times* analysis of election results was even more direct in its blame of young voters, proclaiming, "Young voters packed less wallop on Nov. 2 than some hoped" (Chamberlain, 2004). Finally, cable news pundit Joe Scarborough, host of MSNBC's *Scarborough Country* skipped blame and went directly to ridiculing young voters' election influence when he boasted,

You know, a lot of history was made during this last presidential election, from bloggers, to 527s, and, of course, to all those young voters that were going to come out and change the election. Right! Well, I'll tell you what. Our focus tonight is the swift boat vets and the fact that they actually did secure a second term for George W. Bush. (Scarborough, 2004)

This dominant news narrative may very well have suggested to young voters that their performance in the 2004 election was a disappointment and that their political clout—their political efficacy—was simply not very strong, especially when compared with other segments of the electorate.

When examining young citizens' political information efficacy, however, our longitudinal analysis charts a progressive strengthening of this attitude throughout the course of the campaign. Young citizens' lowest levels of information efficacy were found before their exposure to the presidential debates, a campaign message that effected a significant strengthening of confidence in their political knowledge. By the end of the campaign, young citizens recorded their highest level of political information efficacy, a level significantly higher than when this measure was first taken before their debate viewing.

Our finding of a continued strengthening of young citizens' political information efficacy following debate exposure is in line with previous research that suggests debate viewing prompts greater interest in the ongoing campaign, encourages citizens to seek out additional campaign information, and prompts citizens to engage in discussions with others about the candidates and the campaign. In fact, these are the very types of communicative activities—the seeking of additional information and sharing with others—that would likely lead one to be more confident in his or her political knowledge, which our results seem to confirm.

Conclusion

We realize the current study has several limitations. First, the size of our panel could have been larger; yet the ability to track even this limited number of voters allows us to understand more about changes in democratic attitudes throughout the course of a presidential campaign. We realize too that debates are but only one component in a very complex campaign message environment; future research should examine debate effects relative to other communication forms. Also, a control group of participants not exposed to the presidential debates would be helpful in teasing out specific debate viewing effects. Yet even with such limitations, our findings suggest that a presidential debate provides an effective campaign message for enhancing young citizens' democratic attitudes and particularly for strengthening one's political information efficacy.

Notes

1. The Commission on Presidential Debates provides official viewership figures for all televised general-election presidential debates, data supplied by Nielsen Media Research (see www.debates.org). The viewing audience averaged 63.1 million for debates in 1960, 65.4 million in 1976, 80.6 million in 1980, 66.2 million in 1984, 66.2 million in 1988, 66.4 million in 1992, 41.2 million in 1996, 40.6 million in 2000, and 53.4 million in 2004.
2. The survey items reported in this study were part of a larger questionnaire that was used at each location with each session.
3. A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation using SPSS 13.0 was computed for scores on the eight items using predebate responses. Three discreet factors emerged, identified as political efficacy, trust, and cynicism and accounting for 31.1%, 24.1%, and 16.1% of the total variance, respectively. Only those factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 were considered. The rotated factor matrix loadings that were less than 0.5 were not considered. Each subscale achieved acceptable reliability levels, with Cronbach's alpha levels at +.89 for efficacy, +.64 for trust, and +.66 for cynicism. As Kerlinger and Lee (2000, pp. 662-663) note, for behavioral research, alpha values above +.60 are acceptable. A factor analysis for these eight items was also computed for Time 2 and Time 3 responses, revealing very little change from the predebate factor structure.

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Appendix

Table 1: Effects of Exposure to Presidential Debates on Engagement Attitudes and Information Efficacy

	Time 1: Predebate	Time 2: Postdebate	Time 3: Postelection
Efficacy	1.92	1.75	2.23 ^b
Trust	3.33	3.27	3.39
Cynicism	2.94	2.70 ^a	2.99 ^b
Information efficacy	3.83	4.09 ^a	4.20 ^c

- a. Indicates a significant difference between Time 1 and Time 2.
- b. Indicates a significant difference between Time 2 and Time 3.
- c. Indicates a significant difference between Time 1 and Time 3.