

***“Primary Concerns: An Investigation into the Reduction in Impact of the
Televised Debate in U.S Presidential Primary Campaigns”***

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Preface

This dissertation of 11,899 words attempts to establish whether there is a definite relationship between the number of primary debates and the amount of coverage these debates receive in the media. From this information the author can then make assessments as to the extent to which this relationship has led to a reduction in significance of the primary debate due to the reduced coverage. Beginning assessment with the 1992 Democratic campaign, the media coverage afforded to each debate is measured in the analysis of the number and size of articles written in two national newspapers. This process is repeated in a total of four campaigns and from the information gathered it is possible to conclude that there is an inverse relationship between the larger numbers of debates and the less coverage each debate receives.

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An Introduction to the Study of Debates and the Primary Campaign

There is perhaps little to compare with the pure democratic nature of the process of the debate. It is through cogent and effective argument that the issues that have affected man for millennia, and the issues that affect them today, can be contested and resolved. The principle of strong debate shaping the political landscape has resonance throughout the world, but there is, arguably, little to compare to the reverence held for the process within the United States. This depth of feeling can be traced back through U.S history to the famed series of seven debates between U.S. Representative Abraham Lincoln and Senator Stephen Douglas campaigning for an Illinois seat in the U.S Senate. It was this series of debates that brought to national attention the man who would become regarded universally as the greatest president in U.S history. However, it was a debate between two future presidents, in 1960, which really demonstrated the power that the debate process can hold in a U.S campaign, particularly when that debate is televised.

The pictures of the Kennedy-Nixon debates were beamed not only nationwide, but around the world and provided the U.S electorate with a clear demonstration of the differences between the two candidates. These debates have not only entered history as the first presidential debates held on television, they have also entered political folklore. The stories of Nixon's haggard, sickly and tired appearance, refusing makeup, Nixon's poor appearance on television was only exacerbated by the contrast with the tanned, rested and youthful Kennedy. An estimated 80 million viewers watched the first debate with the oft-cited conclusion that those listening to the debate on the radio felt that Nixon had emerged victorious, whereas the television viewers gave the debate to Kennedy. In

such a close race for the White House, it is not an overestimation to suggest that the influence that these televised debates had proved decisive in the result of the election. Debates have several important advantages over other processes, and television has several important advantages over other media. Benoit and Hanson argue that they provide the ‘electorate with an opportunity to compare the major candidates “head-to-head” as they discuss the same topics at the same time’¹. Jamieson also discussed advantages of the debate over other campaign details stating, ‘as messages running an hour or longer, debates offer a level of contact with candidates clearly unmatched in spot ads and news segments...the debates offer the most extensive and serious view of the candidates available to the electorate’².

Aligned with the history of presidential debates in the U.S, is a strong history of debating in the campaigns that determine who will actually run in the presidential election. The system of primaries has become crucial in American politics for numerous reasons. It is arguably vital in a democracy that members of a political party (particularly in a country with only two major parties) have the right to choose who represents them in the presidential election. Of course, this was a right that was essentially denied to party members until the twentieth century. Growing out of the late nineteenth century tradition of party primaries at a local level, the emergence of national primaries became a centrepiece of the Progressive movement of this period. ‘They were seen by early reformers as a way to take away the power to nominate the president from the party

¹ W.L. Benoit, & G. J. Hansen, “Presidential debate questions and the public agenda”, *Communication Quarterly*, 49, (2001) p. 131

² K. H. Jamieson, and D. S. Birdsell, *Presidential debates: The challenge of creating an informed electorate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 28

bosses and give it back to “the people”³. In 1910, history was made as Oregon became the first state to establish a presidential preference primary in which the delegates for the subsequent National Convention were obliged to support the winner of the primary at the convention. Over time, more and more states introduced this new system in order to determine the preference of its population at the national convention. However, over time the true democratic characteristics of these early primaries were, called into question. The vision of the progressive reformers such as the Direct Democracy movement that had established these early primaries became somewhat tarnished by the reality that the majority of delegates were still selected at state party conventions and caucuses, with the actual decision of who the candidate would be, made at the national convention rather than the primaries. As documented by Kendall, it was not until 1972, following the debacle of the 1968 nomination of Hubert Humphrey, that the Democratic Party’s McGovern-Fraser Commission ‘prepared guidelines to ensure that state parties would select convention delegates in a fair open and timely fashion’⁴. The Republican Party followed its counterpart soon after and the primary system that we know today was established as a genuinely democratic method for a party’s selection of its presidential candidate.

As well as becoming an important part of presidential campaigns, debates between candidates in the primaries also emerged in this period as a popular method for the party members to compare potential candidates. Although, it is worth noting that both the first broadcast (on radio) and televised primary debates preceded the Kennedy-Nixon debate

³ Kathleen E. Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries: Candidates and the Media, 1912-2000* (Westport: Praeger, 2000) p. 6

⁴ Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* p. 6

by twelve and four years respectively. Clearly, both the campaigns of the presidential race and the debates within them, warrant more interest and, indeed study, than their predecessors in the long campaign for the nomination. However, in many respects the primary campaign holds a great deal more significance, both to the electorate and those seeking to study various aspects of the campaigning process. Professor William Benoit makes an analogy of the primary process by comparing it to a semi-final of a sports competition. Both semi-finals contain one team which will advance to the final; however, in many competitions the two strongest teams do not necessarily face each other in the final. If one half of the draw is 'clearly weaker than the other, then the most exciting -and most decisive- game may well be the...semifinal, not the championship game'⁵. This analogy has proved to be true in many presidential elections; an incumbent president in a weak or unpopular position may be effectively challenged by numerous opponents. For example, in 1976 Gerald Ford was in an almost untenable position, unelected, and associated with the disgraced and impeachable Nixon, presiding over the depths of an economic downturn. Therefore, it can be argued that several of the numerous candidates competing for the Democratic nomination in 1976 could have defeated Ford just as Jimmy Carter subsequently did. Of course, hypothetical suggestions such as this are impossible to prove, but it is highly plausible that a Democrat such as Morris Udall would have won the presidency on the back of winning the nomination.

There are other reasons why the primary campaign can appear to hold a greater significance than the general campaign. For example, the candidate that emerges after the primary process in both parties then holds the influence as the sole representative of the

⁵ William L. Benoit et al. *The Primary Decision: A Functional Analysis of Debates in Presidential Primaries* (Westport: Praeger, 2002) p. 1

party in the main campaign. It is crucial for the party who is selected as they are effectively selecting the direction in which the party will head for the foreseeable future. To take the primary campaign of 2008 as an example, a Republican Party represented by John McCain will definitely be heading in a different direction in both the campaign and possible presidency than one led by Mike Huckabee, Mitt Romney or Ron Paul. Or indeed, if John McCain had been successful in his initial bid for the Republican nomination in 2000 rather than George W. Bush, the difference to the country as well as the party could have been exponential. Clearly, therefore, the primary campaign can be seen to hold a level of importance at least on a par with the general campaign if not more so. This confirms that this uniquely American system of nomination does warrant significant interest and therefore investigation. This makes the lack of attention given to the primary campaign in academic study - in comparison to the, far more studied, main campaign - highly perplexing.

The Problems of a Large Number of Debates

Speaking to *The New York Times* just as campaigning for the 2008 Democratic nomination for president was beginning, in April 2007, a full 17 months before the presidential election, Jonathon Prince, John Edwards' deputy campaign manager stated that 'there were nearly 40 requests for...the presidential candidate for whom he works, to appear at a candidate debate or forum'⁶. Coming from state Democratic parties and county Democratic committees, newspapers and television stations, unions and church groups, and black, Hispanic and Jewish Democrats; the number of opportunities for candidates to debate the issues reached it's zenith in the most recent campaign. Prince described the current campaign debate climate as a "mess" stating that, "debates are important, but in these big multicandidate races they end up not being an exchange of ideas, but just an exchange of sound bites. They have become a distraction"⁷. Other members of both parties in this campaign made similar conclusions, the communications director for Senator John McCain, Brian Jones has stated "We're getting deluged," and, "If you actually ended up saying yes to every debate, you'd have a debate a week until the Iowa caucuses"⁸. In reality this statement proved to be not far from being accurate. In the 34 week period between the first debate and the Iowa Caucus, no fewer than 27 debates were held by both parties combined.

The 2008 primary campaign was not the first where the issue of a large number of debates has been recognised as a negative feature, by candidates and commentators alike. Throughout the 1980s, the number of debates witnessed in primary campaigns for both

⁶ "Debates Losing a Bit of Luster in a Big Field". Adam Nagourney *New York Times* 04/23/2007

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

parties escalated rapidly. This reached a peak in 1988 where ‘according to Ron Brown, Chair of the Democratic National Committee, there were “something like 70 joint appearances” by the presidential candidates’⁹. Of these appearances estimated by Brown, 22 can be classified as televised debates¹⁰. This led to many questioning as to whether the larger number of debates appeared to lessen their impact. Candidates too appeared to demonstrate a reluctance to attend such a large number of debates, with the large preparation time required. Quoted in an article discussing this topic in 1988 a sponsor of a debate that year stated “I think the candidates may be a little jaded on debates”¹¹. Critics commented that voter interest had become strained, particularly due to the large number of debates that had already been held in 1987, sometimes months before the start of the primaries.

Following this criticism, Ron Brown sought to counter this by asking the candidates running for the 1992 nomination to take part in ‘only party sanctioned debates’¹². The Democrats attempted to ‘limit the number of debates to between six and eight, said Brown, to give “national focus” to the candidates’¹³. To reduce the number of debates from 22 in 1988 to such a low number proved difficult for the DNC, although the number of televised debates was successfully reduced to 13. This response to the perceived increases in the number of debates demonstrates the belief that the high debate numbers were perceived to have a negative impact on the overall campaign. However, if this view had remained constant then it would have been safe to assume that the number of debates

⁹ Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* pp. 85 - 86

¹⁰ Statistics taken from Benoit et al. *The Primary Decision* 2002 p. 134

¹¹ “Candidates Facing Series of Debates”. Andrew Rosenthal *New York Times* 01/08/88

¹² Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* p. 86

¹³ *ibid*

would remain at a constant level or possibly even be reduced in future campaigns. This was seen initially with the Republican campaign of 1996 getting close to the target suggested by Ron Brown for the Democrats with only 7 televised debates. However, by the 2000 campaign when, like 1988, both parties were holding primary campaigns due to the fact that no incumbent was to take part in the race, the number of total televised debates had spiked to 21, almost matching the heights of the much criticised 1988 campaign. The Democrats had achieved a certain degree of success in meeting the limitations suggested by the National Committee, as of the 21 debates only 8 were held for Democratic candidates.

However, all statistics surrounding the number of primary debates in all previous campaigns pale in comparison to the numbers generated in the most recent campaign, also involving races in both parties due to no incumbent. The Democrats, having been on a consistent path in reducing the number of debates throughout the 1990s, staged 22 televised debates in which a significant number of major candidates attended. Amazingly, this number equalled the number that had led to the criticism of large debate numbers in 1988, and what's more, the 1988 number was a combined total for both parties. If the televised Republican debates are added to the 2008 total then the figure reached is 39.¹⁴ Candidates have expressed a reluctance to attend such a large number of debates. Speaking in 2000, veteran Republican campaign consultant Charles Black stated that debates "take time for preparation," adding that "it's more than just showing up every evening."¹⁵ 'Having so many debates in such rapid succession means candidates may

¹⁴ Information for 2008 debates taken from the *Poynter Online Presidential Debate History Resource* found at <http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=49&aid=71327>

¹⁵ Quoted in "Debate Feel the Heat on TV", Kathy Kiely. *USA Today* 01/26/00

spend less time meeting voters and more time preparing with their handlers¹⁶. Such criticism of the high number of primary debates is the inspiration for this research, attempting to establish the extent to which a higher number of debates can reduce their influence.

¹⁶ Quoted in “Debate Feel the Heat on TV”, Kathy Kiely. *USA Today* 01/26/00

Methodology

The DNC had made a conscious effort after the 1988 campaign to reduce the number of debates after the perceived problems emerged for candidates and criticisms were made that such a large number of debates would lead to a loss of interest for the electorate. The question of lost interest is the focus of this research, hoping to draw conclusions as to whether the theories posited following the 1988 campaign have proved to hold true. If so, a hypothesis can be drawn that the greater the number of debates in a campaign, the less influence each individual debate would have on affecting the electorate.

The question of how debates influence voters and the most effective way to study this is open to contentious debate. Clearly, the principal way for a debate to influence voters and therefore an effective method for assessing their impact, is if they actually view the debate or series of debates being studied. This is the method advanced by many researching all forms of debate such as Benoit et al¹⁷, and Sipe¹⁸. Researchers make conclusions of the influence of debates by assessing opinions of a sample of viewers on both candidates and issues discussed before and after the debate in a pretest-posttest survey. This method clearly does hold merit, and the conclusions drawn do definitely confirm the assertion that debates strongly influence those who view them. However, even those whose research reaches such conclusions acknowledge that these methods do have their faults. Professor Benoit, for example, has written on the limitations of debates in that, ‘many voters do not watch them’. Adding that, ‘proliferation of cable and satellite TV, as well as the Internet, makes it easier for people who are not interested in politics to

¹⁷ Benoit et al. *The Primary Decision* 2002

¹⁸ Corey Sipe. *Televised Presidential Debates and Its Influence on Voters*. published Aug 30, 2006 found at http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/54720/televised_presidential_debates_and.html?page=5&cat=37

avoid debates'¹⁹. Evidence does suggest that fewer and fewer people are viewing primary debates. A USA Today article written at the height of the primary campaign of 2000 points out that Fox News Channel aired a Republican debate in December 1999 which drew in 'more than 1.6 million viewers'²⁰. However, the article draws comparisons to other entertainment programmes from the same week stating that '7.2 million watched the wrestling program "Smackdown!" Nielsen's [Media Research] 91st-ranked show'²¹ for the week in question. Sipe, another proponent of proving influence of debates through interviewing those who view it, states that 'those who watch news coverage of a debate, but not the debate itself, are more likely to agree with how the media perceives the election [and] the debate'²². He concedes that 'without the attention from the media about the debates, the debates probably would have little influence on voters because voters usually get their cues on what is important by what is featured on the news'²³.

It is with this in mind that the methodology of this research was formed, taking into account the fact that, with such relatively small audience figures for primary debates, the highest level of impact that debates now have on the public stems from the coverage of these debates by the media. As stated by Sipe, this coverage has a very strong influence on those who view or read it as the views of the medium are naturally transferred to the consumer. Therefore, I will attempt to determine the impact that primary debates have had, by assessing the amount of media coverage debates receive throughout a campaign. I will start with the 1992 campaign as this is the campaign which followed the

¹⁹ "Presidential Debates Matter: A Guest Post by Professor William Benoit". The Presidential Debate Blog: 08/05/08 found at <http://presidentialdebateblog.blogspot.com/2008/08/presidential-debates-matter-guest-post.html>

²⁰ "Debate Feel the Heat on TV", Kathy Kiely. *USA Today* 01/26/00

²¹ *ibid*

²² Sipe. *Televised Presidential Debates and Its Influence on Voters*. 2006

²³ *ibid*

controversial 1988 campaign where the high frequency of debates was not only criticised in the media, but also led to a conscience effort by at least one of the major political parties to reduce the number of debates in future campaigns. I will attempt to establish whether or not there has been a reduction in media coverage of debates and attempt to infer whether or not this can be related to the greater and greater number of debates witnessed from 1992 to the most recent campaign.

I have decided to make comparisons between two campaigns in which only one of the main parties held televised debates in a primary contest, 1992 (Democrats) and 1996 (Republicans), and two campaigns in which both parties held competitive primary campaigns including televised debates, 2000 and 2008. I feel that this sample provides a reasonably large period of time, 16 years, to assess whether there has been a steady reduction in the influence of primary debates. This sample also provides an equal number of campaigns competed in by both of the major parties. It is for this reason that I have chosen to omit the 2004 (also Democratic) campaign from the sample. There is a certain amount of dispute as to what can be considered a televised debate, and even what constitutes a debate. For this reason I have chosen to use the list of debates provided by Benoit et al²⁴ in the appendix of their study for the campaigns 1992, 1996 and 2000, I also followed similar criteria of selection in selection of debates myself for the 2008 campaign. Namely, selecting any debate which contained at least two of the top five leading candidates and was broadcast on a national or local television network. Many debates or forums are filmed by individual campaigns or party organisations; however these are omitted from the sample if there is no broadcast.

²⁴ Benoit et al. *The Primary Decision* 2002 p. 134 - 137

The media studied in this research will be newspapers, specifically *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The initial research plan was to supplement these publications with one local newspaper, produced in the state of the location of the debate. However, this proved impossible to achieve as the information could not be gathered for every debate, therefore it proved not feasible to include the local sample of newspapers in some debates without affecting the parity between the samples. Both newspapers that will make up my research provide an online archive, the articles on each primary debate will be located by searching for the name of the political party and major candidates participating in that debate, with the word “debate”. For example, for the 2000 Democratic primary debates I will search for “Democrat” “Gore” and “debate”. Articles will be excluded from my sample if they do not focus on the actual debate, but rather on other aspects of the campaign. This will be determined by whether there is direct reference to the debate in the headline or first paragraph of the article.

The sample of data for each debate will only assess articles that report on the debate in the 24 hours after the debate took place. Therefore if an article makes reference to more than one debate for example, only the debate that preceded the article will have the article and relevant data drawn from it added to the sample. Each debate will have data concerning the number of stories in both newspapers, the number of words used in each story, the total number of words reported on the debate. Finally, I will also note whether or not any portion of the article appeared on the front page of the newspaper, as the larger number of front page articles can be seen to be a direct indicator of the importance of the debate and therefore its influence on the reader. From this data, using the total number of televised debates in the primary campaign I can determine the average number of articles and the average number of words, written per debate. It is through this analysis that I will

attempt to establish what if any impact the number of televised debates has on their coverage in the media.

The 1992 Campaign

Beginning my analysis with the debates of 1992, this Democratic primary campaign was one which would prove crucial and arguably hold great interest for both the public and the media. As I have already explained, this campaign is an example of one in which the eventual winner would emerge through the primary process with an extremely strong chance of gaining the presidency. Bill Clinton won the Democratic nomination in 1992 so he could challenge, and ultimately defeat, President George Bush in the general election. However, it is possible that one or more of the other Democrats for example Paul Tsongas, Bob Kerrey or Jerry Brown could also have defeated Bush. There was much to separate this primary campaign from many others and provide notable coverage in the media. ‘It was the only time in a recent presidential nominating process that Iowa was not contested. The New Hampshire primary became the voters’ first verdict on the candidates’²⁵. This was a campaign of controversy, the Jennifer Flowers affair threatened to derail the Clinton campaign. A campaign of political gaffes, such as comments made by Jerry Brown to the New York Jewish community regarding the possibility of selecting the Rev. Jesse Jackson as his running mate if elected, forgetting the anti-Semitic comments made by the Reverend in a previous campaign, did derail his campaign.

Elements of the debating process in the 1992 campaign strongly differed from the campaigns that had preceded it. In comparison to the 1988 campaign, where the first debate was held in early July, over a year before the Democratic National Convention and eventual nomination, the 1992 campaign returned to the traditions of the campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s with the debates not beginning until just before the New

²⁵ “The Comeback Kid: New Hampshire Moments”, James Carville. *The Boston Globe*. 12/16/07

Hampshire primary. However, these debates came under criticism in much the same way as the previous campaign. The debate structure was called into question by journalists suggesting that these debates would fail to impact the voters. Writing in *The New York Times* a critic suggested that ‘calling on six politicians to cover every imaginable subject from tax reform to health care to Soviet nuclear arms to Japanese competition in one-minute slices guarantees sloganeering’²⁶. Describing the debates as ‘more an opportunity for little-known figures to establish their personas than to explore issues’²⁷, appears to back up the contention of another distinguishing feature of these primary debates. Kendall states that this series of debates held a distinguishing feature of being used to help ‘convey a sense of Democratic “team” with common principles, uniting in their opposition against Bush and in their advocacy of “change”’²⁸.

However, as with any primary debate, a key indicator of success is the extent to which a candidate is able to differ from their opponents in the detail of proposed policy reformation. This element of a debate is also crucial in establishing the extent to which the candidates disagree, and even come to aggressive verbal blows. Debates of this character are more likely to be reported more widely and prominently and therefore hold a greater impact. This author has established that, following the first debate of the 12th of December 1991, both the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* focussed on the negative intra-party attacks with *The Post* leading with the headline “6 Democratic Debaters Find Little To Agree On: Bush Largely Untouched As Challengers Clash”²⁹. This suggests that although Kendall characterised the 1992 debates as examples

²⁶ “Critic’s Notebook; Seeking Ways to Elevate The Presidential Race”. Walter Goodman. *The New York Times*. 12/26/91

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* p. 86

²⁹ “6 Democratic Debaters Find Little To Agree On: Bush Largely Untouched As Challengers Clash”. Dan Balz and David S. Broder. *The Washington Post*. 12/16/91

of party unity from her position as a witness to the actual debates, that the newspapers slant on the contest is one that is far more likely to highlight the differences and disputes between the candidates.

Analysing the data collected by the author (see table 1), we can see that the coverage of this first debate warranted the highest number of total words written about, or in direct relation to, the debate for the first five contested debates. As stated above, the first debate also had the impact of achieving front page coverage in both publications. This is to be expected as, in many respects, this debate was the first chance for many of the candidates to introduce themselves to a national audience. Jerry Brown, for example, used the opportunity of this first debate to ‘advertise his 1-800 number for fund-raising’³¹, also taking a leading position by influencing the questioning in this and many of the other early debates. Arguably, it was this performance and, perhaps crucially, the coverage of this performance in the media that led to Brown developing his campaign from one of an outsider whose tactics were considered a political joke, to becoming the main contender

Table 1								
1992	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	12/15/91 D	1	2	2095	1499/1231	3	4825	2
	01/19/92 D	2	1	1040/722	1192	3	2954	1
	01/31/92 D	0	2	0	1031/760	2	1791	0
	02/16/92 D	1	2	1369	1290/727	3	3386	1
	02/23/92 D	1	1	981	844	2	1825	0
	02/29/92 D	2	2	709/1906	1116/1104	4	4835	1
	03/01/92 D ³⁰	1	2	1390	4159/779	3	6328	0
	03/05/92 D	1	1	658	1053	2	1711	0
	03/15/92 D	2	2	1395/545	1161/1293	4	4394	2
	03/27/92 D	2	1	354/1027	760	3	2141	0
	03/30/92 D	2	1	923/1091	1008	3	3022	1
	04/05/92 D	2	1	1009/1087	983	3	3079	2
	04/06/92 D	2	2	1006/972	676/830	4	3484	0
Total	13					39	42,792	10
Average per Debate						3	3367	

³⁰ Two debates held on this date, one in Georgia one in Maryland. Both attended by main candidates.

³¹ Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* p. 86

to the nomination against Clinton.

It is worth noting that the third debate, held in Washington D.C received no coverage in *The New York Times*, the only point in this campaign where either newspaper failed to report on a debate. It is understandable that *The Washington Post* would be more likely to report on a debate held in the capitol although there is a strong argument to suggest that the failure of *The New York Times* to report on the content of this debate is due to the similarity of that content to the preceding debates. The headline of *The Washington Post's* lead article on this debate, "Democrats Swap Jabs On Domestic Issues: PBS Debate Includes Sharp Exchanges"³² bears many similarities to the reporting of the first debate in particular. This suggests that a series of debates that follow a similar pattern may lead to a reduction or even complete neglect in reporting of these debates. In spite of this, the debates received mostly steady coverage until the contest of the 29th of February 1992, where for the first time the total number of words written exceeded the total published after the first debate. Coupled with the coverage of the two debates the following day, by far the highest number of words written on a debate in the campaign, a total of over 11,000, were used in seven stories for all three debates combined. The fact that two debates (see note 30) were held on 1st March provides a strong reason for the large number of words written in relation to the debates. This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that two debates were held on the same day. The 1988, 2000, and 2008 campaigns all contained two debates held on a single day but these were two debates held by different parties, containing different candidates. This is the only example of a party holding two debates on the same day, in different states, for different audiences, and with three of the same candidates competing in both contests. The fact

³² "Democrats Swap Jabs On Domestic Issues: PBS Debate Includes Sharp Exchanges". E.J. Dione Jr. and Thomas B. Edsall. *The Washington Post*. 02/01/92

that two debates were held on this day should require another debate to be added to the total debates column of my research. However, as every article written the day after these debates reported on both as effectively one debate, it proved impossible to distinguish which articles and how many total words were written on each debate.

Following a period of three debates within two days, it is perhaps inevitable that the next debate in the calendar, on 5th March 1992, received the least coverage of any in this primary season. It may be the case, as with earlier debates that the similarity of the content and themes of the debate to preceding contests led to a reduction in coverage. It is definitely the case that “*The Times*” article “Debate; Economy, and Brown, Are Focus of a Democratic Round Table” did focus on many of the same themes, highlighting the subtle differences between each candidate’s prescription for the unhealthy economy. However, a simpler, and perhaps more important, interpretation of this period can be drawn in relation to the hypothesis that a high volume of debates leads to a reduction in reporting and therefore their influence. It could be argued that after such a large volume of words were written about the three debates only three days beforehand, that the possible number of words written about such a relatively narrow subject can reach saturation point. This theory is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that after a ten day gap, the next debate on 15th March 1992 warranted more than twice the number of words, twice the number of articles, two of which reached the front page, in comparison to none in the previous debate.

However, it is worth noting that this was perhaps the most heated, and therefore highly reported, debate, with questions of Bill Clinton’s electability being asked by Jerry Brown

coupled with accusations of corruption. This does appear to have a strong influence on the reporting of elements of the campaign, particularly the debates. Heated clashes are more interesting to the modern reader than civilised debate, arguments of character more widely reported than arguments of policy. This element of the media's reporting of the campaign helps to sustain their attempts to portray the series of primaries as a battle. Kendall argues that this portrayal of the campaign by the print media has a direct impact on the television news coverage, stating that 'in spite of the consistent focus of the networks on candidate clashes, none of the reporters gave the slightest hint that the media could be shaping the public's negative perception of the campaign'³³. The remaining four debates were "head to heads" between Clinton and Brown, the only two candidates remaining in a primary campaign that was only half way through. The final three contests were held in New York, ahead of the crucial primary in that state. Understandably, these debates received a large amount of coverage in *The New York Times*. But it is interesting to note the massive reduction in coverage by *The Washington Post*, in comparison to the earlier debates, once the critical, early primaries had been decided. This appears to be a theme throughout modern primary contests; Marshall makes this argument by pointing out that 'in 1992, eight of the 10 primaries mentioned most frequently in leads on the network news took place in February or March'³⁴. The modern trend of "frontloading of primaries" has been advanced as a reason for this disparity between media coverage of the earlier primaries. Therefore, the greater coverage of the earlier debates may be a factor in relation to this as opposed to the number of debates.

³³ Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* p. 186

³⁴ Thomas R. Marshall. *The News Verdict and Public Opinion during the Primaries*. (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corp, 1993) p.51

The 1996 Campaign

The first feature of the 1996 campaign which separates it from its predecessor is simply the massive reduction in the number of debates (see table 2). These seven debates were the lowest number held in a single primary campaign since 1980. As with the 1992 campaign, only one debate was contested in the year before the primary elections. However, in election year, only half the number of televised debates were held in comparison to 1992. The eventual winner of this campaign was to face an incumbent president who'd begun his campaign for re-election at an unprecedented early point with the running of television spots as early as the summer of 1995. Clinton was able to advance his national stock by shoring up his image 'and flaying Republicans for their decision on Medicare and the federal budget, the Republicans were joining in to help by beating up on each other in an unprecedented negative primary season'³⁵. The Republican campaign, in New Hampshire particularly, was characterised by political advertising scholar Pat Devlin as 'the most costly and most negative in history'³⁶. There is an argument to suggest that this may have been a reason for the limitation of the number of debates, with members of the Republican National Committee seeking to avoid potentially damaging conflicts to any candidate who emerged to seek the presidency in November. It could also be argued that the well known weaknesses of the Republican frontrunner (and eventual nominee) Senator Bob Dole on the debating stage led to a lower number. Dole himself only attended four of the debates, leaving him, as the frontrunner, open to attack without retort in the other three.

³⁵ Lynda Lee Kaid. "Videostyle and the Effects of the 1996 Presidential Campaign Advertising". In Robert E. Denton. *The 1996 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective*. (Westport: Praeger, 1998) p. 146

³⁶ Quoted in *ibid*

Table 2								
1996	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	10/11/95 R	1	1	1454	1200	2	2654	0
	01/06/96 R	1	1	733	669	2	1402	0
	01/13/96 R	1	2	1731	1089/771	3	3591	1
	02/15/96 R	2	3	1728/1262	1397/810/762	5	5959	2
	02/22/96 R	2	1	1917/1227	1070	3	4214	1
	02/29/96 R	4	3	1189/1232/746/145	1472/550/1448	7	6782	3
	03/03/96 R	2	1	1625/1027	1441	3	4093	2
Total	7					25	28,695	9
Average per Debate						3.6	4099	

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Looking at the above table, initial examination of figures in the section “Average per Debate” reveals that the suggestion that the fewer the number of debates, the greater the media interest is confirmed by the evidence here. Both the average total stories and the average total word count have increased in comparison to the data collected for the 1992 campaign. I feel that the number of words written on these debates as a contrast to the previous campaign is the most significant difference, with every debate having an average of over 700 words more written. The large number of words written throughout this campaign reached a particularly high level in the fourth and sixth debates of the (15th and 29th February 1996), both of which were attended by Bob Dole. Therefore, there is a strong argument to suggest that the massive coverage given to these two debates was because the media was effectively limited in the number of debates on which it could report. Combined, these two debates were reported on the following day in the two newspapers eight times, five of which made it onto the front page where they hold the greatest impact for the reader.

However, it should also be noted that the content of these two debates, as in previous campaigns, may be the principal reason for such a high amount of media coverage. As stated above, this campaign was known for being particularly negative and both these debates may have been reported on so heavily because they displayed this characteristic. The issue of “attack ads” particularly dominated both debates, with the debate of 15th February notable for each candidate’s criticism of their opponent’s negative advertising. *The New York Times* reported on this stating, ‘The forum turned negative almost immediately, when Mr. [Lamar] Alexander, seconds into his opening statement, sought to set himself apart by accusing Mr. Dole of running negative television commercials’³⁷. However, it was not until the debate of the 29th of February (Dole was absent for the fifth debate) that this issue of negative advertising returned to dominate the debate. If anything, the original nature of the debate format can arguably be a major reason for the seven articles written about this debate in two papers, three of which made the front page. As described in *The Washington Post*, ‘under a unique format designed by a South Carolina business group, the candidates were forced to watch and comment on their own negative ads’³⁸. Arguably, the nature of this debate not only achieved higher coverage by reporters writing on the originality of the format, but also because the format encouraged personal attacks throughout the debate, which, as we’ve seen, often leads to greater coverage.

However, I would assert that if the negative debates had continued along the same lines, with the same criticisms of candidate’s character and/or policy, then, as seen in 1992, the

³⁷ “The Debate; GOP Rivals Clash Over Attack Ads”. Richard L. Berke. *The New York Times*. 02/16/96

³⁸ “Rivals Take Aim in Carolina Debate: Angry Exchanges Dominate GOP Forum”. Dan Balz and Thomas B. Edsall. *The Washington Post*. 03/01/96

coverage would have decreased as the same issues would have been addressed in the debates. It is, clearly, impossible to know for certain, but there is a strong argument to suggest that the higher level of coverage seen on average for each debate in this campaign would not have been at such a level if the number of debates had increased. The rise in coverage of these debates is perhaps even more significant when it is compared to comments and criticisms made of the coverage in the 1992 campaign. One commentator, Chris Black of *The Boston Globe*, stated that ‘in 1980 “a reporter could write a 1,200 word article on a candidate going nowhere, but now [in 1992] 200 words would be a lot”’.³⁹ This suggests that the higher coverage of the 1996 campaign was even bucking a trend in the media, highlighted in the previous campaign. Arguably, this places even greater significance on the low number of debates in this campaign as a reason for this greater coverage.

³⁹ Joshua Meyrowitz. “The Problem of Getting on the Media Agenda: A Case Study in Competing Logics of Campaign Coverage.” In Kathleen E. Kendall, ed. *Presidential Campaign Discourse: Strategic Communication Problems*. (Albany: University of New York Press, 1995) p. 63

The 2000 Campaign

The 2000 campaign was the first since 1988 where, without an incumbent president to run against, both parties ran competitive primary campaigns, including holding a significant number of debates. As discussed in an earlier chapter, this is the second highest number of total debates held by both parties combined in a single primary campaign. The Democrats had arguably been successful in achieving the target set out by DNC Chair Ron Brown to ‘limit the number of debates to between six and eight’⁴⁰. Looking at the results (see table 3) we can see that of the twenty-one televised debates, only eight were competed by the democratic candidates, incumbent Vice President Al Gore and former Senator and NBA star Bill Bradley. Therefore, it is also interesting to note the large increase in debates held for Republican candidates from the 1996 campaign that preceded it. The number of Republican debates in the 2000 campaign (see table 4) almost doubled, increasing from seven to thirteen.

This increase in the number of debates is difficult to categorise with any particular reason. There is a strong argument to suggest that the increase is due to the fact that, with both parties holding competitive primaries, there is an element of competition between the parties to ensure maximum exposure in comparison to their rivals. If the Democratic field of candidates had been any larger than just two, it’s quite plausible that they too would have held more debates, particularly if the presumptive nominee, Al Gore had faced a stronger challenge. The early Republican debates of this campaign differed to those in the 1996 campaign, particularly in the early contests in that they were nowhere

⁴⁰ Kendall. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries* p. 86

near as negative or dominated by personal attacks in the same way. *The New York Times* reported on the first Republican debate describing the fact that there were ‘no raised voices in the hour-long session as the contenders, sitting casually in a semicircle, offered mostly like-minded prescriptions on education, taxes, trade and moral values’⁴¹. This reduction in the negative personal intra-party attacks can be seen as a key indicator for the increase in Republican debates. This Republican campaign arguably shares more similarities with the early debates of the Democratic campaign of 1992, with the same sense of a united party against the common foe of the Clinton (and therefore Gore) administration.

Table 3								
2000	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	10/22/99 R	1	1	977	838	2	1815	0
	10/27/99 D	1	0	1436	0	1	1436	2
	10/28/99 R	2	2	1065/1349	522/1130	4	4066	1
	11/21/99 R	1	1	530	502	2	1032	0
	12/02/99 R	3	2	1587/1624/956	1185/1037	5	6389	2
	12/06/99 R	2	2	1484/1272	1021/939	4	4716	1
	12/13/99 R	2	1	1609/1547	1131	3	4287	2
	12/17/99 D	2	2	1571/1775	1007/873	4	5226	0
	12/19/99 D	3	2	1862/784/863	1214/821	5	5544	2
	01/05/00 D	1	2	1596	1297/802	3	3695	2
	01/06/00 R	3	1	1691/864/473	1375	4	4403	1
	01/07/00 R	1	1	1395	1175	2	2570	0
	01/08/00 D	2	1	1440/94	1159	3	2693	0
	01/10/00 R	1	1	1306	1568	2	2874	0
	01/15/00 R	1	1	1544	1113	2	2654	0
	01/17/00 D	1	1	1279	1116	2	2395	0
	01/26/00 R	2	2	1042/852	1356/976	4	4226	1
	02/15/00 R	2	1	1452/778	1430	3	3660	2
	02/21/00 D	3	1	1502/928/256	1293	4	3979	2
	03/01/00 D	1	1	1276	1374	2	2650	1
	03/02/00 R	1	1	1027	1283	2	2310	1
Total	21					65	72,620	20
Average per Debate						3.1	3458	

⁴¹ “5 G.O.P. Hopefuls Kick Off Debates”. Richard L. Berke. *The New York Times*. 10/23/99

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When comparing the total number of debates for both parties in this campaign to those in my research sample for previous campaigns we can see that the 1996 campaign with only seven debates had a larger amount of media coverage both in relation to the average number of articles written per debate and the average number of total words written. This does confirm the hypothesis that the lower the number of debates in a primary campaign, the more coverage it receives within the media. However, this hypothesis would also suggest that the 21 debates of the 2000 primary campaign would receive less coverage than the 13 debates of the 1992 campaign. A comparison of tables 1 and 3 demonstrates that this is not the case. In this comparison, the average number of articles written per debate and the average number of total words written are higher in the 2000 campaign with eight more debates than the campaign eight years prior. An initial assessment suggests that the greater number of debates in the 2000 campaign did not have a negative impact on the amount of coverage it received in the two publications I am assessing.

Table 4								
2000	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	10/22/99 R	1	1	977	838	2	1815	0
	10/28/99 R	2	2	1065/1349	522/1130	4	4066	1
	11/21/99 R	1	1	530	502	2	1032	0
	12/02/99 R	3	2	1587/1624/956	1185/1037	5	6389	2
	12/06/99 R	2	2	1484/1272	1021/939	4	4716	1
	12/13/99 R	2	1	1609/1547	1131	3	4287	2
	01/06/00 R	3	1	1691/864/473	1375	4	4403	1
	01/07/00 R	1	1	1395	1175	2	2570	0
	01/10/00 R	1	1	1306	1568	2	2874	0
	01/15/00 R	1	1	1544	1113	2	2654	0
	01/26/00 R	2	2	1042/852	1356/976	4	4226	1
	02/15/00 R	2	1	1452/778	1430	3	3660	2
	03/02/00 R	1	1	1027	1283	2	2310	1
Total	13					42	45,002	11
Average per debate						3.2	3462	31

Table 5								
2000	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	10/27/99 D	1	0	1436	0	1	1436	1
	12/17/99 D	2	2	1571/1775	1007/873	4	5226	0
	12/19/99 D	3	2	1862/784/863	1214/821	5	5544	2
	01/05/00 D	1	2	1596	1297/802	3	3695	2
	01/08/00 D	2	1	1440/94	1159	3	2693	0
	01/17/00 D	1	1	1279	1116	2	2395	0
	02/21/00 D	3	1	1502/928/256	1293	4	3979	2
	03/01/00 D	1	1	1276	1374	2	2650	1
Total	8					24	27,618	8
Average per Debate						3	3452	

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However, if the debates are split into two groups, one for each party (see tables 4 and 5), then we can see that the number of debates for the Republican party in 2000 matched the number for the Democrats in 1992. And as discussed earlier, the Democrats had been successful in reducing this debate count to just eight. Therefore, there is a strong argument to suggest that the coverage of the 1992 Democratic and 2000 Republican campaigns should be approximately the same because the same numbers of debates were contested. We can see that the 2000 Republican campaign received an average of just 0.2 more stories per debate than the 1992 series of debates. This tiny difference does seem to confirm a similarity between the coverage of the same number of debates in two different campaigns.

That said, if this hypothesis was to follow through, then the coverage received by the Democratic campaign of 2000 with just eight debates would be expected to be greater than either its Republican counterpart in that year or its campaign of 1992. The coverage would be expected to be on a par with the high levels reached in the 1996 Republican campaign with an average of 3.6 articles written per debate. However, not only did the

eight Democratic debates receive less coverage than the seven Republican debates of 1996, they also received less coverage than their Republican counterparts with their 13 debates in the same campaign. The coverage received an average of three articles written per debate, the same amount of coverage received by the 1992 campaign with five more debates. The failure of the 2000 Democratic primary campaign with such a relatively low number of debates to achieve a higher level of media coverage suggests that the relationship between debate numbers and media coverage may not be as strong as the initial hypothesis suggests.

However, it is worth noting the individual characteristics of the Democratic campaign in 2000, these factors do go some way as to providing reasons for the lack of media attention, particularly for the debates. In this case, it is possible to argue that the same reason for the low number of debates is also the reason for their reduced coverage. As discussed, the nomination of Al Gore in 2000 was almost confirmed straight after Bill Clinton's General Election victory of 1996. As Ron Faucheux wrote in 1999, in an article advising Bill Bradley how to defeat Gore, 'the vice president's name recognition, party acceptance, governmental experience, fundraising ability and political support [were], taken together, a formidable package'⁴². Comparing the two parties' nomination races in 2000, *The New York Times* stated that 'the Democratic race was far less climactic because while Mr. Bradley emerged as a threat last fall,...that spurt of popularity never translated to the voting booth'. Adding that 'Mr. Bradley,...was shut out by Mr. Gore in

⁴²Ron Faucheux. "Bradley could cause primary problems for Gore." *Campaigns & Elections* 20, no. 4 (May 1999): 7. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 9, 2008)

every contest'⁴³. Therefore, the arguably finite amount of media coverage given to debates throughout a primary campaign would be more likely to focus on the campaign where there was more of a “race” element, as opposed to one which was considered by many to be over before it started. This would not be the case in the Democratic nomination race eight years later.

⁴³ “The 2000 Campaign: The Overview; Gore and Bush Triumph Nationwide, Putting Nominations in their Grasp”. Richard L. Berke. *The New York Times*. 03/08/00

The 2008 Campaign

Although the campaign of 2000 was notable for a return to the high numbers of debates, falling one short of the high of 22 in 1988, no campaign in U.S history has witnessed the high number of debates, over such a long period, as the most recent campaign for the 2008 nominations for president. In contrast to the 2000 primary season, this was a more open campaign for both parties. This may be due to the fact that, for the first time since the birth of the modern primary campaign in 1972, neither party had either an incumbent nor a truly presumptive nominee, for example, an incumbent Vice President such as George H. W. Bush in 1988 and Al Gore in 2000. Arguably as a consequence of this open nature of the campaigns, the total number of televised debates by both parties combined (see table 6) reach the highest point in U.S history at 39. Both parties held more debates in a single campaign than ever before, the Republicans with 17 (see table 7) and the Democrats with 22 (see table 8). The total of 22 televised debates all attended by at least two of the Democratic frontrunners in this campaign supersedes the number of debates competed in by both parties in the 2000 campaign. Clearly, with such a high number of debates in the primary calendar, the hypothesis regarding the number of debates and the subsequent media coverage would suggest that this campaign would see the lowest media coverage and therefore the individual debates would have less impact. Looking at this information in table 6 we can see that the average number of articles written per debate is just 2.3, that is nearly a whole article less per debate than both the 2000 and 1992 campaigns, and over one article less than the 1996 campaign.

Table 6								
2008	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	04/26/07 D	1	2	1298	1117/746	3	3161	1
	05/03/07 R	1	1	1287	1200	2	2487	1
	05/15/07 R	1	1	27	1184	2	1211	1
	06/03/07 D	1	1	1279	1347	2	2626	1
	06/05/07 R	1	1	1281	1285	2	2566	1
	06/28/07 D	1	1	981	1259	2	2240	1
	07/23/07 D ⁴⁴	2	3	918/822	1255/911/613	5	4519	1
	08/04/07 D	1	1	848	1121	2	1969	0
	08/05/07 R	1	1	1078	1255	2	2333	1
	08/07/07 D	1	2	1114	1156	2	2270	0
	08/09/07 D ⁴⁵	0	1	0	1103	1	1103	0
	08/19/07 D	1	1	1035	1080	2	2115	0
	09/05/07 R	1	1	1116	1263	2	2379	1
	09/09/07 D ⁴⁶	1	1	1138	867	2	2005	0
	09/12/07 D ⁴⁷	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	09/17/07 R	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	09/20/07 D	0	1	0	1281	1	1281	0
	09/26/07 D	1	1	1332	1271	2	2603	1
	09/27/07 R	1	1	791	887	2	1678	0
	10/09/07 R	2	2	1164/396	1070/889	4	3519	2
	10/21/07 R	1	1	1288	1286	2	2574	1
	10/30/07 D	2	1	1417/530	1218	3	3165	2
	11/15/07 D	3	1	1309/559/156	1373	4	3397	2
	11/28/07 R ⁴⁸	2	2	1223/843	1354/452	4	3872	2
	12/09/07 R ⁴⁹	1	1	1400	764	2	2164	1
	12/12/07 R	1	1	762	1113	2	1875	0
	12/13/07 D	1	1	1023	1041	2	2064	0
	01/05/08 D	1	1	1320	1369	2	2689	2
	01/05/08 R	2	1	898/1591*	1202	3	3691	2
	01/06/08 R	1	1	1002	55	2	1057	0
	01/10/08 R	1	1	1173	1208	2	2381	0
	01/15/08 D	1	1	1124	1286	2	2410	1
	01/21/08 D	1	2	1183	1426/1013	3	3622	2
	01/24/08 R	1	1	1153	1188	2	2341	1
	01/30/08 R	1	1	994	1024	2	2018	1
	01/31/08 D	1	1	1552	1401	2	2953	2
	02/21/08 D ⁵⁰	2	1	1431/690	836	3	2957	1
	02/26/08 D	2	1	1549/276	1498	3	3323	2
	04/16/08 D	3	2	1558/740/648	1512/845	5	5500	2
Total	39					90	96,118	36
Average per						2.3	2465	

⁴⁴ Debate conducted in partnership with *YouTube*.

⁴⁵ Debate focussing on single issue of Gay Rights

⁴⁶ Debate focussing on Latino issues, translated into Spanish

⁴⁷ Debate a unique “Mash-up” filmed and broadcast but able to access online in future

⁴⁸ Debate conducted in partnership with *YouTube*

⁴⁹ Debate translated into Spanish

⁵⁰ Debate hosted by *MTV* and *MySpace*

Debate Table								
2008	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	05/03/07 R	1	1	1287	1200	2	2487	1
	05/15/07 R	1	1	27	1184	2	1211	1
	06/05/07 R	1	1	1281	1285	2	2566	1
	08/05/07 R	1	1	1078	1255	2	2333	1
	09/05/07 R	1	1	1116	1263	2	2379	1
	09/17/07 R	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	09/27/07 R	1	1	791	887	2	1678	0
	10/09/07 R	2	2	1164/396	1070/889	4	3519	2
	10/21/07 R	1	1	1288	1286	2	2574	1
	11/28/07 R	2	2	1223/843	1354/452	4	3872	2
	12/09/07 R	1	1	1400	764	2	2164	1
	12/12/07 R	1	1	762	1113	2	1875	0
	01/05/08 R	2	1	898/1591	1202	3	3691	2
	01/06/08 R	1	1	1002	55	2	1057	0
	01/10/08 R	1	1	1173	1208	2	2381	0
	01/24/08 R	1	1	1153	1188	2	2341	1
	01/30/08 R	1	1	994	1024	2	2018	1
Total	17					37	38,146	15
Average per debate						2.1	2244	

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Similarly, we can see that the average number of words written per debate at just 2465 is over 1000 words less than the other campaigns studied, with the exception of the 1992 campaign where it is still 902 words less. These results do appear to confirm the assertion that there is a limit to how much a newspaper can expect to cover a large number of debates in a primary campaign. As has been discovered throughout this research, many debates repeat the same themes, arguments and sound bites as those that have been seen, and reported on, before and will be seen, but perhaps not reported on in the future. Writing 23 debates into the extensive debating season in November 2007, a *New York Times* article wrote of ‘yet another debate’⁵¹, adding that ‘Amid all this...confusion, it

⁵¹ “Op-Ed Contributors: Candidates in a Box”. David Brooks and Ben Schott. *The New York Times*. 11/16/07

becomes ever harder to keep the candidates and their traits clear in one's mind⁵². The decision by one of the major candidates, and eventual nominee, Barack Obama not to attend every debate also demonstrates an apparent reduction in their significance for candidates as well as the public. An announcement made by campaign manager David Plouffe in August 2007 stated that “Unfortunately, we simply cannot run the kind of campaign we want and need to, engaging with voters in the early states and February 5, if our schedule is dictated by dozens of forums and debates”⁵³. Plouffe goes on to suggest that the high number of debates does not provide voters with the information they require on every candidate and that “ultimately, the one group left out of the current schedule is the voters, and they are the ones who ask the toughest questions and most deserve to have those questions answered face to face”⁵⁴. However, this statement of intent should perhaps be viewed more in the category of campaign rhetoric as, in spite of this pledge, Obama only turned down an invitation to one of the 22 Democratic debates, on 20th September 2007.

However, the issue of debate format, particularly with the idea of attempting to make the debates more voter inclusive, is one which did come to dominate this debate campaign. In many respects, it can be argued that the numerous attempts by both parties, but particularly the Democrats, to place the candidates in innovative environments,

⁵² *ibid*

⁵³ Quoted in “Obama to Turn Down Additional Fall Debates”. Mike Allen. *Politico* 08/18/07 found at <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0807/5440.html>

⁵⁴ *ibid*

Table 8								
2008	Date of Debate	New York Times Stories	Washington Post Stories	Word Count NY/T	Word Count W/P	Total Stories	Total Word Count	Number of Front Page Stories
	04/26/07 D	1	2	1298	1117/746	3	3161	1
	06/03/07 D	1	1	1279	1347	2	2626	1
	06/28/07 D	1	1	981	1259	2	2240	1
	07/23/07 D	2	3	918/822	1255/911/613	5	4519	1
	08/04/07 D	1	1	848	1121	2	1969	0
	08/07/07 D	1	2	1114	1156	2	2270	0
	08/09/07 D	0	1	0	1103	1	1103	0
	08/19/07 D	1	1	1035	1080	2	2115	0
	09/09/07 D	1	1	1138	867	2	2005	0
	09/12/07 D	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	09/20/07 D	0	1	0	1281	1	1281	0
	09/26/07 D	1	1	1332	1271	2	2603	1
	10/30/07 D	2	1	1417/530	1218	3	3165	2
	11/15/07 D	3	1	1309/559/156	1373	4	3397	2
	12/13/07 D	1	1	1023	1041	2	2064	0
	01/05/08 D	1	1	1320	1369	2	2689	2
	01/15/08 D	1	1	1124	1286	2	2410	1
	01/21/08 D	1	2	1183	1426/1013	3	3622	2
	01/31/08 D	1	1	1552	1401	2	2953	2
	02/21/08 D	2	1	1431/690	836	3	2957	1
	02/26/08 D	2	1	1549/276	1498	3	3323	2
	04/16/08 D	3	2	1558/740/648	1512/845	5	5500	2
Total	22					53	58,022	21
Average per Debate						2.4	2637	

answering questions often on individual topics or policy areas, is a direct result of the waning interest in the standard debate, particularly in such high numbers. These new formats, (see table 6 footnotes 44-50) can definitely be seen to be experiments with the traditional debate. Perhaps the most well reported and therefore influential of these experiments were the *YouTube* debates designed to connect the candidates in their debating forums to the public and pressure them to answer the questions that the electorate wanted answering. Members of the public submitted videos to the debate co-sponsors, *CNN*, with selected questions being played directly to the candidates. Looking at the information in table 6 we can see that the media coverage of the first *YouTube*

debate for the Democrats on the 23rd of July is far greater than the debates around it. The total number of words written about this debate, at over 4500 is the second highest total of the debate calendar, only coming behind the final debate between the Obama and Hillary Clinton. The focus of all of these articles was placed on the originality of the format of the debate, with one *New York Times* article going so far as to critique that the process was a “Novel Debate Format, but the Same Old Candidates”⁵⁵, adding in the body of the article that despite the new set-up ‘candidates frequently lapsed into their talking points, and there was little actual debate among them’⁵⁶. It is also worth noting that although the Republican *YouTube* debate held some months later on 28th November received the highest words written per debate in their campaign, it received fewer words than the Democratic *YouTube* debate, and one less article was written. This perhaps suggests that the perceived novelty surrounding the originality of the format of the debate was wearing off by its second outing.

Other developments in the style and format of debates were also attempted by both parties in an attempt to generate more interest in the campaign, to appeal to specific groups of voters, or simply to present the façade of parties which were eager to modernise and accept the technological revolutions of the 21st Century. This was achieved with varying degrees of success. The most obvious example of an attempt to embrace new technologies in this campaign was the Democratic debate of 12th September. This, however, is also the example of the joint least amount of coverage received by any debate, not only in this campaign, but in all the campaigns studied in this

⁵⁵ “Novel Debate Format, but the Same Old Candidates”. Patrick Healy and Jeff Zeleny. *The New York Times*. 07/24/07

⁵⁶ *ibid*

research sample. No articles were written by either publication on the debate “Mash-up”, filmed and broadcast, but with the added original online option of the audience able to pick topics of discussion themselves and chose the candidates they wished to hear debate. This was achieved through a series of pre-recorded answers and rebuttals, which, for the format to work, would have to be anything but spontaneous. This is then, perhaps the worst example of an attempt to modernise the debate in order to generate interest. It is worth noting that this “Mash-up” was referred to in future stories relating to other debates, but it failed to meet the research criteria of being the main focus of an article the day after the broadcast of the debate.

In addition, there were three debates held to address the issues of specific constituencies for the first time this campaign, (debates sponsored by and focussing on the political issues of African Americans have been seen in previous campaigns). Both parties held debates that were translated into Spanish with the main focus to be Latino issues and the Democrats held a debate where the sole focus was the issue of Gay Rights. All of these debates failed to achieve the high levels of media coverage that followed the *YouTube* debates. All three debates’ average words written were below the average for the whole debate season, with the Democratic debate focussing on the issue of Gay Rights only written about in one *Washington Post* story, giving it a total coverage of just 1103 words. This campaign of 2008 demonstrates, not only the reduced amount of coverage that can be seen from a primary campaign with such a high number of debates, but also demonstrates the attempts by both parties to generate interest in this long debate season through new debate formats, with, it is fair to say, only limited success.

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Conclusions Drawn from this Research

The results of the research conducted and analysed in this work appear to confirm the assertion that, if, in a primary campaign, there are more televised debates, these debates will be reported on in the media less than campaigns with fewer debates. Of the campaigns assessed, the competition which boasted the lowest number of debates (1996), did achieve the highest level of media coverage for them. Inversely, the campaign that included by far the greatest number of televised debates (2008) did demonstrate that, on average each debate was reported on far less than the previous campaigns studied. In short, more debate deliver lower coverage which in turn creates less impact

Clearly, there are criticisms that can be made of both the method used in this research and even conclusions drawn. Many scholars that study the influence that debates can have will point to the very noticeable impact that debates have on those that watch them. The author does not seek to argue with the assertion that debates have been proven to educate and influence their viewers. However, as has been admitted by those who study debates in this way, the numbers who actually do view debates are dwindling, therefore greater significance is placed on the reporting of these debates in the media. This significance is heightened when you recognise the individual take that an article can present about a debate, therefore transferring these views to the reader. It is for this reason that I believe the study of the coverage of these debates is a highly effective method for gauging the relative influence each debate has indirectly had on the public.

However, to draw complete conclusions as to the resolution of the hypothesis proposed in this research, a far larger study would have to be attempted, not only taking into account the study of more newspaper publications, but also the influence these debates hold in other forms of media. The development of 24 hour rolling television news in the 1990s for example could, if analysed, demonstrate a massive increase in the coverage the debates studied here over the time period, possibly peaking with the most recent campaign. Particularly when you take into account the fact that one of the main reasons for the huge increases in debate numbers over this period is the large number of debates that are sponsored by such networks devoted exclusively to news. Similarly, the expansion of the news media onto the internet throughout the 1990s and 2000s could also be taken into account as an area where coverage of debates does not necessarily decrease as the number of those debates increases.

The author does not wish to suggest that the process of debates in the modern political campaign does not hold merit. It is a pre-requisite element to any U.S campaign at almost all levels of government and the act of debating does allow the public to make a clear comparison between those who seek their vote and may, ultimately, lead the nation. The goal of this research is to demonstrate that it can be proved that, in many respects, the higher number of debates seen in more recent campaigns does not necessarily lead to a comparable increase in media attention to allow the public to make more informed decisions. It is difficult to imagine that the high number of debates witnessed in the 2008 campaign will be reduced in any future primary races. However, the advances and experiments made in that campaign may become more the norm in the years to come. So,

although not necessarily leading to greater media coverage, at least debates may become more relevant by allowing members of the public for example to quiz the candidates on issues that are relevant to them. Perhaps it is not the volume of debates that has led to their reduction in influence, but more the evolution of these debates into opportunities to repeat sound-bites or make personal attacks on their opponent's character. The U.S has a great tradition of debate, one that started with Lincoln and Douglass. The conclusions of this research suggest that this tradition is in danger of fading away as the desire to debate in such large numbers chokes any impact that they may have in modern primary campaigns. Vice President Hubert Humphrey stated that "freedom is hammered out on the anvil of discussion...and debate". Evidence here suggests that, as the anvil becomes larger, its power is definitely reduced.

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