Not Your Parents’ Presidential Debates: Examining the Effects of the CNN/YouTube Debates on Young Citizens’ Civic Engagement

Mitchell S. McKinney & Leslie A. Rill

During the 2007–2008 U.S. presidential primaries, CNN partnered with YouTube to create the first nationally televised presidential debates where citizens interrogated the candidates via video questions posted to the Internet. The creators of these debates claimed their novel use of Internet technology “would change the face of presidential candidate debates.” The CNN/YouTube debates were designed expressly to engage citizens in the campaign dialogue, and specifically to engage young citizens who are frequent users of YouTube yet not always among the viewing audience for a televised presidential debate. The current study examines the effects of viewing the CNN/YouTube debates, and particularly the debates’ influence on young citizens’ “normative” democratic attitudes. Building on previous research designed to test differences in debate formats, this study compares young citizens’ reactions to the CNN/YouTube debates and also to a more traditional presidential debate with candidate questioning controlled by a journalist. Results suggest that while exposure to candidate debates in general yields positive effects on young citizens’ normative democratic attitudes, there was very little difference found in the effects of exposure to the CNN/YouTube debates when compared to a traditional journalist-controlled presidential debate.

Keywords: Civic Engagement; CNN/YouTube Debate; Political Cynicism; Political Information Efficacy; Presidential Debates; Young Voters

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While the term “historic” has been invoked repeatedly to characterize the 2008 presidential election—used to describe Hillary Rodham Clinton’s candidacy as well as Barack Obama’s nomination and eventual election as our nation’s first black president—another noteworthy feature of campaign 2008 involved the electoral performance of young voters. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) reports that approximately 52% of young citizens (18- to 29-year-olds) cast a ballot in 2008. This increase represents the third presidential election in a row in which the percentage of young voter turnout has risen (with a 41% turnout of 18- to 29-year-olds in 2000, climbing to 48% in 2004, and to 52% in 2008). Indeed, the 52% young voter participation in 2008 matches the highest level of turnout by young citizens achieved in 1972 when 18-year-olds were first granted the vote (Young Voters, 2008).

Yet another notable feature of the 2008 vote was young voters’ overwhelming support for the Democratic candidate Barack Obama. Across all age groups, young citizens represented Obama’s widest margin of support as these voters, by more than two to one (68% to 32%), chose Obama over John McCain (Young Voters, 2008). Throughout the election much was made of team Obama’s ability to reach, to organize, and to turn out a generation of “digital natives” by developing campaign appeals that used the very communicative practices and language of young citizens (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). The New York Times went so far as to label his loyal following of young supporters “Generation O” (as in Obama); and this special relationship was fueled by a steady stream of digital communication as typified in the exchange that took place just seconds after the networks called the election for Barack Obama when he sent his many wired followers a text message signed simply “Barack” informing them “I’m about to head to Grant Park to talk to everyone, but I wanted to write to you first. All of this happened because of you...we just made history” (Cave, 2008, ¶. 4).

Certainly, based on their electoral turnout, and particularly the wide margin of Obama support from young citizens, one might conclude that the many emails, text messages, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos were successful in mobilizing younger voters like never before. Yet, beyond the macrolevel voter turnout data previously noted, we have little if any empirical evidence to help us understand if—and perhaps even more importantly how—specific youth-oriented civic engagement messages may have worked to engage young citizens in the campaign dialogue and to persuade them to vote. The current study seeks to provide some answers to the complex matter of youth engagement in politics. While it would be impossible to fashion a study that captures young citizens’ exposure and reactions to the vast array of civic engagement appeals that make up a political campaign, our analysis reported here isolates young citizens’ reactions to a specific political campaign message—candidate debates—targeted expressly to young voters. Our primary interest is to understand how this message may activate these voters’ latent or “normative” democratic attitudes that have been linked in previous research to increased civic and political participation, including voting behavior.
In July (for the Democrats) and November (for the Republicans) of 2007, CNN and YouTube joined together to sponsor two nationally televised presidential primary debates. These two-hour debates, moderated by CNN anchor Anderson Cooper, the “hip” host of CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360 news program, featured citizens questioning the candidates through 30-second videos posted on YouTube’s campaign site, YouChoose ’08. In total, nearly 8,000 citizens’ videos were posted for possible selection in the two debates. Ricke (2008) reports that younger citizens by far posted more questions, with videos from citizens under the age of 30 accounting for nearly 60% of all videos submitted. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of all questions selected for inclusion by CNN and put to the candidates in the two debates were from younger citizens, with several questioners actually identifying themselves as college students.

It was clear at the outset of both broadcasts that these would not be your typical presidential debate encounters. The Democratic debate was introduced with a video featuring a young male citizen, attired in baseball cap, T-shirt, and several visible tattoos who implored the candidates, “since this is such a revolutionary debate would you as politicians do something revolutionary and that is to actually answer the questions that are posed to you tonight, versus beating around the ‘Bush’ so to speak?” Not to be outdone, the Republican candidates began their debate with a homespun serenade from a guitar-strumming “country boy” (also with the requisite baseball cap and T-shirt) who crooned, “we don’t know who we’re voting for, we don’t know who will win, that’s why we use YouTube to ask our questions of these men. Time is short, we’re voting soon, and I thought I’d just mention, if we don’t reach consensus, then we’ll have to decide at convention.”

Throughout both 2-hour debates (with 38 questions put to the eight Democratic candidates and 34 questions asked of the eight Republicans), videos appeared to be selected by CNN as much for the question’s entertainment value as for its voter education potential. For example, a talking snowman asked the candidates’ views on global warming; a “life time member of the NRA”—after firing a round from his AK-47—asked candidates their position on gun control; a Midwestern farmer seated at his kitchen table asked about farm subsidies while nibbling on an ear of “delicious government subsided” corn; and an animated cartoon featuring a talking Uncle Sam quizzed candidates about their tax policies. It was also clear that these debates sought to feature citizens asking about very personal and genuine concerns. One video featured a group of refugee workers in a Darfur camp, surrounded by children whose parents had been killed, asking if the candidates would commit U.S. troops to help put an end to ethnic cleansing. In another video, a cancer patient, while asking what the government could do about the rising costs of health care, removed a wig midway through the question revealing her bald head. Another example of the heartfelt query came from a black minister wearing his cleric’s collar and sitting in the pews of his Hickory, North Carolina church who asked why some politicians used religion to deny gay Americans their equal rights.
While some media and political pundits questioned the merits of the CNN/YouTube productions (e.g., Healy & Zeleny, 2007; Weiss, 2007), CNN touted their novel debate experiments a huge success by their ability to generate a large audience, and particularly in attracting young viewers. First, the Republican’s November YouTube debate attracted the largest viewing audience—nearly 5 million viewers—of all the 16 Republican primary debates that took place during the 2007–2008 primary debate cycle (Stelter, 2008). Also, while the Democrat’s July debate drew only 2.6 million viewers (producers pointed out that this exchange took place in the middle of the summer when TV viewership for all programming declines), CNN boasted that its YouTube debate reached its intended target by attracting “the biggest audience since measurements began in 1992 for a cable news debate of those between 18 and 24” and concluded “this age group tuned in since this debate was the first of this election cycle to push the media envelope and use online videos from YouTube” (Seelye, 2007, ¶. 4). Yet, beyond an entertaining two hours of candidates-meet-citizens via YouTube, were debate viewers in any way served by this pushing of the media envelope? Did this novel fusion of Internet technology with televised campaign communication yield any beneficial civic engagement effects for those viewing these debates?

The principal goal of this study is to determine if a debate message specifically tailored to young voters, utilizing the very methods of communication familiar to young citizens and incorporating young citizens in the debate dialogue, can foster heightened attitudes of political engagement. The current study examines the effects of viewing the CNN/YouTube debates, and particularly the debates’ influence on young citizens’ “normative” democratic attitudes. Building on previous research designed to test difference in debate formats, this study compares young citizens’ reactions to the CNN/YouTube debates to reactions of young citizens exposed to a more traditional presidential debate with candidate questioning controlled by a journalist. Next, we provide a brief review of the relevant literature relating to the analysis of campaign debates and more specifically a review of the few studies that have examined the effects of debate messages on viewers’ latent or “normative” democratic political attitudes.

Review of Literature

Debates and Democratic Attitudes

A number of studies have examined campaign debates’ possible latent effects whereby exposure to candidates engaged in televised debates may activate citizens’ various civic and democratic tendencies. In general, although this line of research remains underdeveloped, most findings do suggest that debate viewing positively affects attitudes of civic engagement and thus may contribute to strengthening our political and electoral processes. Specifically, debates have been found to heighten viewers’ interest in the ongoing campaign (Chaffee, 1978; Wald & Lupfer, 1978), to encourage citizens to seek out additional campaign information following their debate viewing (Lemert, 1993), and to encourage greater participation in the campaign through such
activities as talking to others about one’s preferred candidate and increases in reported likelihood of voting (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979; Patterson, 2002).

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

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

Our interest in the ability of debates to affect democratic attitudes is in line with Pfau’s (2003) recommendation for future debate research when, speaking of normative democratic outcomes, he concluded, “There are no other more important effects that scholars could document” (p. 32). With the current study, we are particularly interested in achieving a clearer understanding of how this important form of campaign communication may affect young citizens’ democratic attitudes. With much of the extant debate effects research based on general populations of debate viewers, with a notable exception being the McKinney and Banwart (2005) study, a primary goal of the current investigation is to expand our knowledge of specific debate effects on young citizens. With the CNN/YouTube debate incorporating a channel of communication heavily utilized by young citizens (i.e., videos posted to YouTube), and with many of the video questions featuring young citizens, these debates provide an ideal campaign message in which to analyze the effects of a targeted message on the intended audience.

Within the broad rubric of democratic attitudes and values, our particular attention in this study will focus on what Delli Carpini (2004, p. 398) points to as a principal attitude of democratic engagement, political cynicism. Also, as noted previously, our study design and questioning seeks to ascertain whether or not there
are differing effects on young citizens’ political cynicism based on the type of debate viewed. To examine the effects of a targeted (CNN/YouTube) versus nontargeted (journalist-controlled) debate message on young citizens’ levels of political cynicism, we posit the following research questions:

RQ1: How does viewing a campaign debate targeted specifically to young citizens affect their attitudes of political cynicism?
RQ2: Does exposure to the CNN/YouTube debate, targeted specifically to young citizens, have a greater affect on young citizens’ political cynicism than a debate not targeted specifically to young voters?

Political Information Efficacy

Along with our interest in the normative democratic attitude of political cynicism that has been shown to produce a more engaged—and more likely to vote—citizen, we also are interested in another cornerstone of participatory democracy, the informed voter. While others have focused a great deal of attention on the cognitive elements of political information, chiefly the acquisition and processing of requisite political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Popkin, 1991), we are more interested in the attitudinal component of knowledge attainment—specifically, how confident one is in what they know. Recently, Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) have advanced the concept of political information efficacy (PIE). This attitudinal construct is grounded in important theoretical links between general political efficacy and one’s feelings of confidence in the political knowledge they possess. While traditional political efficacy has been defined as an individual’s feeling that he or she has the ability to influence the political process (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954), the concept of political information efficacy is defined as the level of confidence one has in his or her political knowledge and that one possess sufficient knowledge to engage the political process through such behaviors as voting.

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

In their initial empirical testing of political information efficacy, Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) utilized both National Education Studies (NES) survey data and a pilot experimental investigation that showed younger voters (those 18–29) reported significantly less confidence in their political knowledge than older voters; and, also, lack of confidence in one’s political knowledge is significantly related to voting or not voting. A number of additional studies have been conducted using political information efficacy as a variable of analysis (e.g., Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Yun, & LeGrange, 2007; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; Tedesco, 2007), yet we have a...
very limited understanding of a televised presidential debate’s affect on young citizens’ political information efficacy, and particularly whether a debate targeted specifically to young citizens versus one that is not may affect PIE differently. Thus, we posit the following general research question:

RQ3: Does exposure to political campaign debates, both the targeted CNN/YouTube and the nontargeted journalist-controlled debate, affect young citizens’ political information efficacy?

Method

Sample

YouTube primary debate participants
A total of 311 students from a large Midwestern university participated in this portion of the study. Participants were segregated by their party affiliation prior to viewing the stimuli (i.e., only those participants identifying as committed or leaning Democrats viewed the Democratic primary debate and those committed or learning Republicans viewed the Republican primary debate).

A total of 135 respondents viewed the Democratic CNN/YouTube debate. This debate took place on July 23, 2007 in South Carolina and was broadcast nationally by CNN from 6:00 to 8:00 pm Central Standard Time. The debate included the following eight Democratic candidates: Illinois Senator Barack Obama, former vice-presidential candidate and North Carolina Senator John Edwards, New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel, Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd, Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. Of the 135 Democratic YouTube debate respondents, 73% (n = 99) were female and 27% (n = 36) were male. The mean age of the Democratic respondents was 19, and the respondents ranged in age from 18 to 29.

A total of 176 respondents viewed the Republican CNN/YouTube primary debate that occurred on November 28, 2007, in St. Petersburg, Florida and was broadcast nationally by CNN from 8:00 to 10:00 pm Eastern Standard Time. This debate included eight presidential candidates: California Congressman Duncan Hunter, Texas Congressman Ron Paul, Arizona Senator John McCain, former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, and Colorado Congressman Tom Tancredo. Of the 176 Republican debate respondents, 62% (n = 109) were female and 38% (n = 67) were male. Respondents’ ages ranged from 18 to 29, with a mean age of 19.

General election participants
A total of 198 students from six universities across the nation viewed the first general-election presidential debate on September 26, 2008. The 90-minute journalist-led debate between Senators Barack Obama and John McCain took place
at the University of Mississippi and was broadcast nationally by various networks. Jim Lehrer, anchor of the PBS *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, was the sole debate questioner. The general-election debate respondents included 56% (n = 111) females and 44% (n = 80) males (with 4% [n = 7] not identifying their sex). Party identification among the respondents was distributed as 41% (n = 82) Democrat, 28% (n = 55) Republican, 18% (n = 32) Independent, 5% (n = 10) Libertarian, and 8% (n = 15) Other. The mean age of the respondents viewing the first Obama-McCain presidential debate was 22, with respondents ranging in age from 18 to 38.

**Procedures**

Participants in all three experimental sessions were enrolled in basic communication courses and received credit for taking part in this research. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous. In each session, the respondents completed pretest questionnaires, which included demographic information and a series of items designed to measure the respondents’ political cynicism and their political information efficacy. The respondents then watched the debate in real time; and immediately following the debates the respondents completed a posttest questionnaire, which included repeat measures of the political cynicism and political information efficacy items.

**Measures**

To measure young citizens’ political cynicism, we used a measure consisting of eight scaled items that were adapted and expanded from the National Election Survey conducted by the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center. Variations of this measure have been used in previous studies (e.g., Kaid, 2003; Kaid, Johnston, & Hale, 1989; Kaid et al., 2000; McKinney, Spiker, & Kaid, 1998; Spiker, 2005; Spiker & McKinney, 1999; Wald & Lupfer, 1978). For each of the eight items, participants responded to a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (strongly agree). The items include: “Whether I vote or not has no influence on what politicians do”; “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does”; “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on”; “One cannot always trust what politicians say.” “One can be confident that politicians will do the right thing”; “Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a political campaign is over”; “Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think”; and “One never knows what politicians really think.” Across all three experimental sessions, the measure achieved acceptable Cronbach’s alpha levels for reliability, consistent with previous research utilizing this scale (Kaid, 2003). Additionally, a four-item scale was used to measure political information efficacy (PIE). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (using a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree) on four statements reflecting one’s level of confidence in their political knowledge (including “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics,” “I think that I am better informed about politics and
government than most people,’’ “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country,’’ and “If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for’’). Consistent with past research (e.g., Kaid et al., 2007; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007), Cronbach’s alpha for this measure across all three experimental sessions reached acceptable reliability.5

Analysis

The first two research questions were answered by summing the eight scaled items and using paired sample t tests to compare pre- and posttest means for the three different debates (the Democratic CNN/YouTube primary debate, the Republican CNN/YouTube primary debate, and the general-election presidential debate). Prior work (e.g., Kaid, 2003; Kaid et al., 1989, 2000; McKinney et al., 1998; Spiker, 2005; Spiker & McKinney, 1999) has typically summed the eight scaled items to provide a gestalt measure of one’s overall attitude of political cynicism. Finally, this study’s third research question asked if exposure to political debates affected young citizens’ level of political information efficacy (PIE). Here, paired sample t tests also were used to compare the pretest and posttest mean scores of the summed four PIE items for the three experimental debate-viewing sessions.

Results

In response to our first research question, evaluating if exposure to the CNN/YouTube primary campaign debates would affect respondents’ attitudes of political cynicism, the results indicate that young citizens viewing both the Democratic and Republican CNN/YouTube debates registered a significant decrease in their political cynicism following their exposure to the debates (see Table 1). The Democratic CNN/YouTube viewers’ pretest response (M = 3.32, SD = .60) was significantly greater than their mean posttest response (M = 2.98, SD = .58), t(134) = 7.78, p < .001, η² = .31; and the Republican CNN/YouTube viewers’ pretest response (M = 3.19, SD = .62) was also significantly greater than their mean posttest response (M = 3.03, SD = .60), t(172) = 4.60, p < .001, η² = .11 (keep in mind that for each of the eight items, scored 1 = disagree strongly to 5 = strongly agree, a lower score indicates respondents feel less political cynicism).

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Note. Higher scores indicate greater political cynicism. *p < .05. **p < .01.
Next, in addressing our second research question, examining whether exposure to a debate not targeted specifically to young voters would affect young citizens’ attitudes of political cynicism as much as the youth-targeted CNN/YouTube debates, results indicate that those who viewed the general-election presidential debate also registered a significant decrease in their overall level of political cynicism following exposure to the first Obama-McCain debate. General election debate viewers’ pretest response ($M = 3.16, SD = .59$) was significantly greater than their mean posttest response ($M = 3.00, SD = .60$), $t(197) = 4.95, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$.

Finally, to answer our third research question, whether exposure to political debates will increase young citizens’ political information efficacy, a paired sample $t$ test was conducted comparing individual’s political information efficacy pretest mean scores with their posttest scores in each of the three debates. Results revealed a significant difference for individuals viewing the Democratic CNN/YouTube debate. Here, the mean pretest response ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.02$) was significantly less than the mean posttest response ($M = 3.55, SD = 0.86$), $t(134) = -8.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$. (Remember that 1 = disagree strongly and 5 = strongly agree with each statement, thus a higher score indicates greater PIE.) For those watching the Republican CNN/YouTube debate, a significant difference in pre- to posttest change was also reported. The mean pretest response ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.04$) was significantly less than the mean posttest response ($M = 3.46, SD = 0.90$), $t(172) = -9.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$. Additionally, a significant pre- to posttest change also occurred for individuals viewing the journalist-led general election debate. Here, the mean pretest score ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.02$) was significantly less than the mean posttest response ($M = 3.81, SD = 0.88$), $t(197) = -4.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$. Thus, as Table 2 reports, after viewing both Democratic and Republican CNN/YouTube debates, as well as the journalist-led general election debate, young citizens reported greater political information efficacy, indicating that the debates significantly increased individuals’ confidence in their political knowledge.

**Discussion**

The primary purpose of this project was to determine if a youth-targeted political engagement message such as the CNN/YouTube debates could, in fact, enhance young citizens’ democratic attitudes. The results of the current investigation suggest that this campaign message did succeed in enhancing young citizens’ civic

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<th>Table 2</th>
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*Note. Higher scores indicate more confidence in one’s political knowledge. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.**
engagement attitudes. Viewers of both the Democratic and Republican CNN/YouTube debates achieved a significant reduction of their political cynicism. Our results also indicate that the manner or format in which one is exposed to candidates in debate seems to make little difference when it comes to alleviating young citizens’ political cynicism. Indeed, even without the inclusion of the hip, humorous, and heart-wrenching citizen videos, young citizens exposed to the rather sedate interrogation of Barack Obama and John McCain by Jim Lehrer also resulted in an overall reduction of young citizens’ cynicism. For 90 minutes, the only technology Lehrer used in his questioning of the presidential candidates was his voice and note cards.

Taken together, these findings point less to any sort of debate format effect and more so to the beneficial nature of candidate debates as a form of campaign communication that enhances important civic engagement attitudes. While the creators of the CNN/YouTube debates claimed their novel use of Internet technology “would change the face of presidential candidate debates” (Ricke, 2008, ¶. 2), we caution, based on the findings of this single study, any unquestioning drive to “technologize” campaign debates without a clear understanding as to the types of candidate debate encounters that might prove most beneficial for citizens. Describing the Commission on Presidential Debates—the organizer and official sponsor of all U.S. general-election presidential debates since 1987—Los Angeles Times columnist and blogger Jim Puzzanghera charged the Commission “hasn’t been known for cutting-edge technology. In many ways, it remains a creature…closer to the Lincoln-Douglas debates than bloggingheads.” In response, Janet H. Brown, Executive Director of the Commission, noted “We get blamed by people for being Neanderthals, but just because something is new doesn’t mean it’s a good idea to include it in the debates” (Puzzanghera, 2008, ¶. 4). Again, our results suggest that young citizens can be just as engaged through campaign debates conducted “the old fashion way” as they are via debates incorporating the latest digital bells and whistles. Here, our argument is not that we should abandon the use of technology in political communication practices—incorporating such technology appears to have beneficial effects; but we do reject the view that suggests if campaign discourse is not augmented by or facilitated with the latest digital communication technologies it is somehow deficient or otherwise ineffective. Our findings suggest otherwise.

Finally, it appears that debate messages, again no matter the format, significantly enhance young citizens’ political information efficacy (PIE). This finding also points to the beneficial nature of campaign debate dialogue. As an “information-rich” source of campaign communication, with candidates directly explaining their issue positions in a sustained manner (90 minutes of direct exposure to the two general-election candidates, and two hours with the primary candidates), debate viewers feel significantly more confident in the political knowledge they possess. A post hoc analysis of young citizens’ PIE is also revealing. As Table 2 shows, subjects’ level of PIE (predebate viewing) in the journalist-led debate (M = 3.63, SD = 1.02) is significantly greater than subjects’ predebate PIE for the CNN/YouTube debates (M = 3.08, SD = 1.04) when averaging both Democratic and Republican pre-PIE levels, t(197) = -5.32, p < .001, η² = -.13. This finding suggests that confidence in
one’s political knowledge may actually increase as the political campaign unfolds. Subjects’ general-election debate PIE was measured in late September of 2008, approximately 5 weeks before the conclusion of the nearly 2-year long presidential race. Yet, the CNN/YouTube primary debates occurred a year or more before the November 2008 vote; and while the primary debates did lead to an increase in subjects’ PIE, still at this early stage of the campaign subjects were significantly less confident in their political knowledge than those young citizens more than a year later who would soon be faced with making their electoral decision. The apparent increase in PIE over time suggests that the ongoing campaign—and debates in particular—help voters become more secure in their political knowledge and that they possess sufficient knowledge to engage the political process through such behaviors as voting.

Conclusion

Certainly, we do not believe that exposure to a single message like the CNN/YouTube debates or a general-election presidential debate serves as a panacea for the political engagement of young voters. In fact, we are unable to extrapolate from our results any claims at all about the actual voting, and other civic behaviors, of these young citizens. Yet, we are in full agreement with Delli Carpini’s (2004, p. 398) assessment that latent democratic attitudes and values such as political cynicism and efficacy “are positively associated with the amount and quality of democratic engagement.”

Clearly, much more work is needed to advance our understanding of both the civic engagement of young citizens and also our knowledge of the effects of various types of debate messages. First, as noted previously, this study represents one of the very few attempts to analyze the effects of a targeted campaign debate incorporating Internet technology on the intended audience. In the future, more attention should be paid to primary debates, as much more experimentation is found in primary debate formats, and specifically analysis that considers how different debate structures may affect viewers of these important campaign messages.

Perhaps one of the greatest limitations of the current study is that we attempted to understand the communicative engagement of young voters through examination of an isolated message. We acknowledged at the outset of this study that the CNN/YouTube debate was just one in a multitude of appeals designed to mobilize young citizens. Future analyses should capture the very complex campaign message environment, and specifically investigations that track the longevity of effects throughout the entirety of a campaign and also how a single message may interact with the many other campaign messages and events.

Finally, our study of young citizens’ political attitudes affected by debates responds to McKinney, Kaid, and Bystrom’s (2005, p. 23) call for engaged scholarship “through examination of actual civic engagement programs and interventions, assessing the extent to which such attempts are actually effective in promoting an engaged citizenry.” Our findings here suggest the CNN/YouTube debate was an effective youth engagement effort, yet not any more effective than a traditional
general-election presidential debate. Still, we encourage debate sponsors and broadcasters to continue to develop such forums that incorporate the voices and communication channels of young citizens. We hope, too, other scholars will join our efforts to identify those political communication practices that promote informed and active citizen involvement in the democratic process.

Notes

[1] YouTube has both debate sites archived, with the Democratic debate at www.youtube.com/democraticdebate and the Republican debate at www.youtube.com/republicandebate.
[2] Full transcripts for both debates can be found at the respective Web sites provided in the previous note.
[3] This item is reverse coded, with 1 = strongly agree and 5 = disagree strongly.
[4] Cronbach’s alpha was .63 for the pretest and .68 for the posttest in the CNN/YouTube debate; and .68 for the pretest and .72 for the posttest in the general-election debate.
[5] Cronbach’s alpha for political information efficacy was .86 for the pretest and .89 for the posttest in the CNN/YouTube debate and .90 for the pretest and .91 for the posttest in the general-election debate.

References


