

Polling on Presidential Debates, 1960-1992

by Sidney Kraus and Melanie Ross

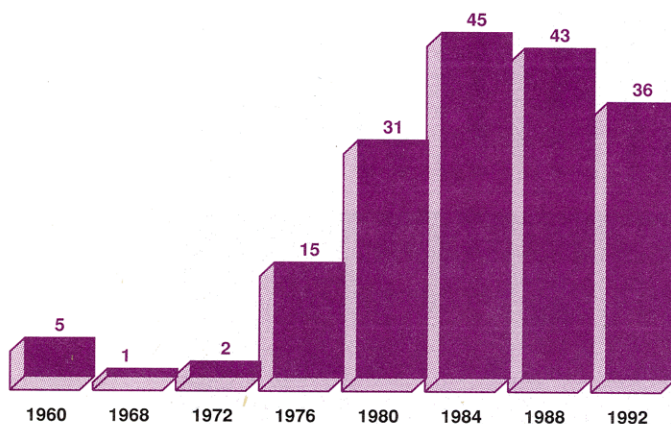
Televised debates have become institutionalized in our election campaigns. We have seen them affect a number of our notions about selecting a president.¹ Given the more frequent use of the presidential debate in campaigns over the past two decades, it is not surprising to find that opinion polls assessing the public's responses to this practice have grown apace.

To our knowledge, however, there have been no longitudinal studies yet attempted on debate effects. For pollsters, media personnel, and the general public, the engaging aspects of polling are the questions asked and the responses to them. But here we are dealing only with the former. We will concentrate primarily on the types

do the first polling on televised presidential debates) adds its total of 14 to CBS' overall participation.² In that lineup, CBS tops Gallup with a total of 47 polls.

The growth in debate polling over the years is associated with heightened support for debates by the general public. The increases in the general election years of 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988 and, to a slightly lesser extent in 1992, are especially dramatic. See Figure 1.

Figure 1
Number of Debate Polls by Election Years, 1960 - 1992



Note: Debate polling totals in years not shown. Only 1 poll was conducted in each of following years: 1970, 1971, 1974, 1979, 1983, 1986 and 1993. Five were conducted in 1987.

of questions asked and the number of times they were asked over time since the presidential debate was first introduced in 1960. We hope that this modest undertaking will eventually lead to a comprehensive analysis of the effect on public opinion of the presidential debate and its implications for presidential selection. More detailed versions of this study were presented at the 1995 annual conventions of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and its midwest affiliate (MAPOR).

Growth of Debate Polling

During the period 1960-1993, 27 different survey organizations conducted polls that included questions about presidential debates (Table 1). These organizations conducted a total of 205 polls, asking 784 questions related to presidential debates during the 33 years examined. The Gallup Organization led the field with 39 polls, followed by CBS/New York Times, 34, and the Los Angeles Times, 17. That ranking is altered when CBS News (which commissioned the Roper Organization in 1960 to

The Questions Asked

With the growth of polling, the number of debate-related questions asked obviously also increased. The five polls conducted in 1960 asked 14 questions about the debates. The 37 polls conducted in 1992 asked 130 questions (Table 2). The most frequently asked questions in eight of the nine election years between 1960 and 1992 are listed by category in Table 2, and rank-ordered by the number of questions asked during the entire time span. Questions about candidates' personal characteristics were the most numerous (183). Those asking about general knowledge of the debates were a close second (182).

This pattern should give us some insight into why certain questions were asked in a given election year. In the elections of '76, '80, '84, and '88, there was a steady and significant rise in the number of questions asked about the candidates' characteristics. Certain events in those years may account for this development. The year 1976 was only the second time in 16 years that a presidential campaign included televised debates. In 1980, admiration for Ronald Reagan, actor and great communicator in the race for president, prompted much interest in his persona, his ability to debate, etc., and may have been respon-

Table 1
Who Has Polled In The Debates?
Number of Polls, By Survey Organizations, By Year

Survey Organization/ Sponsor	Years of surveys, # of polls	Survey Organization/Sponsor	Years of surveys, # of polls
ABC News in conjunction with the Kennedy School	1983 (1)	LOS ANGELES TIMES	1979 (1), 1980 (3), 1984 (2), 1987 (1), 1988 (7), 1992 (2)
ABC News	1980 (1), 1984 (1), 1988 (5), 1992 (5)	Market Strategies for Americans Talk Issues	1983 (1)
ABC/Louis Harris Research	1976 (1), 1980 (3)	NBC News	1984 (3), 1992 (2)
ABC/WASHINGTON POST	1984 (4), 1988 (3), 1992 (1)	NBC News/Associated Press	1980 (3)
AP/Media General	1984 (1), 1986 (1)	NBC News/ WALL STREET JOURNAL	1988 (1)
CBS/NEW YORK TIMES	1976 (5), 1980 (9), 1984 (11), 1988 (5), 1992 (4)	Opinion Research Corporation for The Nixon Campaign	1968 (1)
CBS News	1976 (1), 1980 (2), 1988 (5), 1992 (5)	Opinion Research Corporation for TV GUIDE	1987 (2)
Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan	1980 (1), 1984 (1)	Opinion Research Corporation	1972 (1)
Gallup for CNN/USA Today	1992 (8)	Penn & Schoen Associates for Garth Analysis	1984 (1)
Gallup for NEWSWEEK	1980 (2), 1984 (3), 1988 (1), 1992 (1)	Princeton Survey Research for Times Mirror	1992 (2)
Gallup for Times Mirror	1988 (3)	Princeton Survey Research for US NEWS AND WORLD	1992 (1)
Gallup	1960 (4), 1970 (1), 1972 (1), 1974 (1), 1976 (2), 1980 (2), 1984 (7), 1987 (1), 1988 (2)	Research & Forecaast for Hearst Corporation	1987 (1)
Gordon Black for USA TODAY	1984 (3), 1988 (2)	The Roper Org. for CBS News	1960 (1)
Gordon Black	1984 (1)	The Roper Org. for TV Guide	1988 (2)
NBC News/WALL STREET JOURNAL	1992 (2)	The Roper Org. for TV Information Office	1980 (1)
KRC Communications for American Political Network	1988 (4)	The Roper Org.	1976 (3), 1980 (2), 1984 (1)
Louis Harris & Associates for BUSINESS WEEK	1984 (2)	Voter Research & Surveys for ABC/CBS/NBC/CNN	1992 (1)
Louis Harris & Associates	1971 (1), 1984 (3), 1987 (1), 1988 (1), 1992 (1)	Yankelovich Clancy Schulman for TIME	1988 (2)
LOS ANGELES TIMES and CNN	1988 (1)	Yankelovich Clancy Schulman for TIME/CNN	1992 (1)
		Yankelovich, Skelly, White for TIME	1976 (3), 1980 (2), 1984 (1)

Table 2
Number of Debate Poll Questions, By Topic and Year

Year	All Questions	Personal characteristics of candidates	Knowledge of the debate; likelihood of watching it	Will the debate influence your vote?	Who won the debate?	Media influence as to who won	Issues separating the candidates
1960	14	1	7	2	4	0	0
1968	4	0	2	1	1	0	0
1972	3	1	2	0	0	0	0
1976	58	6	25	9	17	0	1
1980	111	34	34	31	8	0	4
1984	188	39	48	41	31	11	18
1988	235	85	34	26	42	36	12
1992	130	17	30	49	25	6	3
Total	743	183	182	159	128	53	38

Note: In contrast to the presidential election years listed above, other years reveal little polling activity on the debates, e.g., 1974 - 1 question; 1979 - 3 questions; 1986 - 1 question; 1990 - 2 questions.

sible for the surge in the number of character askings (34) that year. In 1984 the further rise (39) may have been due to the mounting attention given to women in politics (New York Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro became Mondale's running mate in that election). In 1988, Gary Hart's alleged extramarital activities, one of the major news stories in 1987, generated considerable interest in the character dimension in that election year and may have accounted for the near doubling of the character questions asked that year.

Few Character Askings in 1992

We pondered the meaning of the significant drop in the personal characteristics askings in 1992 (down to 17 from 85 in 1988), and concluded that the change came about as a result of a three-way presidential race between President Bush, and candidates Clinton and Perot, and the changing debate formats. Still, we remained a bit uneasy about this finding. We expected to discover that allegations of Clinton's extramarital

activity would emerge in a fashion similar to Hart's alleged indiscretions in the 1988 campaign, and with similar consequences. That was not the case. Investigations of other presidential polls—local, regional, candidate, campaign, etc., and those not associated with presidential debates *per se*, may shed some light on the anomaly.

Thoughts for a Future Study

This study, as we've suggested, is merely an introduction to a larger investigation into the effect of presidential debates on public opinion and voting outcomes. A future study would have to include a thorough analysis of both question responses and the election campaigns in which these questions were put to the electorate.

Endnotes

¹ See, Sidney Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy* (Hillside, NJ: Earlbaum Assoc., Inc., 1988). The second edition of this book is due out in 1997.

² The Roper Center found a fascinating set of

questions about debates in their archive, dating as far back as 1940. In August of that election year, Wendell Willkie challenged Franklin D. Roosevelt to a debate. The Gallup question asked if people would like to see that debate (42% responded yes; 44% said no). About a month later, Roper, commissioned by *Fortune*, asked the public, "Would you like Roosevelt to take up Willkie's challenge to debate?" (48% yes; 31% no; 12% don't care). Roper also asked about a debate on the declaration of war. In March-April, 1952, Gallup asked, "[What is the most important problem to be debated in the coming presidential election?]" and which party can best handle that problem. Again, on March 8-13, 1956, Gallup asked the same questions.



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