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BY MARK WATTS

Watching Debates

A Focus Group Analysis of Voters

IN FEBRUARY 2002, Abacus Associates conducted two focus groups with likely voters in Secaucus, New Jersey, and Richmond, Virginia. The focus groups aimed to assess public opinion toward candidate debates and how debates should be improved. The Debate Advisory Standards Project will use the findings from these focus groups, in combination with other research, to establish best-practice standards for the sponsorship and conduct of debates and issue forums.

Are Debates Informative?

Participants in both focus groups overwhelmingly believe debates deliver important information about candidates – information necessary for making informed decisions when choosing a candidate. Participants also believe that debates offer information they cannot find anywhere else. Furthermore, while participants rely in varying degrees on newspapers, talk radio and mailings to their homes for information, all participants say they receive some information from debates and that debates play a major role in their decisions.

Despite participants' beliefs that debates provide important information, only a few watch debates for statewide or local office. Clearly, statewide and local debates need to be made more accessible and visible to voters. Local television and radio must cover state and local debates, and the news media, candidates, parties and debate sponsors need to do a better job publicizing debates.

In both Virginia and New Jersey, participants believe every candidate should debate his or her opponents during the campaign. When candidates do not debate opponents, voters question their ability to hold higher office. In their view, the only reason a candidate would choose not to debate is to hide a significant failure.

What Voters Like About Debates

Participants' views about what they wanted to see in debates were strikingly similar – both within each group and across the two. While participants were not in absolute agreement about desirable and undesirable debate characteristics, their responses came unusually close to unanimity. Indeed, with respect to each individual debate characteristic discussed here, no more than one or two participants departed from the majority view. As a consequence, neither focus group saw much discussion of what characteristics a debate should have. Disagreement centered on how to produce better debates.

Participants value debates for giving them an opportunity to see and hear candidates free of media filtering and outside the choreographed and controlled settings of ads and speeches. They value debates because they are – at least in their ideal form – spontaneous, unscripted and honest.

● *I like that they are live...not rehearsed. Or supposedly it's not rehearsed...It shows more of their natural selves in that venue than like a commercial where it puts them in a casual shirt which is supposed to be "natural."* (Virginia female)

● *That's really learning about the candidate – when these two people are standing there, and they just have to be themselves because it's a live audience and they know everybody is watching them.... This isn't just a TV camera being recorded to be edited, this is them. I think that's the best way to find out about somebody.* (New Jersey female)

● *It shows the candidates' ability to go beyond the script.* (New Jersey male)

According to participants, debates go deeper into the issues, show more of the candidates' knowledge of the issues, and address a wider range of issues than do other cam-

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paigned elements. Because the debates are unscripted, participants feel they provide a better sense of how well the candidates understand the issues than do stump speeches or campaign ads. A strong Democrat and Gore supporter from New Jersey offered the following example: He had heard from the media that George W. Bush was a lightweight on the issues, but he learned from the debates that Bush actually had a good grasp of the issues.

● *They have to explain how they are going to do it... [Y]ou really get a sense of who understands and who has done his homework. So you get to know who is knowledgeable on the issues. (New Jersey female)*

● *Are they giving you a full deal about what they are campaigning about? A lot in their advertisement they will just cut it all so far, but when they are out at the media and they know the audience and the TVs are looking at them, they tend to give a better answer or a clearer answer. (New Jersey male)*

● *It brings the issues to the forefront... and it can clear up a lot of things that, you might read in the paper here and there or catch on the news, but I think most of the issues are going to be addressed. (Virginia male)*

Participants also believe debates show the candidates' capacity for quick thinking and their ability to handle pressure – important character traits in the eyes of many voters.

● *They are under a lot of pressure, and I like to see how they handle the pressure and see what their strength and character is. (New Jersey female)*

● *How they answer a question. Especially in the presidential election. If this guy can't handle the pressure of rebutting a question thrown at him I mean... how is he going to stand up in a national crisis? (Virginia male)*

Beyond exposing the candidates' ability to handle pressure, participants feel debates show the candidate "as a person." For these participants, debates reveal candidates' characters, personalities and styles, traits rarely exposed in more controlled environments. A number of participants also cite "body language" as an important source of information during debates.

● *I think it is also a good place to kind of judge what you think their character is. How straightforward they are when they answer the question or if they try to dance around. (Virginia female)*

● *I like to watch body language during the*

debate because body language tells you a lot more than the words that they are speaking because they can speak an awful lot of words but sometimes a little movement shows you something different. (New Jersey female)

● *You can see facial expressions, body language. If they are stammering or if they have a good command of what they are responding to and you get a good idea of how they react under pressure. If their body starts to shift you can tell somebody is getting nervous. If they start to move around or if they are at a loss for words. (New Jersey male)*

Finally, debates are also valued for their fairness, primarily because they give all candidates an equal chance to be heard. Most participants believe minor party candidates should be included in debates and that moderators should be as neutral as possible – with many expressing the belief that most journalists are insufficiently neutral.

● *The structure tries to be even handed. They go out of their way... to make certain that the structure does not benefit anyone. (New Jersey male)*

● *I like the opportunity for rebuttal. The one thing that you don't get from 30-second spot ads*

is what the other side has to say. I think rebuttal is an important aspect. (Virginia male)

What participants say they value in debates is, in large part, an indictment of the rest of campaigns. Many say debates are important because they are one of the few times, if not the only time, they receive “real” information. Campaign advertisements and media news coverage of campaigns provide extremely filtered, choreographed and scripted presentations of the candidates. Voters feel advertisements and news coverage do not provide opportunities to see candidates for who they really are and do not provide enough information to evaluate candidates’ knowledge and positions on all issues. Participants value debates because candidates must let down their protective guards and speak and act outside the control of their handlers.

What Voters Dislike About Debates

When participants criticize debates, it is often for their failure to live up to their potential. Participants object to candidates giving rehearsed and simplistic canned responses and avoiding difficult questions or questions that might take them off message. They especially dislike debate formats with brief response periods or no opportunity for followup questions because these formats allow candidates to avoid answering questions. Finally, participants object to moderators’ “softball” questions that allow candidates to give scripted answers.

● *Often it is still too short. I say on one hand they have to go by the script but it often starts that it is not quite sound biting where they could be structured enough to fill that minute and a half. If they really had to fill up four minutes on a subject... it could go deeper and it doesn't so it is somewhere between the sound biting, you know they had to be an actor... (New Jersey male)*

● *These so called...panel of reporters down here who throw softball questions at the candidates. They stink; I hate them... [A]s an observer it looks like it is scripted. (Virginia male)*

● *I worry about the aspect of the whole thing being too staged. I think that during the last presidential debates that we saw what was happening to Gore because Gore was changing his demeanor with each debate so I felt like he was being over advised by...the people that advise him.... Therefore, we didn't find out who Gore was, we found out who Gore wasn't. (New Jersey female)*

With the exception of length of response period and the opportunity for follow-up questions, participants in New Jersey rarely mentioned specific formats when they criticized debates. However, in Virginia, several participants mentioned a dislike for debates that are restricted to the two main parties. Excluding minor party candidates violated participants’ sense of fairness, an attribute they valued in debates.

● *...[O]nly two political candidates can be part of debates at least for presidency and I would like to see other groups even though they are not necessarily representing a lot of people, I would really like to get input from these other groups. I may not agree with them. (Virginia female)*

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● *I think in a congressional from local right on to presidential that all the candidates, I don't care who [they] are, they should be heard. (Virginia male)*

Participants in both states agreed that while many candidates might make debates

more difficult, minor party candidates should be included – in both Presidential and lower-level races – for the sake of fairness. However, when probed on this issue, participants agreed that the number of candidates needed to be limited to make debates workable. Most accepted four candidates as an appropriate limit. However, participants could not come up with a way to decide who should be included or excluded.

A number of participants in the Virginia focus group objected to candidates’ breaking the rules by going over their allotted time or failing to answer questions. Most believed that exceeding time limits should be punished through an award of extra time to the offending candidate’s opponent. With respect to failure to answer questions, most opposed punishment. Participants believed that the moderator should note that the question had not been answered and pose the question again. Participants opposed further punishment based on their belief that the damage to a candidate’s image caused by question-avoidance is punishment enough.

In both states – though this view was expressed much more strongly in New Jersey – participants object to candidates’ “going negative.” Complaints about negative campaigning, of course, are a consistent feature of public comment on contemporary politics, whether attacks on opponents appear in media coverage, advertising, or debates. Our participants see negative attacks as a frequent and thoroughly distasteful feature of debates.

● *I dislike what has happened like backstabbing... Making negative remarks about the candidate, that is not the issue here. It is a debate. I'm sticking to what I believe in and you are sticking to what you believe in. It is not here for me to put you down. It is for me to say what I am going to do in a positive way, not to say what is negative about you. (New Jersey female)*

● *...[W]hen they get into digging into people's past and bringing up things that don't pertain... You are there to study the issues and you are there to do what you have to do... you don't need the mudslinging and the name calling and let's be honest everybody is grown up here. (New Jersey male)*

Although participants objected strenuously to negative attacks, no one came up with a way to eliminate them from debates. They identified no format or rule of debate that led to more negative attacks. Some participants did mention the roundtable as a

more civil format. However, they mentioned this preference only after seeing a clip from the 2000 Cheney-Lieberman Vice presidential debate, which was particularly civil and in a roundtable format. Their response may have been different had they seen the Gore-Perot NAFTA debate, which was a roundtable but decidedly less civil. Clearly the tone of a debate is driven much more by the participating candidates than by format. However, a moderator can set the tone to some extent.

Participants also dislike debates with excessive drama and a lack of civility or control. While these attributes might make debates entertaining or “good television” and are often focused on by pundits and journalists, participants – with only a few exceptions – dislike them. Participants particularly dislike debates that devolve into disorderly arguments.

● *[The] thing that I don't like about it is the dramatics that some candidates tend to. They take it and begin to use that question as a campaigning tool rather than really addressing the issue. (Virginia male)*

● *...[D]uring a rebuttal sometimes they seem like there is just an argument that starts and nobody gets to finish their point because they are both screaming. Sometimes they just can't seem to get their point across. (Virginia female)*

Some participants criticize debates for their failure to show which candidate would be the best leader. They feel that candidates who might be great leaders are not necessarily great debaters and candidates who might be great debaters are not necessarily great leaders.

● *Sometimes the more skilled debater or the more charming personality wins out over substance. (New Jersey female)*

● *...[D]ebates by their nature can rule out certain types of candidates. People that are not particularly photogenic or who are not as quick on their feet... I can't help but wonder who we are self-limiting by debates. (Virginia male)*

This criticism contradicts the argument that debates are good because they reveal the candidates' knowledge of and position on the issues, the candidates' personality, and the candidates' ability to handle pressure – all perceived as important measures of leadership and less available to voters outside of debates. Like the criticism that debates are too scripted or too negative, this complaint applies not just to debates but to all information voters receive during campaigns, as voters routinely complain that what makes a good candidate does not necessarily make a good leader.

Choosing Debate Formats

The relatively high level of consensus regarding the desirable and undesirable characteristics of debates breaks down when participants are asked about specific debate formats. Because participants do not usually identify format as the determining factor in what makes a debate good or bad, they rarely express a causal relationship such as “I like debates to be spontaneous, so debates should be formatted _____ way to improve spontaneity.” While they clearly know what they value about debates, their comments on formats are based more on immediate “call-it-as-I-see-it” reactions than on sophisticated analysis.

However, the major reason consensus breaks down over formats is that certain formats tend to engender both positive and negative debate characteristics. For instance, a debate format that maximizes spontaneity

and reality may also be prone to negative attacks and disorder. Similarly, an orderly format with minimal interaction (and thus minimal attacks) may make a debate seem overly controlled and scripted – lacking the spontaneity and authenticity that make debates important and distinctive sources of information. Character and personality may be revealed more clearly in a free-flowing, “attack-prone” debate style and be less visible in a more orderly, formal style. Furthermore, when moderators ask “hard” follow-up questions that force candidates to address issues fully, it becomes more difficult to prevent negative attacks and maintain order and a sense of fairness.

The following exchange among three participants in the Virginia focus group provides a good example of how certain formats demonstrate both positive and negative debate characteristics:

● **Female 1:** *Well I don't know if when they go back and forth like with the candidates asking each other questions I don't feel like they get the same question in that sort [of debate].*

● **Female 2:** *As far as them asking each other questions, the only part I don't like about it because you can get into a lot of arguments and tend to be critical of one another. You can throw out the question that you would want to. It still goes back to making that person look bad... So that is the part I don't like.*

● **Male:** *But you know that in itself is very critical because again you are seeing these two people acting under pressure and you know the guy who handles a difficult situation coolly and more professionally, you see that.*

These three participants were discussing the classic debate structure in which debaters ask each other questions. This format is often valued as the best and truest form of debate by communication and political scholars. It is also a format that all participants say they have never seen used in American campaigns. Participants are very divided over whether it is a good format. As the exchange above demonstrates, participants worry that the format may violate the goal of fairness or exacerbate the problem of negative attacks. However, at least one participant praises the format for providing more opportunity to see candidates handle pressure. Participants tend to disagree over formats because they can see how any particular format might contradict what they value about debates. This dis-

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agreement occurs despite the fact that most participants value the same characteristics of debates.

Despite their disagreements over debate formats, participants did support a few common standards. Participants would like to be able to see both candidates simultaneously on the television screen; they especially like formats in which the candidates stand or sit near each other. They believe audiences should not be allowed to react to the candidates – no cheering, clapping or show of support for one side or the other should be permitted. Debate audiences should be neutral, undecided, and nonpartisan and/or should be under strict rules of silence.

Most participants prefer one moderator to a panel of moderators. Moderators should be neutral, fair and maintain control over the debate. They should ask hard questions, press the candidates when they give evasive or simplistic responses, repeat questions if they are not answered and penalize candidates if they go over their allotted time. Moderators should not pose questions about personal attacks that have been made in the campaign. To the greatest degree possible, the same questions should be posed to all candidates. Candidates should not be able to limit the questions, nor



should they be allowed to see the questions beforehand.

Making Debates Useful for Voters

According to participants, debates should provide information – not entertainment. However, although participants say they value information and a diversity of candidates in debates, they do not seek information about a diversity of offices. Participants tend to watch only Presidential and Vice Presidential debates and rarely seek out debates for state and local offices, despite the information those debates could provide.

Increasing viewership is likely to result

from increasing the accessibility and publicity of debates and creating debate formats that provide voters with an informative, unscripted, civil, issue-oriented discussion – a discussion that provided honest insight into the positions, knowledge, character and personality of the candidates.

Although political “debate” television shows featuring ideologues and pundits screaming at each other are considered entertaining and may result in more viewers than a more civil and informative format, these shows are designed for political junkies and political partisans. They are not designed to inform the nonpartisan, less politically informed or undecided voter. Voters who meet this definition do not want debates to be entertaining screaming contests. They want clear, honest information to help them make decisions. Based on the comments made by participants in these focus groups, debates should be as informative, unscripted, fair, and issue oriented as possible and candidates should be held accountable for giving honest, straightforward answers. Most impor-



tantly, debates (and candidates) should maintain a civil tone. Debates that meet these goals will attract more viewers because they give voters the types of information they feel they need for choosing their candidate. ■