

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: UPSETTING AND REINFORCING PREDISPOSITIONS

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The Presidential debates continue to be disputed as an effective arena for candidates to share their ideas and personality directly with the American public. Often, the candidates hope that through this forum, they may have some impact on voters' decisions on election day. Through polls taken by Chilton Research Services for ABC News the nights before and immediately after the first presidential debate in St. Louis (October 11, 1992) and the last presidential debate in East Lansing (October 19, 1992), the study tested whether there was a change in candidate preference for both "predisposed", or those who have already selected a candidate, and "undecided" voters. In addition, this study raises the question of whether media pundits and news stories may also influence public opinion through their post-debate analyses, or might get their own cues from that public opinion. To do this, the media analyses following the first presidential debate were examined and then juxtaposed to polls which gauged "who won the debate." Such polls were administered the night of and the night following the first debate.

Past research reveals a fairly consistent effect regarding changes in candidate preference following a Presidential debate. Although some research shows that candidates can benefit from their performance in the debates (Joslyn, 1984), most attitude changes of the electorate are very slight, particularly among voters who have a predisposition (Abramowitz, 1978; Geer, 1988; Lanoue, 1991; Payne, Golden, Marlier, & Ratzan, 1989; Wall, Golden & James, 1988). Yet, even though candidate expectations tend to be reinforced, there can sometimes be "unexpected victories" in single debates, such as Gary Hart's performance in the Democratic debates of 1984, which gave him greater exposure, thus providing information, persuasion and strategy that are crucial to the candidate for public support (Popkin, 1991).

Recent studies suggest that such "victories" may influence undecided voters, who appear to change their preferences as a result of the debate (Chaffee, 1978; Geer, 1988). But other data reveal that largely voters' opinions of the candidates did not change much (Newport & Gallup, 1992), revealing that debates are

more confirmatory than persuasive (Payne et al, 1989).

In examining the secondary issue of the effect on public opinion by news analysts, many researchers advocate the position that the media may influence voter knowledge and preferences (Becker, 1978, Lang & Lang, 1979, Chaffee, 1980, Marsh, 1984, Kinder & Sears, 1985, Jamieson, 1988). Reports of changing opinions can affect voters in a "bandwagon" effect (Marsh, 1984). However, Kraus found that the media primarily *reinforce* voting predispositions through their analyses (Kraus, 1988).

Although the aforementioned studies have considered the question of debate impact, this study exploring the 1992 debates is unique. First of all, the methodology of interviews with randomly selected respondents allows for a closer approximation of the general population than any of the previous studies, which often used the subgroup of students as their base for comparison (Lanoue, 1991; Lanoue & Schrott, 1989; Payne et al, 1989; Wall et al, 1989). By questioning the general population in their own homes, the study preserves ecological validity. Second, the advantage of this particular study is its immediate reaction to the debates via a telephone call made within thirty minutes of the debate's finishing. This instantaneous data collection can isolate as much as possible the expected news coverage bias to reveal any shifts in the net outcome of public opinion toward those candidates involved with the election.

Influence of Debate on Candidate Preference

Method

Data collection. The data sources for this portion of the study were the ABC News Daily Tracking Poll and the ABC News Debate Polls conducted immediately following the first presidential debate held on October 11 and the third presidential debate held on October 19.

Recruitment of the debate viewers. Using a national probability sample, ABC News conducted a daily tracking study of 500 registered voters to measure candidate preference, likelihood of voting, and other issues from October 6th through election eve, November 2nd. Between October 8th and October 10th, as part of the tracking poll we began recruiting registered voters to watch the first debate on October

11. Once a respondent agreed to be called after the debate, his/her first name, phone number, demographic information, likelihood of voting, and candidate preference were stored in the post-debate data file. This methodology was repeated on October 16-18 for the final debate on October 19th.

Agreement to be called back was very high for each debate we covered. In the recruiting phase for the first debate, over three-quarters of the registered voters contacted (77%; n = 1160) were willing to be called back. Similar agreement levels were achieved for the final debate on October 19th (75%; n = 1130).

Post-Debate Survey. Immediately following each debate, 85 interviewers attempted to call the recruited respondents. The respondents were asked just four questions:

- Did you watch any of the debate this evening? ("No" responses terminated)
- Did you watch most of the debate or only part of it?
- Who, in your opinion won the debate?
- Suppose the election were being held today, for whom would you vote?

Data analysis. To ascertain the significance of movement in candidate preference, we ran the McNemar chi-square on the data collected before and after each debate. To determine any additional voter influence, analysis by perception of debate winner was made through a McNemar chi-square and a chi-square test for independence between debate winner and "change". The dichotomous variable "change" represented whether there was a difference in candidate preference before and after the debate in question.

Results

Debate 1. The post-debate survey results for the first debate show a slight downward movement from pre-debate presidential preference to post-debate preference for both George Bush and Bill Clinton among debate viewers. Meanwhile, Ross Perot's level of support more than doubled. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1: Overall Presidential preference per debate (debate viewers)

CANDIDATE	1st Debate (10/11) ^a		Last Debate (10/19) ^b	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Bush	35%	32%	30%	29%
Clinton	48%	46%	52%	49%
Perot	6%	15%	11%	20%
Other/Neither	8% ¹	6%	2%	*
Undecided	3%	1%	5%	2%

¹ On the first night of data collection (Pre-debate), the categories "other" and "neither" were separate.

Table 2 shows from where Perot gained support. Like Bush and Clinton supporters, most of Perot's pre-debate supporters stayed with their candidate after the debate. Over one-third of the pre-

debate undecided group switched to Perot following the debate, compared to fewer undecideds who moved to Clinton and Bush. Such results are significant at $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2: Candidate preference before and after 1st debate

POST-DEBATE	***PRE-DEBATE PREFERENCE***					Total
PREF.	Bush	Clinton	Perot	Other/Nei.	Undec.	
Bush	84%	1%	10%	19%	6%	32%
Clinton	3%	89%	5%	23%	23%	46%
Perot	8%	8%	80%	27%	35%	15%
Oth/Nei	5%	2%	5%	23%	24%	6%
Undec.	1%	-	-	8%	12%	1%

$\chi^2 = 49.00$ $p < 0.001$ $df = 10$ $n = 624$ $* < 0.5\%$

Who won the debate. Our survey shows that subjects considered Clinton (28%) the winner of the debate, followed by Perot (24%) and finally Bush (19%). Twenty-six percent of the respondents called the debate a draw.

Interestingly, less than half of those who thought Perot won after the debate would vote for him. That result contrasts with nearly all of those who both thought Bush or Clinton won and would support their respective candidate. The McNemar test reveals that these results are significant. (See Table 3.)

TABLE 3: Candidate Preference by perceived debate winner^a

Winner	Debate 1 ^b			Debate 3 ^c		
	Bush	Clin.	Perot	Bush	Clin.	Perot
Post-deb. pref.						
Bush	94%	3%	16%	93%	2%	14%
Clinton	4%	93%	34%	3%	92%	31%
Perot	2%	2%	42%	3%	5%	55%
Other/Nei.	0%	2%	7%	0%	0%	0%
Undecided	0%	0%	1%	1%	*%	1%

^a Significance run for candidates only

^b n = 455, df = 3 ^c n = 595, df = 3

$\chi^2 = 63.30, p < 0.0001$ $\chi^2 = 41.89, p < 0.0001$

Finally, we ran another chi-square test which assessed whether a person's choice for debate winner influenced the decision to change one's preference. In this case, most voters were not likely to change their preference as a result of who won the debate. (See Table 4.) Those who did change, particularly the undecided voters, tended to place their partisanship with the candidate they thought had won the debate.

TABLE 4: Change to different candidate(s) by winner

Winner	Debate 1 ^a			Debate 3 ^b		
	Bush	Clinton	Perot	Bush	Clinton	Perot
No change due to "winner"	92%	89%	63%	90%	93%	73%
Change due to "winner"	9%	11%	37%	10%	7%	27%

^a n = 624, df = 4 ^b n = 694, df = 4

$\chi^2 = 46.65, p < 0.0001$ $\chi^2 = 44.75, p < 0.0001$

Final debate. The results of the final presidential debate were very similar to the first debate. Bush and Clinton's support remained relatively stable as Table 1 also shows, but Perot's jumped up 9 percent.

Again, most of Bush and Clinton supporters prior to this debate remained with their candidate. Table 5 reveals that Perot's movement came largely from pre-debate Perot supporters, but he also drew a higher percentage of support from undecideds and those favoring Bush and Clinton. These results are statistically significant.

TABLE 5: Candidate preference before and after last debate

POST-DEBATE		***PRE-DEBATE PREFERENCE***				
PREF.	Bush	Clinton	Perot	Other/Nei.	Undec.	Total
Bush	89%	1%	3%	30%	31%	29%
Clinton	1%	88%	5%	40%	19%	49%
Perot	8%	10%	91%	30%	31%	20%
Oth/Nei	1%	*%	-	-	-	*%
Undec.	1%	1%	1%	-	19%	2%

$\chi^2 = 56.03$ $p < 0.001$ $df = 10$ $n = 695$ * $< 0.5\%$
Who won the final debate. Bill Clinton emerged as the winner according to the results from our survey. Thirty-seven percent thought Clinton had won, 26 percent thought Perot had won, and 21 percent thought Bush had won.

Most who thought Clinton or Bush had won supported their respective candidate after the debate. Perot support was somewhat softer. These results, like those in the first debate, are significant. (See Table 3.) The chi-square test for a change in preference produced similar results to the first debate's test. (See Table 4.)

Discussion

The results of these analyses reinforce the prior research which claims that debates appear to have a very limited effect in the overall support for a given candidate. Although the results between pre- and post-debate conditions were statistically significant, the actual percentage change of support in reality was very small for the two major candidates, Bush and Clinton. Yet there was an unexpected victory for Ross Perot, whose numbers surged after the first and last debates among debate viewers.

Perot was able to pull support from undecided voters more decisively than the other two candidates, although Bush and Clinton certainly also received pledges from undecideds and people voting for other candidates, particularly if they thought that candidate "won" the debate. And since in particular Perot performed so well in the debates, the percentage changes in his support also reflected his success. Because of the relative size of this voter population, however, the overall effect of "debate winner" is statistically significant ($p < .0001$ in all cases for both debates), but small in reality.

A possible explanation for the movement in Perot's preference level is due to his reentry into the presidential contest. Expectations and opinions of him were low. A Gallup poll conducted October 5-7 showed only 11 percent expected Perot to do the best job in the

debates. Furthermore, an earlier ABC News Poll taken at the time when Perot reentered the Presidential campaign (October 1) showed that nearly two-thirds (61%) of registered voters did not think Perot had the personality and temperament it would take to serve effectively as president.

Perot's performance at the debate far exceeded expectations. He was folksy, witty, entertaining, and seemed to offer concrete, understandable solutions to problems relating to the economy and the deficit. Whereas Bush and Clinton were less spectacular and more conservative in their approach, Perot basically had nothing to lose, and his showmanship and supposed nonpartisan stance may have worked to his advantage.

Perot may have pulled support from the relatively small group of undecideds and others, but it did not automatically earn him support from predisposed Bush or Clinton voters, regardless of who they thought "won" the debate or performed the best.

Although the current study allows for a greater cross-section of the population to be selected in the study, there are some valid concerns which need to be addressed regarding the debate surveys. Such concerns could evolve into further studies which could refine the effects of debates and voter predisposition even further. Measuring the post-debate preference of non-viewers immediately following the debate as a comparison to the viewers survey might show even more precisely the effects of debates. In this case, the problem of self-selection can be muted. Such a supplementary study would also aid in addressing a second concern about what intervening or confounding variables came into play between the time the respondent was recruited and the post-debate measure.

Public Opinion and Post-Debate Analysis by the Media
Method

Data collection and analysis. In examining the interaction of public opinion and media analysis we compared how different print and broadcast news media outlets portrayed the first debate held on October 11. The analysis consisted of a review of post-debate news programs seen on ABC, CBS and NBC, including: a) The programs immediately following the debate, b) The morning programs of October 12, c) The evening news programs of October 12. In addition, an analysis was made of relevant debate articles in the October 12 editions of four nationally recognized newspapers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times.

In all cases, the data were examined with special attention being paid to mentions of who was said to have won the debate, and by whom, statements

regarding the effect of the debate on the overall presidential race and references to the polls themselves.

In order to attempt to measure any influence the news stories and reports had on the public, we compared the response to "Who won the debate" question from the immediate post-debate sample to the response to the same question from an independent sample taken from the tracking poll the following evening on October 12. Both a chi-square test and a z-score analysis of the individual candidate's ratings by the public over time checked for possible significant correlation of the data.

Results

In most of the media analyses taken following the first debate, the primary emphasis was on who won the debate. Secondary emphasis was placed on the performance of the candidates. There was less emphasis on real substance, that is, what issues were discussed. In both broadcast and print, the newsworthy story tended largely to revolve around how well Perot did and how Bush may have been hurt by the debate.

Broadcast -- Post-debate analysis immediately following debate. The ABC and NBC analyses immediately following the debates were fairly brief, but took different approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of the candidates in the debate. The CBS post-debate broadcast was not included because a tape was unavailable.

NBC News took a fairly standard approach to the post-debate coverage. Anchor Tom Brokaw hosted two guests, Bush's Chief of Staff James Baker and Clinton's vice-presidential running mate Al Gore. He questioned them about the results of the debate, both substantively, via particular issues, such as the economy and overall political orientation themes, as well as in terms of "who won". As expected, each guest favored his candidate. Gore even mentioned a "clear win" by Clinton. There was little mention of Perot in the context of the debate by either Brokaw or his guests.

On ABC News, the main focus was on what the public and not the pundits thought about the debate. After anchor Peter Jennings summarized the debates, he cut to a segment with undecided voters from Charlotte, North Carolina and San Francisco, California to get their opinions. These undecided voters talked mainly about Perot. Some were enthused about him; others were not.

After this live segment, the ABC correspondents weighed in their opinions. The show ended with the results from the ABC News Debate Poll while it was ongoing. The poll results revealed Clinton as the debate winner.

Broadcast -- Morning Shows. Public opinion played a strong role in the morning news shows'

coverage of the first debate. The lead for each of the first half hour news segments centered on "who won" as determined by immediate post-debate polling. Both ABC and CBS initially brought out their own polls. Further into the show a Gallup poll was shown as a comparison to the network polls to illustrate differing results. ABC's poll showed Clinton had "won", whereas CBS and Gallup showed Perot had "performed the best."¹ Even so, CBS' Harry Smith began the morning newscast asking who won the debate, then turned to the CBS News Poll showing Perot had "won."

Other comments by newscasters echoed the win-lose theme:

1) Bill Lagattuta (CBS): "Perot did a good job. Many saw him winning the debate."

2) Jim Mikalewski (NBC): "If anyone made any gains it was Ross Perot. If there were any losers, it was George Bush...Polls show [Bush] didn't gain any ground on Clinton."

In continuing segments with each candidates' top campaign officials, political pundits, network correspondents, and undecided voters, the talk was of how Perot benefitted and what Bush had done wrong and would have to do to improve his standing. Only one other notable exchange repeated every half hour: the "patriotism" discussion between Bush and Clinton.

Broadcast -- Evening News. The debate story led the three network newscasts the evening following the debate. Each show was generally an encapsulated version of the morning shows. The emphasis was on what the voters thought, the resurgence of Perot, the troubles for Bush, and the survival of Clinton. However, there was additional attention paid to the long term effect of the debate -- through votes. For example, ABC's Peter Jennings questioned the effect of the debate on the race overall, and CBS's Dan Rather also sought to return ultimately to the voters' opinions. Again, he used the CBS poll and other viewer ratings of the debate to approach such inclinations.

Print. The print media likewise revealed that Perot was considered to have given the best performance in the first debate. The newspapers used such phrases as "stealing the show", "lively performance" and "vivid" to describe Perot's performance. However, much of the news was framed in terms of Bush's not winning rather than as a decisive victory for Perot. All four newspapers ran at least one article which noted that Bush failed to win.

Similar to the broadcasts, the newspapers cited

the polls. In one article entitled "Bush didn't score the needed knockout", The New York Times used the CBS news polling data favoring Perot to justify the results of their analysis.

The influence of news coverage on public opinion. In an attempt to measure any effect that news coverage had on public opinion, we compared the ABC News question of "Who won the debate" taken immediately after the debate, with the same question asked of a separate sample of 500 registered voters (n=384 viewers) the following evening.

The immediate post-debate result had Clinton winning the debate, but the later results revealed that Perot was perceived to have won. The changes in these numbers overall are statistically significant. (See Table 6.)

TABLE 6: "Who won?" pre and post media analysis among debate viewers

CANDIDATE	1st Debate (10/11)		Difference
	Night of debate ^a	Night after debate ^b	
Bush	19%	11%	-8%
Clinton	28%	24%	-4%
Perot	24%	37%	+13%
Tie/Draw	26%	26%	0%
Don't Know	2%	2%	0%
$\chi^2 = 46.60$ df = 4 ^a n=637 ^b n=384 p < 0.0001			

The z scores computed from the "who won" percentages of the individual candidates significantly show that over the one night, fewer people thought Bush won the debate (z = 3.50; p < 0.0004). Perot gained support for his winning the debate (z = 4.30; p < 0.0001). While fewer people reported a Clinton victory the night after the debate, the results are not significant (z = 1.41; p = 0.159).

Discussion

Although the media may not be the only contributor to public opinion, the possibility of a relationship exists because the story dominated the next day's print and electronic media newscasts. With no other major news story occurring at that time, viewers of the debate may indeed have been influenced by post-debate media analysis.

The review of the media analyses also corresponds with the data analysis of public opinion regarding who won the debate. Stories described Perot's stunning performance; the public reacted accordingly. Over just one night, Perot made significant leaps in terms of public opinion about whether he won the debate. Similarly, the media reports suggested that Bush did not fare that well in the debates. The number of people who thought he won the debate also dropped. Finally, the sentiment that Clinton won the debate did not change greatly and is statistically inconclusive; this too matches the lukewarm reception Clinton met from the media following the first

debate. Although this study does not try to suggest a direct effect, it does point to an interesting relationship between the media and debate watchers over time.

Since the original intention for ABC News was to use the post-debate surveys to measure candidate preference and debate assessment, future studies should include a more in-depth follow-up survey measuring media influence, opinion source and change. For example, viewers could be asked about their media usage and whether they spoke to others about the debates. The data from the next day debate study could compare viewers receiving exposure to post-debate analysis and discussion against those who did not.

A final concern must be raised about the stability of the one night samples used in this study. Those who volunteered to be called back immediately following the debate may be much different than those who were contacted at random the following evening. However, in this study the demographic comparison of party, education, sex, and race for the two samples was similar.

Summary

Overall, the debates themselves do not appear to affect voter preferences, particularly with the larger, established mainstream party candidates. However, third party candidates may have some impact since they feasibly provide an alternative to these other candidates. The debates provided a ground for independent candidate Ross Perot to have his message heard, and consequently to benefit from the debates, both in terms of "who won" as well as some limited voter preference effects. It appears, however, that the media still may influence public opinion. After extensive discussion which framed the debate into the simplistic arguments of who won and who performed the best, overall public sentiment regarding these questions also shifted. This study suggests that there may be a relationship between the "substance" of the broadcasts following the debates and the subsequent public opinion.

Notes

¹ The non-unanimity of poll results prompted the news commentators to remark that the polls were mixed as to who won. None of the news broadcasts pointed out, however, that there was a difference in the question wording in the media polls. ABC News asked the question: "Who, in your opinion won the debate?" as its key measure, whereas Gallup asked: "Regardless of which candidate you happen to support, who do you think did the best job in the debate?" Clearly these were two different questions which sought different responses.

Sources

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