

A Mythical Symbol: The Influence of Presidential Debates and their Limitation

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米大統領選テレビ討論会が有権者に与える影響を論ずるのが本稿の目的である。各候補者が自らの主張をぶつけ合う米大統領選テレビ討論会は、政治参加を促す重要な機会として知られている。これは、候補者の政治家としての能力や政策を対立候補と比較しながら知ることができるためである。さらに、政治教育的な効果もあり、特に政治的に対する知識が十分でない層に対しては、政治に対する理解を深める効果も実証的に検証されている。また、討論形式にも工夫があり、2008年選挙では司会者だけではなく、インターネットサイトから一般の有権者が候補者に質問をすることができる「CNN・ユーチューブ大統領選討論会」も導入され、大きな話題となった。しかし、大統領選テレビ討論会が有権者の実際の投票行動に与える影響については、次の4点において、大きく疑問視されている。第1点目は、討論の準備や内容に起因する。予備選はともかく総選挙の場合、特に候補者は何度も事前にリハーサルしていることもあり、自分の得意な政策を知り尽くしており、自分の失点になるような争点については、討論会では直接的な対立を避けようとする傾向にある。そのため、候補者の政治家としての実際の能力を討論会のやり取りで見極めることは、有権者にとって難しい。第2点目は、討論会内で各候補者に与えられる個々の質問に対する回答時間が非常に限られている点である。わずか数分間で、政策についての深い論議まで論ずることは至難の業である。第3点目は討論会の参加資格である。これまでの大統領選討論会では、1996年選挙では有力だったロス・ペローでさえも、一部の討論会にしか参加を認められなかった。このように、共和・民主両党以外の第三政党の候補者が討論会から排除されるなど、民主主義的な観点からの疑問も提示されている。第4点目は、討論会直後にメディアが行う世論調査の結果に視聴者が影響されてしまう点である。視聴者は実際の討論の内容ではなく、メディアが伝える「勝ち負け」の世論調査のデータをみて、候補者を判断する傾向にある。このように、大統領選テレビ討論会については、討論会視聴者の政治参加を促す重要な機会ではあるものの、有権者の投票行動に対する実際的な効果は比較的限定されており、討論会の重要度が一人歩きしている感がある。

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I : Preface

This study examines the advantages and disadvantages of the presidential debates in American politics. The debates are an important platform by which we can judge candidates by comparison. In debates, eloquence and appearance play a major role and their direct appeal to the public seems to maintain a healthy democracy. Indeed, televised debates are a unique form of communication through which a large audience can view the candidates one-on-one and contrast their viewpoints and personal styles. In the 2008 presidential primaries, popular social networking internet site *YouTube* provides a new interactive feature for the presidential debates. The CNN-YouTube presidential debates are a series of televised debates in which United States presidential hopefuls field questions submitted through popular sites (Braiker 2007, 1-2).

To many Japanese, American presidential debates in the American electoral system are the symbols of democracy and political openness. The reason why many Japanese idealize the American type political debate is deeply rooted in the political and media culture in Japan, which was at least until recently quite different from that of the US. The Japanese political recruitment process appears to be less democratic and tends to focus on covert negotiation between politicians and party bosses; therefore, the political ability of a candidate in Japan is equivalent to how close he or she is to the boss of the party, rather than the candidate's political capability, including his or her eloquence and personal attractiveness. Although Japanese politics has adopted several kinds of political debates in recent elections, the attention to the debates can not be equal to the American ones.

However, recent U.S. presidential campaign debates have met with widespread criticism. First, a direct confrontation in front of a camera by the candidates rarely occurs especially in the debates during the fall general election

periods, and the stated topics in debates tend to be vague. Second, the time allotment of the debates can hardly be adequate. Candidates want to cover such a wide range of foreign and domestic policy that each issue is limited to between one and two-and-a-half minutes. Hence, the audience cannot always obtain an adequate amount of information from candidates. Third, legitimate third party candidates, such as Ross Perot, cannot always participate in debates. Finally, the public can be influenced by the results of media polls; therefore, viewers have difficulty in making a decision based on their own views. Unfortunately, the power of televised debates is nothing more than a “myth,” and the debate format needs a substantial reform.

II : The Effects of Debates

The first nationally televised presidential debate was an intra-party discussion between Democrats Estes Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson in 1956. The first debate in a general election was contested between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988, 92, 120). Since then, presidential debates between the candidates have taken on increasing importance in both primary and general elections. Especially since 1976, televised debates have become institutionalized events of the American electoral process; presidential debates have revealed important positions of candidates and the aura surrounding presidential debates creates the sense that “history is in the making” (Dover 1994, 18-19).

The greatest advantage of the televised debate is the power to command a large audience. Over 60% of the adult population--an average of 77 million individuals --watched the first Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960. More than 120 million viewers saw the 1980 Carter-Reagan debates, and in 1984, the debates drew 85 million viewers. More recently, in 1992, the second Bush-Clinton-Perot debate attracted 69.9 million viewers. In the second presidential debate in the 1996 race, about 55 million viewer watched the confrontation between Clinton and Dole (Carmony 1996, D4). Even with the fluctuation of the number of viewers, the debates reached more members of the electorate than any other single campaign message (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988, 120-123, Carlin and McKinney 1994, 6). With this widespread accessibility, debates can potentially provide the electorate with vital information about issues and perhaps influence individual vote choice.

In addition, according to the research by Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon (1992), presidential debates greatly contribute political socialization among citizens, especially the youth. They claim that televised presidential debates simulate voters' awareness of and interest in political affairs, and promote discussion about these matters within families. This process helps young voters comprehend the workings of a political system and orient themselves within it (Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992, 174).

Moreover, debates are commonly believed to be as one of the biggest opportunities for challengers or “underdogs” to mobilize public support. In general, challengers or “underdogs” in polls tend to have the most to gain from debates. Since debates provide challengers opportunities to get their positions across to the public, incumbents tend to use the “Rose Garden Strategy.” Incumbents are more likely to avoid debating and take care of business at the White House by trying to impress voters with issues pertinent to the incumbents (Owen 1991, 114).

To evaluate a debate, rhetorical scholar Jeffrey Auer uses five criteria. He claims that a debate is supposed to involve (1) confrontation, (2) in equal and adequate time, (3) of matched contestants, (4) on a stated proposition, and (5) to gain an audience decision (146). A number of scholars have conducted quantitative researches following his criteria. Unfortunately, according to several studies researched by political scientists, the current debates are somehow divorced from these criteria. First, candidates rarely involve a direct confrontation in front of a camera. Secondly, the time allotment is hardly adequate. While candidates receive equal time to speak, they want to cover too wide a range of foreign and domestic policy. Within a total of about 30 minutes, each issue is limited to between one and two-and-a-half minutes (Trent and Friedenberg 1983, 233-235). Third, legitimate third party candidates cannot always participate in debates, although the major parties' contestants are matched. Next, the stated topics in debates tend to be vague (Carlin and McKinney 1994, 6-9, Owen 1991, 112-113). Finally, the audience cannot always obtain adequate information about candidates; thus, debates do not permit the audience to reach a final decision.

There is only limited evidence that debates help some people to make up their minds in an election. Therefore, the impact of debates has been overstated.

To illustrate this tendency, I will refer to research by political scholars and examine the several “mythical” impacts of debates. The following evidence studied by several scholars is sometimes conflicting; however, in general, the effect of debates is less influential than that of discussed debates in mass media.

The first defect of the debate is the lack of new information. Since debates in the general elections usually occur late in the election campaign, the information they provide might be redundant or repetitive. Debates might stimulate voters' recall of previously acquired knowledge about the candidate and the previously disseminated messages; however, little new information is given (Miller and MacKuen 1979, 288, Graber 1984, 213). Each candidate has been delivering the similar message from that of the primaries, and it might be difficult for them to provide new ideas to the voters.

According to Jamieson and Birdsell (1988), debates prefigure the candidates' character and skill in public communication, but reveal little else relevant to the presidency because of a lack of issues (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988, 181-190). This is because candidates tend to evade issue confrontation. Participants in the debates, especially the incumbents are so afraid of negative public impressions about them that they are less likely to negatively attack their contenders (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988, 90). Moreover, viewers are likely to make their assessments based on image-oriented characteristics, such as personality or trust. Voters tend to neglect the candidates' issues and their positions (Owen 1991, 115). Therefore, as in the first presidential debate in the 1996 campaign, both candidates attempt to rehearse well. The more participants “cram” their statements, the less they make a big gaffe; however, the less serious policy confrontations are discussed (Walker and Bentley 1996, 42, Grossberger 1996,78).

Second, presidential debates sometimes create an “information gap” among voters. The candidates tend to presuppose that the voters already have some knowledge about the candidates; therefore, debates increase the knowledge gap between informed and uninformed voters rather than flatten it. Those who already know a great deal about the candidates tend to learn more from debates, while those who are less aware from the beginning obtain very little useful information. The “uninformed” viewers confuse messages of the candidate because they do not have enough knowledge. Thus, the information gap between the

“knowledge-rich” and “knowledge-poor” is increased by debates (Owen 1991,115). However, there are some researchers who suggest otherwise. One example is the study by Lemert and his colleagues (1991). They conducted their own research on the debates of the 1980 Republican primaries and concluded that the gap between “knowledge-rich” and “knowledge-poor” is decreased by debates. They claim that even individuals with low motivation “will be exposed to, and learn from, televised debates” even to the extent that learning continues after the debates (Lemert et. al. 1991, 83). Their research might show what the viewers learn from debates during primaries are different from those from general elections.

Third, the “distortion” by media coverage of debates is a serious problem. According to the research by Rouner and Perloff, those who come to the debates uninformed are generally susceptible to the opinions expressed in post-debate analysis by the media. As a result, the media's debate coverage distorts or at least affects viewers more than the debate itself (Rouner and Perloff 1988, 141-147). This tendency is considered as follows: those voters who have difficulty in choosing a candidate or who are undecided at the time of the debates, are more likely than others to use the debates for campaign decision-making. This is because those with lower political interest and knowledge are more likely to be swayed by debates than are the highly sophisticated. They are influenced by a candidate's debate performance; however, they are more affected by the media coverage and analysis of the debate. In other words, those who are “uninformed” are less secure about their political decisions; therefore, they tend to rely on the media analysis rather than deciding after watching the debate itself (ibid.). In short, media evaluation promotes how the public judges the results because most people do not follow the content closely nor do they put much faith in their own evaluation (Wayne 1996, 240).

One of the most important criteria to evaluate a candidate in a debate is the public opinion poll after debates. These post-debate polls excessively augment debate performance. In 1976, in the midst of a debate with Jimmy Carter, President Gerald Ford answered a question about foreign policy by stating that the countries of Eastern Europe were free of Soviet domination. Soon after this blunder, public opinion polls about Ford's remark were conducted several times

and the polls affected his popularity. Apparently, the polls aggravated the mistake, and his weak-on-foreign policy image was fixed (Brace and Hinckley 1992, Chap.2). The poll can be a “catalyst” to accelerate the decision of viewers; however, it may falsify their views. In recent years, instant polls and surveys of focus groups have greatly shortened reaction to the debates. In 1992, one network reported poll results of a preselected group of respondents only 15 minutes after the debates was concluded (Wayne 1996, 240). Thus, the impact of public polls seems to have increased dramatically. Diana Owen concluded that the 1984 Mondale-Reagan debate focused more on the issues than the 1988 Bush-Dukakis debate. This is because the Bush campaign team sought to minimize the importance of debate and the issues discussed in it; the team was fully aware that Bush was leading in the polls and that debating was not his strong suit (Owen 1992, 116-138). Also, Thomas E. Patterson claims that the news media have tended to assess debates in terms of winners and losers. Concerning the “horse race” tendency, Patterson categorizes it as “an event schema” of media; journalism sees the political campaigns as events and “dramatizes” the campaigns (Patterson 1994, 62).

Finally, the effects of debates tend to be volatile and short-lived. Viewers of the debate change their opinions about candidates based on debate performance, yet these effects generally dissipate after four or five days. The viewer's memory of the debate tends to disappear by the election day in November (Miller and MacKuen 1976, 290). Concerning the short impact of debates a media scholar and former journalist, Marvin Kalb, once said in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, “It is just like eating Chinese food: It's enjoyable, but an hour later you're hungry” (Feldmann 1992, 7).

III. Unfairness--Institutional Difficulty for Third Party Candidates

Along with the preceding limited impact, another serious defect of has been pointed out: unfairness. Third party candidates have been excluded from televised presidential debates, except for the case of Ross Perot in the 1992 election. Televised debates have been sponsored by tax-exempt organizations such as the League of Women Voters or the Commission for Presidential Elections, and these organizations have certain rules for participation (e.g., the number

of accessible ballots). In 1980, a third party candidate, John Anderson, met the criteria set by the sponsor, but incumbent President Carter refused to debate opponent Reagan if Anderson was included (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988, 213). Therefore, the first presidential debate in 1980 became lackluster without Carter, the incumbent (Kraus 1983, 46-50). Similar to Anderson, Ross Perot was not allowed to join the 1996 presidential debates. Although Perot had an access to 50 states' ballots, the bipartisan presidential debate committee decided that Perot did not have a "realistic chance" to become president.

To oppose this inequality, Lenora Fulani of the New Alliance Party has filed suite against these organizations, contending their tax-exempt status is invalid. She thinks that their partisan political activity disqualifies them from tax exemption and only tax-exempt organizations should sponsor the debates (Magarian 1992, 838). There is no doubt that third party candidates are "underdogs" in debate participation, and this fact may affect their mobilization of the public.

As for unfairness, there is almost no official debate regulation. The Federal Communications Commissions Act of 1934 had required the networks to provide equal time to all candidates, including those of third parties; however, this "Fairness Doctrine" was literally repealed because of "the freedom of the press" (Gillispie 1993, 33). This provision had been a problem in conducting televised debates. In 1960, Congress temporality suspended the provisions of the act to all the Nixon-Kennedy debates. In 1976, 1980, and 1984 debates were covered as "news events" by networks. However, the demise of the Doctrine means the end of the equal legal ground for third party candidates. Gerald John Fresia, a scholar who strongly advocates the multi-party system, refers to the abolishment of the Fairness Doctrine and laments, "only when minor parties are given the same opportunities to mobilize their support and voice their concerns as Democrats and Republicans will there be space for fundamental political opposition" (Fresia 1986, 50).

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) worked hard to persuade Congress that the Fairness Doctrine intruded upon broadcasters' First Amendment rights (McAvoy 1993, 29). It is true that freedom of the press is one of the most prominent rights of the media; however, a considerable num-

ber of legal scholars and former judges emphasize that the Doctrine does not violate the First Amendment in any legal sense. Irving Kaufman, former Chief Justice of the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, said in 1983, “with campaign costs rising, candidates only the Government can guarantee less wealthy candidates the chance to appeal to the voters” (Kaufman 1983, 17). According to him, freedom is supposed to be accompanied by responsibility, and the active regulatory role of government is a “necessary evil” to maintain fairness in political campaigns. Therefore, the Doctrine had once played an important role in maintaining the fairness in broadcasting.

Compared with other developed countries, the alternative regulation for political fairness seems to be a necessity. Other countries such as the UK, Canada, and Japan require the networks to give all parties the same time for political addresses on television (*ibid.*). In Japan, five to seven minutes is allowed to all candidates, including minor parties, to address their political agenda.

IV. Conclusion

The presidential debates have become institutionalized since 1976 and have emerged as central events in American presidential campaigns. Televised debates can reach a large audience; thus, debates have potential influences in providing voters with important information by which to judge candidates. Moreover, in debates, candidates can discuss issues beyond confining soundbites. However, recent presidential campaign debates have met with widespread criticism by scholars; the effects are unexpectedly limited, and the public is very receptive to postdebate media influence rather than deciding their views by themselves. Debates are just one of many forms of political communication, no better or worse than commercials, speeches, press conferences, campaign pamphlets, radio talk shows, or internet web sites. Unfortunately, the power of televised debates is nothing more than a “myth,” and the debate format needs substantial reform.

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