spectra

HOW COMMUNICATION SHAPES THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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spectra

Spectra, the magazine of the National Communication Association (NCA), features articles on topics that are relevant to Communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners. Spectra is one means through which NCA works toward accomplishing its mission of advancing Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry.

NCA serves its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems. NCA supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion.

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In this issue

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DID YOU KNOW

More than 450 Communication scholars are members of NCA's Political Communication Division. NCA Divisions are made up of colleagues who share an interest in an area of substantive inquiry. To learn more about the Political Communication Division and NCA's 48 other Divisions, visit www.natcom.org/nca-interest-groups.

Let's Communicate During Election Season!

By Kent A. Ono, Ph.D.

Besides Political Science, few disciplines are as important to political elections as is Communication. Why is that? Well, of course, during elections there is an abundance of communication, ranging from caucuses, political advertising, news articles, and social media posts, to conversations in homes and at work, to general information about voting. A staple of presidential election years, as well, are political debates and news and comedy interviews. Branding of candidates and campaigns also is very much alive, as in the traditional slogans, banners, buttons, stickers, bumper stickers, pens, bags, flags, and placards, but also in the less typical election–themed clothing, mouse pads, towels, mugs, koozies, baseball caps, onesies, bibs, coins, cell phone covers, totes, gym bags, fanny packs, baseballs, and scented candles.

Yes, communication plays a vital, indeed ubiquitous, role in U.S. elections. But what can Communication scholars and professionals do to help? I suggest that we can continue to play significant civic, political, and educational roles during this election year, and that we also can develop new ways to participate.

The purpose of this brief article is, first, to help jump start our thinking about how we, as scholars, professionals, and teachers, can lend our knowledge and expertise to others. To do this, I review a few of the ways Communication scholars and practitioners have researched, provided service, and taught students and broader publics about elections. In other words, I start by reminding all of us of what we already know. My second goal is to encourage us to plan ahead in order to make the most effective contributions possible.

Let's begin with research. Communication research is so important to elections that *Wikipedia* now has an entry titled, "Research strategies of election campaign communication research." As narrow as that focus is, the entry tells us that "The overall purpose of conducting election campaign communication research is to reveal how election campaigns are organized with regard to communicational aspects as well as to show how and with what effect election campaigns are covered by media reports."

To offer a more scholarly optic, political communication and public opinion research stand out as two prominent Communication specialties that are relevant to elections. Additionally, though, Communication research, ranging from media and mass communication to interpersonal communication to strategic and international communication, has myriad connections to presidential elections. Researchers have studied political style; rhetorical and discursive aspects of speeches and other election discourse; the various uses of social media platforms to affect election outcomes; presidential debate themes; the discussion of social, economic, and political themes during political campaigns; and social movements' influence on political campaigns. Furthermore, the Communication discipline has contributed to our knowledge about the role of specific media, such as television, on campaigns; presidential image–making; the election and international relations; and the role of the presidency and presidential campaigns on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and national identity and politics.

Of course, communication professionals are responsible for designing, analyzing, and understanding surveys,

polls, and focus group feedback. Some professionals have created computer and clicker technologies to facilitate the communication of public opinion. Indeed, public opinion research, both academic and professional, is a mainstay of presidential elections in the United States.

Communication scholars and professionals also have contributed significantly through public service and applied communication, sometimes even crafting presidential speeches. Others have planned and organized debates. Still others have helped run or served as advisors and consultants on political campaigns. Even more, however, have given interviews for news stories or have written news articles, blog posts, tweets, or op-eds. Whether one leads community discussions, uses conflict resolution techniques to help iron out disagreements, helps host local, regional, or national debates, teaches scholarly interviewees how to give effective news interviews about election candidates, or uses social media to post helpful information about Communication research that is relevant to elections, there is much Communication scholars and professionals do, can do, and have done to help people better understand elections.

Many of us have undoubtedly talked with our students about understanding the role of communication in presidential elections, and this is where teaching Communication during an election year is particularly important. Reviewing course syllabi in the discipline, I see that topics covered range from political campaign communication to campaign speeches, from the history of freedom of the press to public opinion research, from the history of campaigns to contemporary campaign management and strategies, from theories of democracy to public election policies and laws, from quantitative media effects research on campaign appeals on social media to the role of social pressure on voting, from demographic data about prospective voters to the diversity of elected officials, from persuasion to ideology, from fake news to narrowcasting, from media convergence to hybrid media strategies, from promoting free speech to regulating hate speech, from the role of PACS to media ownership, from how to report on campaigns to increasing access to campaign information, and from media literacy to translating science communication to the public.

Communication instructors need not focus solely on elections; they can tailor lessons that are relevant to suit individual courses. So, for example, in an Introduction to Intercultural Communication course, we could include a section about how various cultural groups are targeted by presidential election appeals differently, depending on the social media platform used. An Interpersonal Communication course could have a section on dyadic communication and family conversations about voting. And, a Mass Communication or Media Communication course could simply incorporate a section on election coverage, the political economy of political campaigns, or media ownership and political ideology.

Suffice it to say that there is much Communication scholars and practitioners have done and can do. Part of what it takes is an interest in and motivation to use our expertise. Figuring out how to use that expertise is, in fact, a much easier second step. ∎

Spotlight

The Status of Student-Loan Debt

In November 2019, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York released its *Quarterly Report on Household Debt and Credit*, which features data on the status of the nation's student-loan debt. The report shows a steady increase in student-loan debt balance over time; as of the third quarter of 2019, student loan debt totaled $1.5 trillion. From Quarter 1 of 2018 to Quarter 3 of 2019, the overall total student-loan debt balance increased by $90 billion.

Total Student-Loan Debt Balance by Year and Quarter
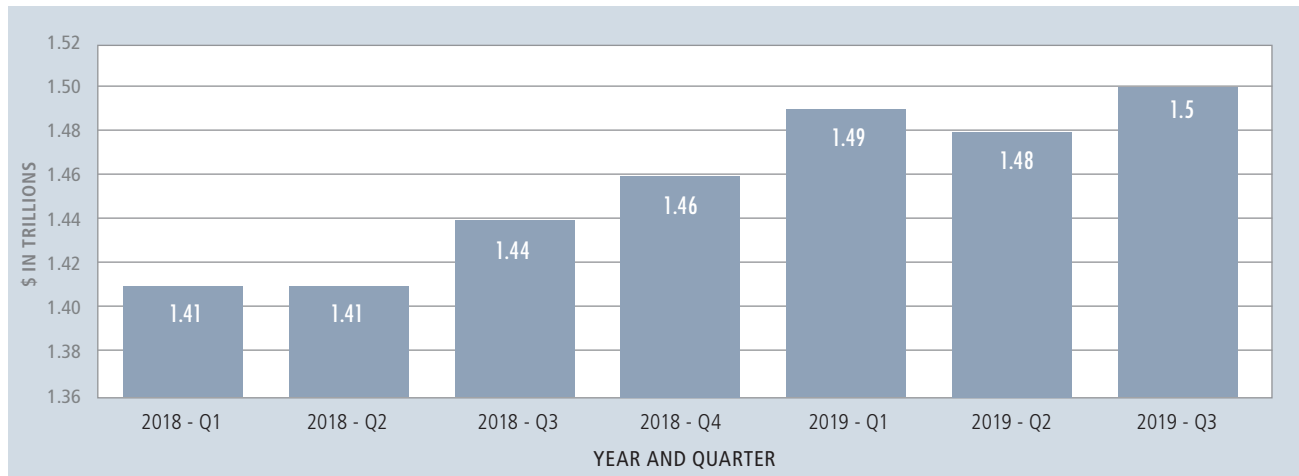
The report also reveals a relationship between age and student-loan debt share. In all age categories except the 30- to 39-year-old age group, student-loan debt share decreased as age increased. The chart below shows that individuals aged 30–39 have the highest student-loan debt share of any age group. In Quarter 3 of 2019, 18- to 29-year-olds held $370 billion in student-loan debt, while only $20 billion was held by those 70 and older.

Student Loan-Debt Share by Age: 2019 - Quarter 3
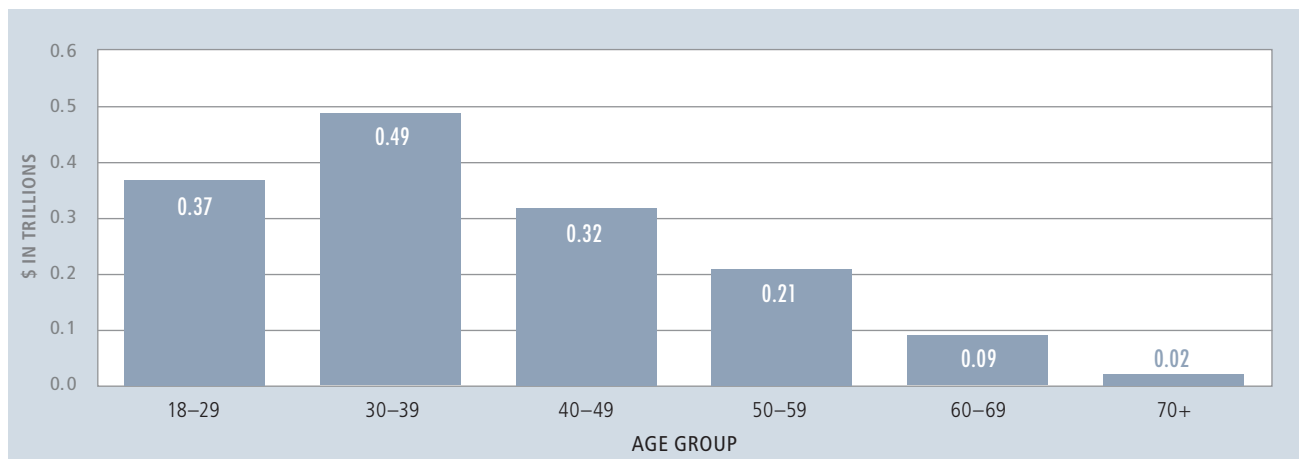
Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, *Quarterly Report on Household Debt and Credit,* November 2019. https://www.newyorkfed.org/microeconomics/databank.html

NSF Division Renamed to Include Communication

The National Science Foundation (NSF) recently renamed the Science of Science & Innovation Policy (SciSIP) program. The new program name is Science of Science: Discovery, Communication, and Impact (SoS:DCI). This re-naming marks the first time Communication is included in the title of an NSF research funding program.

The SoS:DCI program is designed to increase the public value of scientific activity. The program supports research that aims to increase the rate of socially beneficial discovery, improve science communication outcomes, and expand the societal benefits of scientific activity. The program will fund research that builds theoretical and empirical understandings of these areas.

Proposal deadlines are rolling. The next deadline is September 9, 2020. Proposals will be due annually in both February and September beginning in 2021.

To read more about the SoS:DCI program, funding areas, and application procedures, visit the NSF at https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=505730. ⬤

Benjamin R. Warner, Mitchell S. McKinney, Josh C. Bramlett, Freddie J. Jennings, and Michelle Elizabeth Funk, "Reconsidering Partisanship as a Constraint on the Persuasive Effects of Debates," *Communication Monographs,* DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2019.1641731.

This study challenges the idea that presidential debates have little persuasive potential. Using the theory of partisan-motivated reasoning as a framework, the authors analyzed responses from thousands of debate viewers over the course of 15 presidential and vice-presidential debates from 2004 to 2016. Results show that debates increase favorability of the viewer's inparty candidate, and have no consistent effect on favorability of the outparty candidate. The authors stress that vote change is a restrictive measure of persuasion, and they emphasize that changes in existing attitudes among debate viewers can have significant effects on campaign outcomes.

Donovan O. Schaefer, "Whiteness and Civilization: Shame, Race, and the Rhetoric of Donald Trump," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies,* DOI: 10.1080/14791420.2019.1667503.

This essay explores the role that shame plays in our politics, specifically in the case of Donald Trump. Grounded in affect theory and using examples from Trump's candidacy and presidency, Schaefer highlights the visual and verbal techniques Trump employs to capitalize on white shame and convert it to a sense of dignity. Schaefer stresses that we must develop a vocabulary that encompasses the dynamics of shame and dignity to understand Trump's rhetorical techniques. The essay concludes by emphasizing that with politicians continuing to use white shame as leverage for mobilizing support, the use of shame as a resource in our politics requires further investigation.

Freddie J. Jennings, "An Uninformed Electorate: Identity-Motivated Elaboration, Partisan Cues, and Learning," *Journal of Applied Communication Research 47* (2019): 527-547.

In this article, the author constructs the theory of identity-motivated elaboration to evaluate the effects of partisan cues on political learning outcomes. The author distributed one of three op-ed articles to hundreds of participants that were divided into a control group, a nonpartisan group, and a partisan group. Findings indicate messages containing partisan cues interfere with learning and impact the valence of elaboration. The article notes that these findings are significant because Americans frequently rely on partisan signals to form opinions about policy. The author argues that media outlets should refrain from engaging in issue dualism in order to fulfill their responsibility of creating a well-informed electorate, as the strength of our democracy depends on it. ⬤

NCA 106th Annual Convention

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November 19–22, 2020 • Indianapolis, Indiana

COMMUNICATION
AT THE CROSSROADS

In 2020, the National Communication Association's 106th Annual Convention will be held in Indianapolis, IN. The city is home to a flourishing culinary scene, dynamic clubs and entertainment venues, amazing museums, and eclectic specialty shops located in numerous cultural districts near the convention hotel. Its unique urban landscape offers innovative architecture and stylistic design, more monuments than any city outside of Washington, DC, and a vast city-center park featuring greenspaces, trails, and waterways. There really is something for everyone in this incredible city.

The convention theme, "Communication at the Crossroads" is designed to provide special opportunities to come together and to examine and discuss future directions for research, teaching, and the Communication discipline itself. Crossroads symbolize connection and convergence of scholarship, choice and direction for research and teaching, and choice and direction for the discipline. Now more than ever, the discipline is positioned at a place of transformation. These are exciting times for our discipline and our association. Please join us.

—David T. McMahan, NCA First Vice President

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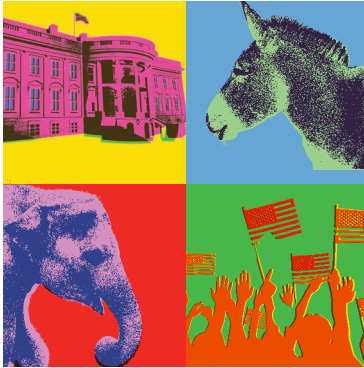
HOW COMMUNICATION SHAPES THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

P olitical communication is everywhere, from Super Bowl ads to trending topics on Twitter to candidates' conversations with supporters on Instagram live. In this issue of *Spectra*, authors address numerous facets of communication and the 2020 presidential campaign.

Scholars of presidential rhetoric often examine 20th century presidents in light of the "rhetorical presidency." In contrast to this traditional style, Jennifer Mercieca argues that "Trump's 'modern day presidential' communication strategy relies upon outrage for its effectiveness, which makes it very different from any previous president." According to Mercieca, Trump uses both traditional and social media to stoke outrage.

Of course, Trump is not alone in using social media to speak directly with supporters. Every one of the Democratic presidential hopefuls uses multiple social media sites to get their message out to the public. Recapping a recent classroom discussion that she led, Diana Zulli writes, "Nearly every student had an opinion about one or more of the candidates, noting how they 'liked' Andrew Yang, 'respected' Elizabeth Warren, and did not seem to 'connect' with Beto O'Rouke. When asked to provide an example of why certain candidates were more likable, respectable, and relatable than others, every student pulled out their cell phone."

Although candidates embrace the opportunity to communicate directly with voters through social media, traditional media continues to be important. Shawn Turner traces the rise of modern presidential campaign coverage, noting that while news outlets now spend billions of dollars covering campaigns, "Americans' news consumption has declined dramatically over the past six decades and the electorate's trust in the integrity of press reporting continues to decrease."

News coverage may have been a factor in the departure of Kamala Harris, Corey Booker, and Julián Castro from the presidential race. Kristina Horn Sheeler argues that a diverse candidate field is not enough without other changes: "Numbers are important, but they are not sufficient… we need to eliminate reliance on media frames that position women and people of color as unsuitable for the Oval Office. Doing so may mean we have ushered in an era that values gender and racial justice."

The debate format may have also affected whether candidates had an equal chance in a crowded field of candidates. Benjamin R. Warner, Mitchell S. McKinney, and Mary C. Banwart trace the trajectory of the 2020 Democratic primary debates. In their essay, Warner, McKinney and Banwart seek to answer two questions: "First, do crowded field debates help voters make informed decisions, or is a large field of debate participants more likely to confuse or overwhelm viewers? Second, does the near-doubling of the number of candidates invited to participate in the early debates allow lesser-known candidates to work their way into contention?"

We hope you enjoy these insights into campaign comm–unication during the 2020 presidential election season.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE
OUTRAGE
PRESIDENCY

By Jennifer Mercieca, Ph.D.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump explained that being "presidential" was boring. He didn't plan to be boring, he told his rally crowds, though he could be as presidential as anyone, he said—if he *wanted* to be. It turned out that he did not want to be presidential, though he did want to be president. Nearly halfway through the first year of his presidency, Trump declared on Twitter that his presidency was better than *merely* presidential. It was "MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL."

That tweet was an apologia in response to criticism about how Trump conducted himself in office. Earlier that day, Trump's account had tweeted "The FAKE & FRAUDULENT NEWS MEDIA is working hard to convince Republicans and others I should not use social media —but remember, I won the 2016 election with interviews, speeches and social media. I had to beat #FakeNews, and did. We will continue to WIN!" Trump thought that his use of Twitter was a source of great power and he wasn't about to give it up without a fight. The "fake" media had been criticizing Trump's use of Twitter (and calling him "unpresidential") because of disparaging tweets he had sent earlier that week complaining about how "Morning Joe" hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Kelly— "low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe"—treated him on their show.

Trump's apologia strategy was to use differentiation— his presidency wasn't boring and "presidential," but was exciting and "modern day presidential." Trump's self–defense didn't stop media criticism about his tweets; it added to the criticism. In response, early the next morning, Trump's account tweeted a doctored video of Trump's 2007 World Wrestling Entertainment appearance in which Trump appears to tackle and severely beat a person whose head has been replaced with the CNN logo. Even more controversy over whether or not Trump's use of social media was appropriately "presidential" ensued, of course. "Instead of preparing for his overseas trip, his first meeting with Vladimir Putin, dealing with North Korea and working on his health care bill," wrote CNN in a statement, "he is instead involved in juvenile behavior far below the dignity of his office. We will keep doing our jobs," promised CNN; "He should start doing his."

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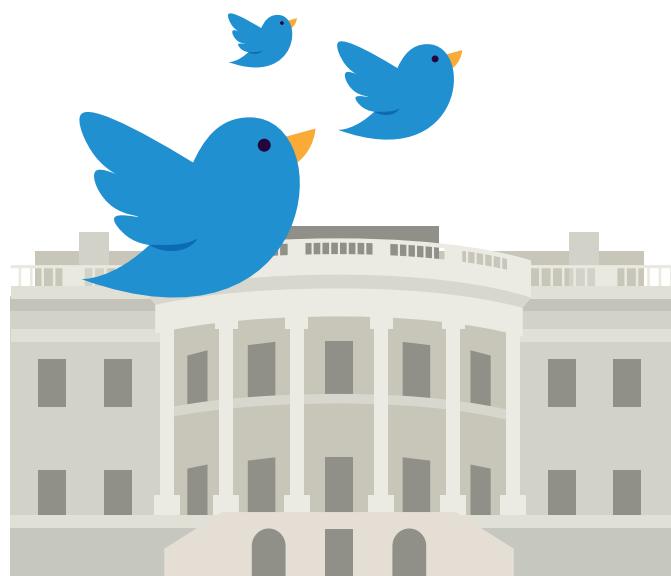
TRUMP'S COMMUNICATION STYLE IS A LOGICAL EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRESS AND THE PRESIDENCY, REPRESENTING THE SHIFT FROM THE "RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY" TO THE "POST-RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY."

Trump did not change his behavior, nor did he quit using social media to try to set the nation's agenda, frame the nation's understanding of controversial events, and defend himself from what he perceived as vicious and disingenuous attacks. "On the 1,001st day of his tenure," wrote Peter Baker in the *New York Times*, "all pretense of normalcy went out the window." On that day, Trump told a rally crowd in Dallas, Texas that he could "be more presidential than any president in history, except for Honest Abe Lincoln." Who could compete with "the hat?" Trump joked. He said that it was actually "*much* easier being presidential," before impersonating an officious-sounding president as he explained, "all you have to do is act like a stiff!" Trump's rally crowd laughed at his version of a "presidential" president. "The media would love it," said Trump, because "everybody would be outta here so fast. You wouldn't have come in the first place."

As Trump told his rally crowd in Dallas, his "modern day presidential" communication style kept his crowds entertained and attentive. What he didn't say—but is obvious from the way that Trump defends himself on Twitter—is that he keeps us entertained and attentive with communication strategies that are designed to stoke outrage in his base, his opposition, and the mainstream media gatekeepers. Donald Trump is the outrage president. His communication style is calibrated perfectly for the metrics that dominate our public sphere: attention and engagement. Trump's communication style is a logical evolution of the relationship between the press and the presidency, representing the shift from the "rhetorical presidency" to the "post-rhetorical presidency."

FROM THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY TO THE POST-RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY

Scholars of presidential leadership have traditionally worked within the paradigm of the "rhetorical presidency," which is an institutional argument about the way that 20th century presidents went over the heads of Congress

to speak directly to the people in the hope that the people would pressure Congress to enact the president's agenda. According to the rhetorical presidency model, the press and the presidency once cooperated to distribute news to the public, which upset the balance of powers between the branches of government, making the Executive Branch more powerful than Congress.

In *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffery Tulis explained that "the modern mass media…facilitated the development of the rhetorical presidency by giving the president the means to communicate directly and instantaneously to a large national audience, and by reinforcing the shift from written message to verbal dramatic performance." In return for its cooperation, the press gained access to the president and content for its news reports. But the relationship between the press and the president was threatened in the post-Watergate era. By the turn of the century, presidents could no longer count on the press to carry their message to the people. Shanto Iyengar writes in *Media Politics* that the average sound bite on network news broadcasts in 1968 was more than 60 seconds long; by 2004 the average sound bite was just 7.7 seconds. Presidents and candidates found that it was hard to communicate with the public effectively; the media filtered out their message. New and social media gave candidates and presidents new opportunities for leverage over the press, changing the relationship between the press and the presidency.

In 2007, Stephen Hartnett and I described in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* the "post-rhetorical presidency" of George W. Bush. We thought that Bush's presidential communication was characterized less by the rhetorical presidency's model of "eloquence, logic, pathos, or narrative storytelling," and more by the public relations techniques of "ubiquitous public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection." It made sense that with soundbites as short as they were and audiences fractured into smaller and smaller bits, presidents would communicate more often in the hope of getting their

messages through the news filter. We didn't know, however, whether Bush was an anomaly, or if the way that he communicated represented the new normal.

It became clear with Barack Obama's presidency that the older notion of the "rhetorical presidency" just didn't make sense anymore and that we were now firmly in the era of the post-rhetorical presidency. The fracturing of media and the rise of social media had fundamentally changed the relationship between the press and the presidency. If "the era of the rhetorical presidency was characterized by a relationship between the presidency and the press that was reciprocal, mutually beneficial, and stable," then "the era of the post-rhetorical presidency is characterized by a relationship between the presidency and the press that is independent, competitive, and unstable," I explained in "Ignoring the President," a chapter in the 2017 book, *From Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age.* As George W. Bush had done, Obama also used "post-rhetorical" communication strategies to "go over the heads of Congress and *around the news filter* to speak directly to supporters."

Obama's post-rhetorical presidency relied upon three communication strategies: 1) strict message control; 2) going around the news filter by speaking directly to supporters; and, 3) using social media to create intimacy between the president and his followers. Obama's 2008 campaign built a massive phone and email database and used it to communicate directly with his supporters, avoiding the media filter whenever possible. The *Electing the President* election post-mortems of 2008 and 2012 explain why Obama's campaign adopted these strategies. "One of the things that we did," explained Chief Communications Officer Anita Dunn, "was communicate, by and large, most of our news [directly] to our supporters." By the 2012 campaign, Obama's team had expanded his online network so that he was connected to "90 percent of Facebook users in the United States," according to Deputy Campaign Manager Stephanie Cutter. Cutter explained that Obama's

campaign used Facebook to run a vertical (top-down) and horizontal (friend-to-friend) campaign because "people trust their information when it's coming from a Facebook friend much more than if it's me on TV saying something." In communicating directly with supporters, Obama's campaign was able to both control the candidate's message and develop intimacy between him and his supporters. According to Democratic National Committee Director of Communications Karen Finney, "people really want to feel like they're part of a community. Engaging people, and making them feel like they're getting a little bit of an inside look into the campaign or they're really a part of something bigger will make you far more successful." Avoiding the news filter and taking his message directly to supporters won elections for Obama. Other campaigns adopted his strategies.

In his 2016 campaign and throughout his presidency, Donald Trump has used the same three general communication strategies that Obama used: message control, going around the media filter, and using social media to cultivate intimacy between Trump and his supporters. Trump acts as his own communications director, and his Twitter account acts as his unofficial press secretary, which allows him to control and disseminate his messages and to use para-social interaction to create intimacy between himself and his supporters. Yet, while Obama and Trump are both post-rhetorical presidents—

BY THE STANDARDS OF ELOQUENCE, PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC, OR DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION, TRUMP'S OUTRAGE PRESIDENCY IS ABHORRENT. OUTRAGE IS EFFECTIVE AT ONE THING: IT GAINS ATTENTION.

both have used their communication strategies to go over the heads of Congress and around the news filter—they communicate very differently. Obama was post-rhetorical and "presidential," while Trump is post-rhetorical and "modern day presidential."

TRUMP, THE OUTRAGE PRESIDENT

Trump's "modern day presidential" communication strategy relies upon outrage for its effectiveness, which makes it very different from any previous president, including the two previous "post-rhetorical" presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. As he explained to his Dallas rally crowd, Trump uses outrage to drive attention and engagement to his messages. By the standards of eloquence, presidential rhetoric, or democratic deliberation, Trump's outrage presidency is abhorrent. Outrage is effective at one thing: it gains attention, which allows Trump to dominate our public sphere.

Michael Goldhaber explained in *Wired* in 1997 that the "information age" had made information so accessible and ubiquitous that it had little value. What was valuable within the information age was what was scarce, he argued—our ability to give attention to information. "We are drowning in information, yet constantly increasing our generation of it," wrote Goldhaber; therefore, attention was the "natural economy of cyberspace." As a scarce and finite resource, "the attention economy" was "a zero-sum game. What one person gets, someone else is denied." Getting attention was rewarding because along with it came the powers of agenda setting, priming, and framing. "If you get attention," he wrote, "that means you have some control over both the thoughts and actions of those paying it to you." Goldhaber predicted that the new logics of the information age would eventually divide the world into "audiences, entourages, and what could be called attention communities"—communities "centered on some topic [that] includes a number of stars, along with their fans." He also predicted that people and

institutions would go to great lengths to attract attention within the attention economy, because "as many a disobedient child knows, negative attention can be better than none at all. On the Web, if you're adept," explained Goldhaber, "you can use notoriety to bring more notice to yourself." In the zero-sum game of the attention economy, the "modern day presidential" strategies that Trump uses—attacking, threatening, name calling—make good sense.

There is no doubt that the mandates of the new attention economy shaped political communication and created a new kind of political spectacle, one that prizes entertainment values to attract and keep our attention and polarizing emotions like outrage to drive engagement. In *Outrage Industry*, Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj wrote that "outrage discourse involves efforts to provoke emotional responses (anger, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, *ad hominem* attacks, and belittling ridicule of opponents." They explained that the growth of outrage media is a "practical and savvy response to political, technological, and economic shifts that have transformed the media landscape since the 1980s." Prior to the dominance of the attention economy, media programmers sought to offend the fewest number of people in order to keep an audience, but now programmers "produce content aimed at smaller, more homogeneous audiences." This niche programming allows "cable television programs, radio shows, and blogs [to] deliver niche audiences to advertisers specifically through the use of *objectionable* programming, which is dramatic, entertaining, and shocking enough to "break through the clutter in a crowded field of cable choices." They report that outrage entertainment is incredibly popular, with "an audience of up to 47 million people daily." Not only is there a huge audience for outrage, but that audience is politically engaged, which is desirable for advertisers and political candidates. Outrageous content drives news coverage, which Trump has used to his benefit.

As a presidential candidate, Trump dominated our public sphere by relying upon outrage to gain and keep the nation's attention, earning approximately $5 billion of free media attention over the course of his 2016 campaign. Trump's outrageousness was good for the media's bottom line. "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS," CBS CEO Leslie Moonves revealed in 2016. "I've never seen anything like this, and this going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It's a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going."

The outrage president uses traditional and nontraditional media to provoke daily (and sometimes hourly) outrages, which keeps both his base and his opposition attentive and engaged. Within the attention economy, being outrageous is the most efficient way to set the nation's news agenda, frame issues, and persuade (some) citizens. Outrage has the added benefit of unifying audiences against whatever is named as the target of outrage, which is good for solidifying Trump's political base. Trump uses outrage to keep the nation on edge, which is terrible for democratic stability, but good for Trump's political career. That outrage, rewarded with our attention, has allowed him to control our public sphere.

The relationship between the press and the presidency asymmetrically favors Trump, which is why Trump can call media he doesn't like "fake news" while still enjoying free media airtime. He has used the mainstream media's platform to undermine the mainstream media's platform. Trust in media has plummeted: Just 15 percent of Republicans reported a "great deal or fair amount" of trust in the 2019 Gallup poll. That suits Trump just fine. Trump has continued in the tradition of rightwing media figures such as Rush Limbaugh, *Drudge*, and *Fox News* commentators— those who have used outrage on talk radio, cable news, and the internet to wrest the agenda–setting power away from mainstream media. As Trump has explained, his "modern day presidential" communication strategies won him the presidency and he would be unwise to give them up.

On July 2, 2017, in response to criticisms throughout the mainstream media about Trump's use of social media, Trump's Twitter account tweeted a video of Trump at a speech event in which he stood behind the Presidential Seal while promising his audience that he would never stop communicating the way that he does. "The fake media is trying to silence us," Trump explained, "But we will not let them. Because the people know the truth. The fake media tried to stop us from going to the White House, but I'm president and they're not." His audience cheered enthusiastically for their "modern day presidential" president. ∎

JENNIFER MERCIECA is a scholar of American political rhetoric. She is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University and is a Contributing Editor for *Zócalo Public Square.* The author of *Founding Fictions* and the co-editor of *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, her latest book, *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump,* will be published by Texas A&M University Press in June 2020.

Tweets, Memes and Snaps: 🇺🇸

The Way to the White House

By Diana Zulli, Ph.D.

T he class was American Political Communication, fall 2019. We were talking about the upcoming 2020 election and the communication styles of President Donald Trump and the Democratic candidates. We were tackling such issues as political branding, relatability, personalization, incivility, and "presidentialness." Nearly every student had an opinion about one or more of the candidates, noting how they "liked" Andrew Yang, "respected" Elizabeth Warren, and did not seem to "connect" with Beto O'Rouke. When asked to provide an example of why certain candidates were more likable, respectable, and relatable than others, every student pulled out their cell phone. The examples that emerged were from Instagram and Twitter. "He looks too stiff in his pictures." "He sounds like he's trying too hard to be cool." "She has a very consistent brand across her social media accounts." One student noted how Bernie Sanders' use of the streaming service Twitch was "interesting." Another student brought up one of the Democratic primary debates—not the actual debate, but the memes that were created about the debate. These examples and discussions were not surprising, but I still asked why the students weren't turning to traditional news to inform their political views. Some students shrugged to indicate "I don't know." Some noted that they don't have a television. Mostly, students said that social media is just "where politics is happening these days." Indeed, it is.

Digital media has undoubtedly affected politics, particularly campaigns. In 2008, Barack Obama successfully launched the first true social media campaign, using the intimate and interactive features of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to create a grassroots political movement that mobilized millions of people. By 2012, both President Obama and Mitt Romney had impressive social media followers, capitalizing on advanced data analysis techniques and microtargeting to reach voters. These social media trends continued during the 2016 election, with Twitter and Instagram use becoming a more prominent force. Now, during the 2020 election, every political candidate has incorporated social media into their campaign repertoire. At this point, the question of *if* digital technology has impacted political campaigns is well answered. It has. Social media has changed the political game forever. The questions of *how* digital technology has impacted political campaigns and to *what effect* are a little more productive. As with most questions, the answer is, *it depends.*

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In many ways, digital technology has provided just another means of carrying out traditional campaign strategies. Candidates still produce campaign advertisements, but they now post them to YouTube and Facebook instead of paying for primetime television placements. Candidates use their social media pages to attack their opponents and appeal to their voters' emotions, both long-established campaign strategies. Lifestyle platforms such as Instagram help candidates emphasize their personality and character, which have always been important voting heuristics. And, as Obama so aptly demonstrated in 2008, social media provides just another (but more efficient) way to solicit campaign contributions.

Beyond making a general transition from offline to online, political candidates employ digital tools in ways that largely cohere with the features and affordances of each social media platform. For example, Facebook enables candidates to create groups, highlight events, and share public or private messages related to their policies and positions. Unlike traditional media spots or other social media platforms, Facebook accommodates content of varying lengths and formats, allowing politicians to go into much more detail about their campaigns. The networked structure of Facebook also facilitates easy circulation of content. Critical to elections, Facebook has (unethically and improperly) enabled data companies and political campaigns to harvest user information, which has been used to predict and influence vote choice in unparalleled ways. Donald Trump took full advantage of Facebook's allowances in this regard. *The Guardian, The Washington Post,* and *The New York Times* have all issued reports suggesting that his campaign accessed more than 50 million Facebook profiles (a low estimate) to create hundreds of thousands of targeted advertisements during the 2016 campaign.

Twitter has been equally influential in shaping political discourse and campaigns. Given the platform's 280-character limit, most candidates avoid substantive policy discussions on Twitter. Instead, Twitter is most useful for highlighting campaign activities, linking to websites and mainstream news articles, posting personal content, and communicating "directly" with the public, all of which increases the perception of candidate

transparency. Importantly, Brian Ott argues that Twitter's restricted character limit and stream-like nature privileges political discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil, which represents a shift away from the more controlled and scripted nature of pre-internet campaign discourse. Because Twitter's algorithms promote posts that receive mass engagement (which uncivil posts often receive), politicians are now rewarded for their "unpresidential" rhetoric on Twitter. This trend toward simplicity and incivility also means that tweets have become particularly quote-worthy. As President Trump continues to demonstrate, tweeting a well-crafted zinger is a sure way to get mainstream news attention.

Instagram's emphasis on images provides a unique opportunity for candidates to visually construct their political identities. Politicians utilize Instagram to present themselves as the "ideal" candidate, displaying patriotic symbols, campaign events and paraphernalia, family images, and relatable scenes (Anyone attend Bernie Sanders' New Year's Eve bash on Insta-live?). Although Instagram's photographic design is also less conducive for policy discussions, Terri Towner and Caroline Lego Muñoz do suggest that Instagram posts can influence the mainstream media issue agenda to some extent.

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However, in my research on the 2016 election, I argue that Instagram's emphasis on the body as a site of political content perhaps harms female and feminine-identifying politicians. Women have long been disadvantaged by the gender stereotypes inherent to politics, often receiving sexist news coverage, comments about their appearance, and scrutiny about their ability to lead while being mothers. Instagram's casual, authentic, and "every-day life" brand may inadvertently reinforce those gendered expectations and associations for female politicians.

Snapchat is one of the newer social media platforms being adapted for political purposes. Popular among the 18- to 25-year-old demographic, Snapchat is known for its "disappearing" images, fun filters, and short snippets of content. While candidates use Snapchat to provide a backstage look at their campaign activities, the features and young audience perhaps limit the platform's political usefulness. Images and videos last just 24 hours. Candidates cannot link website or news content to their posts. And, Snapchat's fun and youthful brand potentially makes appearing presidential and credible more challenging for some candidates. Although Andrew Yang or Pete Buttigieg may better understand the nature of Snapchat, campaigning on the site may reinforce their relative lack of political experience. Joe Biden has a long-established political career, but his use of Snapchat may appear inauthentic.

So back to the original questions: How are candidates using social media? It depends on the platform and the candidate. Are these tools effective? Are voters participating in this growing trend of social media? It also depends…on the affordances of the platform, candidate engagement, and the baseline political interest of the users. In general, there is widespread evidence suggesting that social media does increase political awareness. Social media collapses the divide between entertainment and politics, making political encounters much more frequent and ordinary. The networked structure and algorithmic ordering of social media content can also lead to inadvertent political knowledge gains. Users do not need to follow a politician to see a political post on their feed. They merely need to be friends with or follow someone who has engaged with political content. In this way, social media is useful for highlighting key political events worthy of attention (per the public), facilitating information exchange, and connecting voters and candidates.

Social media has also been proven, in some instances, to promote civic engagement both online and offline. In a study of mobilization messages on Facebook, Robert Bond and colleagues found that users who observed their social networks engaging in political behaviors via status updates, images, and "I Voted" icons were more likely to vote offline so they, too, could engage in similar online behaviors. Even Snapchat use is linked to greater political participation. In a recent study conducted by Laurie Rice and Kenneth Moffett, the expressive actions of sending political videos and images on Snapchat were associated with higher levels of offline civic activity, a pattern of behavior similar to those identified on more established social media sites.

So, yes, social media collapses the distance between candidates and voters, providing candidates easy, convenient, and affordable ways to distribute campaign information. And, yes, social media use is associated with increased political participation. The caveat is that most research on this topic finds either that 1) users who engage political content online already have a high baseline interest in politics or 2) merely observing or responding to political content (watching snaps or retweeting), compared to more active online behaviors (writing a post or taking a photo), has little to no direct effect on civic engagement. Politicians can create amazing advertisements on Facebook, appear transparent

on Twitter, develop the ideal presidential image on Instagram, and provide backstage access on Snapchat. Yet, if users are not already inclined toward politics or actively creating content, the effects may be minimal at best. Knowledge or interest may increase, but the more concrete and measurable political behaviors are often affected by factors beyond social media use, such as interest, education, age, and offline participation.

But digital technology is here to stay. Social media will continue to evolve and become more sophisticated. And, I can say with certainty that politicians will keep using digital tools to further their political goals. What can be expected from the future use of social media as a campaign tool, then, is likely more of the same. We can expect political communication and our expectations of "presidentialness" to continue to be shaped by the features of social media. Following the work of Kevin Coe and Joshua Scacco, digital technology and the ability to narrowcast messages means that political communication will increasingly become accessible to the public, targeted toward specific demographics and identities, and personal, with candidates revealing more of their own lives and appealing to the individual interests of the public.

The brevity and virality of online messages will continue to increase the casual and uncivil nature of political communication. Given the tendency for social media users to coalesce around moments of heightened controversy, we might expect greater attention to political scandal, contentious candidate interactions, and provocative sound bites. We will continue to see more emphasis on unofficial moments that highlight a candidate's "true self" rather than official or scripted speeches. Journalistic norms will continue to adapt for

social media so that journalists and mainstream news organizations maintain some share of the information market (from extensive due diligence to more rapid publication of information in social media formats). And, unfortunately, because social media has reduced the barriers to content production, we will continue to face challenges associated with misinformation and fake news.

The bright side is that digital technology does expand the public sphere, making the political process a little more democratic. Hopefully, social media's low content barriers, viral potential, and emphasis on personality will enable more nontraditional and unfamiliar candidates to find success in politics. Hopefully, blending entertainment with politics will encourage more young voters to exercise their democratic rights. Hopefully, political candidates will use the interactive features of social media to be more responsive to the wants and needs of the public. Hopefully, with media literacy education, open discussion, and industry regulation, digital technology will be an asset to democracy, rather than a hindrance.

Overall, I expect the answer to the question "How are candidates using digital technology and to what ends?" to be, "It depends" for a long time. I also expect my American Political Communication students to keep learning about politics through tweets, memes, and snaps. Politicians, technology engineers, and scholars should thus continue to be mindful of how digital technology enables or constrains political communication, fosters or hinders participation, and promotes or degrades democracy. In the meantime, when Instagram notifies me that a candidate is "going live," I'll be tuning in. ∎

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PUNDITS, PARTIANSHIP, AND PERSONALITIES

THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

By Shawn Turner, M.S.

As the 2020 presidential election approaches, the one thing that most Americans seem to agree on, regardless of political affiliation, is that the stakes are exceptionally high. According to both Democrat and Republican polling firms, more Americans are likely to cast a vote in this year's presidential election than in any in the nation's history. High on the list of factors that will drive voter decisions at the ballot box is the volume, frequency, and nature of press reporting on the candidates, the campaigns, and the issues.

On December 15, 1791, the First Amendment to the Constitution established what James Madison called "one of the great bulwarks of liberty"—the right to a free press. Since that time, the concept of press freedoms, and the responsibility of journalists to provide the public with information necessary to make informed decisions, has been a cornerstone of American democracy.

But as virtually every aspect of society has shifted over time, so have the influences, perceptions, and, to a large degree, the role of the American news media. And, in no place is that evolving role more evident than in the coverage of our most salient democratic exercise— presidential elections.

In 1964, when the current President of the United States—Donald J. Trump—was old enough to cast his first vote in a presidential election, the candidates were Lyndon B. Johnson and Barry Goldwater. At that time, there were only three television networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC— and a majority of Americans still relied on newspapers and radio broadcasts for information about presidential politics. But the first signs of sweeping changes in the media landscape were beginning to emerge. In the runup to the 1964 election, CBS created its first permanent presidential election unit and doubled the number of journalists and staff covering the candidates. That same year, all three networks increased their coverage of the political conventions. All told, the networks spent more than $25 million covering the campaigns.

Still, coverage of presidential elections in 1964 was a far cry from where we are today. With each election cycle, broadcast, print, and online news outlets reorganize to provide around-the-clock campaign coverage, and scores of political journalists set out to travel the country and report on the candidates. As they endeavor to keep the electorate informed, they compete with one another and a multitude of other election-related information sources

that vary in form, function, and legitimacy. Indeed, the costs of reporting on presidential campaigns in the modern information environment are measured in the billions of dollars. Surprisingly, the vast amount of resources devoted to covering campaigns, and the resulting unprecedented access to election information, has not resulted in an increased reliance on the news media. In fact, Americans' news consumption has declined dramatically over the past six decades and the electorate's trust in the integrity of press reporting continues to decrease.

Many factors are contributing to the disparity between the increased availability of election reporting and the decrease in news consumption, but three key trends are particularly relevant and worthy of reexamination. They include (1) an increasing use of pundits and opinion writers, (2) a lopsided focus on certain candidates over others, and (3) a growing and very public embracing of biases by news organizations and journalists.

PUNDITS, PUNDITS, EVERYWHERE

For cable and network news outlets, forecasting political trends and outcomes is a cherished pastime. Hundreds of political pundits, commentators, and outside experts are employed to provide around-the-clock analysis of the political environment. In theory, they differ from journalists in that they deliberately aim to shape the way the voting public thinks about presidential politics. However, pundit discourse is increasingly intermingled with traditional election reporting. This growing practice contributes to a blurring of the lines between opinion and fact-based journalism. Moreover, as political journalists embrace the mores of social media, where everyone has an opinion and every opinion is subject to a value judgment, news consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the ideological leanings of political journalists. This contributes to the perception that political reporters, who are charged with projecting impartiality, are interchangeable with pundits, who are often unabashedly partisan.

Nonetheless, even when political pundits do offer informed predictions or emphasize substantive issues, they often fall short of accurately reading the political tea leaves. According to *Politico*'s annual tracker of "The Worst Political Predictions," each year, political pundits, politicians, and even journalists thrust upon the public a hearty list of woefully incorrect predictions. Undoubtedly, the tendency to focus disproportionately on political scandals, gaffes, and horserace politics contributes to misleading predictions. And, it remains the case that established

political attitudes and educational attainment levels—not exposure to media punditry—are the major factors shaping voter's perspectives.

THIS CANDIDATE, NOT THAT ONE

As problematic as incorrect predictions may be, political campaigns embrace the mixing of punditry and journalism because, as Max McCombs and Donald Shaw found while studying media coverage of the 1968 presidential election, media sources shape who and what voters pay attention to. McCombs and Shaw concluded that the media determined what voters believed to be most important, noting that, rather than presenting unfiltered reflections of events, the media actually shaped reality. McCombs and Shaw labeled this phenomenon "Agenda Setting," and its implications continue to be manifest throughout presidential election reporting.

A content analysis conducted by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy found that in the runup to the 2016 presidential election, candidate Donald Trump received an unusually high volume of coverage prior to his rise in the polls. Notably, this coverage, which focused on the "horserace" aspect of the campaign and Trump's growing momentum, was largely positive in nature. Today, many in the press acknowledge that while they did not believe that Trump had a real shot at winning, his growing popularity, coupled with his brash, unorthodox, and at times shocking campaign antics, captured the media's collective attention. At the same time, the study found that, largely because of the media's focus on Trump, the Democratic contenders received far less coverage than that of the Republicans. The data indicated that the leading Democratic candidates—Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton—were either ignored or subject to disproportionately negative reporting. Although it may be impossible to know if the lopsided focus on one candidate and campaign over the others had a decisive impact on the election's outcome, the data-tracking firm mediaQuant found that Trump received the equivalent of nearly $5 billion in free earned media during the year leading up to the presidential election. Despite their significant name recognition, none of the other candidates enjoyed close to that amount of exposure.

MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS TURNING LEFT AND RIGHT

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2019, just 41 percent of Americans believed that the press reported the news fully, accurately, and fairly. This represented a four-point drop from the previous year. Nonetheless, it

remained well above 2016 levels, when, in the midst of an exceptionally divisive presidential campaign, Republicans' declining trust in the press dragged the overall rating down to 32 percent. The data clearly indicate that perceptions of the media are driven in part by partisan perspectives. Democrats are four times more likely than Republicans to report having trust and confidence in the media. Problematically, as partisan divides deepen across the United States, many news media organizations have either tacitly or deliberately become associated with a set of ideological values. Indeed, spending just a few minutes viewing each of the three major cable news networks—CNN, MSNBC, and FOX—reinforces the reality that when it comes to media consumption, liberals and conservatives occupy different worlds.

It's worth noting that these and other factors at play in the media environment are not just turning voters away from the press; they may also be leading to declines in voter turnout. In 2016, as news organizations committed record amounts of resources to covering the presidential election, 57.9 percent of eligible Americans cast a vote for President. That number was down from 58.6 percent in 2012, and down even further from the 61.6 percent who voted in 2008.

The decline in media trust reinforces the notion that the ideal role of the press is to provide news consumers with information in an as objective and unbiased a manner as possible. When voters become aware of where journalists stand on candidates and key issues, they are more likely to view the reporting with skepticism. There will always be media organizations and correspondents that lean to the left or to the right, but when reporters and news outlets dispense with any pretense of objectivity, and embrace labels identifying them as conservative or liberal, they are failing to adhere to one of the most basic canons of journalistic ethics. The *"fairness standard"* holds that journalists should present facts with impartiality and neutrality, reporting opposing viewpoints where they exist.

Not all of the challenges facing the news media are self-inflicted. There are a number of important changes in the information environment over which journalists have little control. The 24-hour cable news cycle allows anyone with a smartphone to become a citizen journalist who gathers and sends electronic images and video in real time. As a result, reporters are often required to shift their role from information provider to information evaluator.

The number of Americans who prefer to get their presidential election news online is growing. While this is not necessarily a negative trend, mainstream news and information gathered on social media platforms is often accompanied by or shared with social dialogue. Research indicates that this can shape perceptions of political news articles, even when the articles are not read.

As we look to the future of the news media and reporting on the 2020 presidential elections, it's worth noting that while the fourth President of the United States—James Madison—referred to the press as "one of the great bulwarks of liberty," more than 200 years later, the current President—Donald Trump—called the press "the true Enemy of the People." Undoubtedly, the truth is closer to Madison's characterization, but there is ample room for improvement in the relationship between the press and the public it serves.

In many ways, the media is a supply-and-demand industry. News organizations use robust internal polling and analysis tools to illuminate the kinds of content, formats, and dialogue that resonate with target audiences. News organizations believe they have gotten the message that using political pundits, becoming partisan news sources, and covering political personalities in lieu of the issues, is what the voters want in presidential election reporting. Perhaps it's time we send a new message. ■

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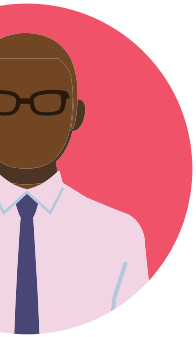
DIVERSITY

in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Campaign:

Seeking Justice Beyond the Numbers

By Kristina Horn Sheeler, Ph.D.

On Tuesday December 3, 2019, Senator Kamala Harris ended her 2020 presidential campaign, citing lack of funds. She was followed on January 2, 2020, by Julián Castro, who said "It simply isn't our time." What had been hailed as the most diverse Democratic field in history was no more. No Black or Latinx persons were on the stage of the December 19 debate. Senators Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren were the only women.

More women and persons of color declared their candidacies for the 2020 U.S. presidential election than ever before. A majority of senior campaign staffers are from diverse backgrounds. If we consider diversity only by the numbers, things look promising—at least in the Democratic Party. Upon further reflection, however, we have not made the kind of progress needed to suggest we are at a turning point in U.S. presidential politics. Harris's and Castro's departures signal as much. I base this claim on two factors that are crucial to advancing a more diverse politics: eliminating tired media frames and foregrounding justice as a fundamental value.

ADD WOMEN AND NON-WHITE MEN AND STIR

When considering the Democratic field as a whole, white male candidates outnumber all other candidates combined. Yet, the field has never been so diverse; five white women, one Black woman, three Black men, one Latinx man, one Asian-American man, and one openly gay white man were in the race when it began. Jennifer Lawless, Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia, noted on Minnesota Public Radio on June 7, 2019, that such a diverse field may have two important consequences: getting African-American and Latinx voters excited, and seeing more diverse individuals as campaign staffers.

While it is too early to gauge voter excitement, campaign staff diversity is noteworthy. On May 24, 2019, Joshua Jamerson reported in the *Wall Street Journal* that more than half of the senior staffers in Democratic candidate campaigns were women and approximately 25 percent were women of color. Harris and Castro each put together a senior staff made up largely of people of color, and Castro, Harris, Warren, Bernie Sanders, Kirsten Gillibrand, Cory Booker, and Joe Biden employed women in more than half of their campaigns' senior leadership roles. Even President Trump's reelection campaign is made up of slightly more women than men in positions of campaign leadership. Laura Barron-Lopez and Alex Thompson noted in *Politico* in August that pay

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standards among senior staff members had nearly reached parity (nearly), but a woman or person of color in the top role of campaign manager is still unusual. Only the campaigns of Steve Bullock, Castro, Beto O'Rourke, and Tom Steyer are/were led by women. If campaign staffers look more like the citizenry, it is possible issues will reflect the interests of a larger segment of the population and that trend could continue once the candidate is elected.

Numbers are important, but they are not sufficient. To signal the cultural shift necessary to mark progress, we need to eliminate reliance on media frames that position women and people of color as unsuitable for the Oval Office. Doing so may mean we have ushered in an era that values gender and racial justice.

ELIMINATING TIRED MEDIA FRAMES
Despite the most diverse group of candidates vying for the Democratic nomination, media frames remind us of the hurdles political women face when it comes to being perceived as electable. In *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture,* Karrin Vasby Anderson and I wrote about the 2008 U.S. presidential election, which revealed a cultural backlash against female presidentiality, evidenced in political journalism, popular culture, and political discourse broadly defined. Shawn Parry-Giles, in *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics,* analyzes news coverage of Hillary Clinton going back to 1992 and argues that the overwhelming narrative frames her as not only inauthentic, but as the target of violent rhetoric, disciplining her ambition in seeking public political office.

Presidential candidate Julián Castro tweeted in December 2019 that "the media's flawed formula for 'electability' has pushed aside women and candidates of color." The 2020 campaign is replete with reminders. Shortly after Elizabeth Warren announced her intention to

run, *Politico* tweeted: "How does Elizabeth Warren avoid a Clinton redux—written off as too unlikable before her campaign gets off the ground?" Kate Manne, writing in *Politico* in April 2019, asked why Biden, Sanders, O'Rourke, and Pete Buttigieg are leading and "bask[ing] in glowing coverage," while experienced women such as Gillibrand, Harris, Klobuchar, and Warren "haven't generated nearly the same media buzz." The same question could be asked about Castro, former San Antonio mayor and Obama administration Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. The simple answer: gender and race.

Perhaps Klobuchar summed it up best in the November debate in response to a question from moderator Andrea Mitchell. Mitchell quoted a previous statement by the Senator on Buttigieg's qualifications: "Of the women on the stage, do I think we would be standing on that stage if we had the experience he [Buttigieg] had? No, I don't."

MITCHELL: Senator, what did you mean by that?

KLOBUCHAR: Pete is qualified to be up on this stage, and I am honored to be standing next to him. But what I said is true. Women are held to a higher standard. Otherwise, we could play a game called name your favorite woman president, which we can't do because it has all been men.

Women aren't the only ones who face a double standard. For example, the media often tout Buttigieg's aptitude, reminding us that he is a Rhodes Scholar. Booker is a Rhodes Scholar, too, but that is not part of the story. Race, this time, is a problem.

Kamala Harris faced a different standard altogether. In "The Rhetoric of Impossible Expectations," I argue that Hillary Clinton faced unreasonable expectations as a 2016 presidential candidate; that whatever she did, it would

FROM TOP: Current and past 2020 Democratic nominee hopefuls Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and Kamala Harris

never be enough. Senator Harris faced similar expectations; she was often called "the female Obama." *The Washington Post* noted the comparison as early as 2015, when Harris was a Senate candidate; it continued into her presidential run. Lois Beckett in *The Guardian* compared attendance at Harris's announcement to Obama's, noting that the early numbers suggested an even greater buzz for Harris. Beckett also quotes an attendee who compared Harris to Obama. The success of former President Obama set the standard all future candidates of color must meet. Did it set up Harris for failure when she wasn't able to pull away from the already crowded field? Writing for *FiveThirtyEight* in December, Perry Bacon Jr. suggested as much.

Debilitating media frames reflect and reinforce our biases. "Who's Actually Electable in 2020," a *New York Times* poll and conversation with Nate Cohn on "electability," reports on who could defeat President Trump in battleground states. Different from previous polls that ask about "hypothetical women candidates," this poll reframes the questions to be about the Democratic frontrunners and who respondents would vote for against President Trump, and why. One question is telling: Respondents were asked "whether they agreed with the statement that most of the women who run for president just aren't that likeable." Forty percent agreed with that statement, which Cohn says is enough to tip the election to Trump in a Warren – Trump match-up. According to Cohn, "we were trying to give people permission to say that, in their mind, there's just something wrong with the women who have run for office, without making them say they don't want a woman to be president." Gender, again, is a problem.

JUSTICE AS A PRIMARY VALUE
We must do better. Following Ibram X. Kendi in *How to Be an Antiracist,* we must acknowledge our sexism and racism and actively counter them. In *Woman President,* Anderson and I write about gender justice as one of the foundational premises driving our work. Taking a cue from Bonnie J. Dow and Celeste Condit, we acknowledge that gender justice includes and moves beyond seeking equality. This vantage point necessitates an intersectional perspective among gender and other systems such as race, sexuality, and class that do not necessarily confer equal value or opportunity. The recent *Quarterly Journal of Speech (QJS)* forum edited by Darrel Wanzer-Serrano is instructive for thinking about the values that undergird our political culture. In writing about the field of rhetorical

studies and *QJS* specifically, Wanzer-Serrano argues that it is not enough to be "not racist;" instead, we must inhabit an epistemology that is committed to antiracism. In the same forum, Vincent N. Pham posits the end goal as "epistemic justice" and pushes us to "refashion" our field "into something more rigorous and intellectually adaptable for the pressing rhetorical questions of our time and future." Justice, specifically gender and racial justice, is central to refashioning our ways of knowing related to questions about the presidency and the individual who inhabits the office. Perhaps these values are more important at this moment in our political culture than ever before.

To what extent are the Democratic candidates making gender and race visible, not only as gendered and raced bodies themselves, but by pushing structural change in their symbolic choices? Booker announced his campaign on February 1, 2019, the first day of Black History Month. He positioned race and the racial discrimination faced by his family as a central component of his campaign video, and concluded with "together America, we will rise." Harris announced on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and took on President Trump directly, speaking on issues such as immigration and white supremacy. Buttigieg embraces "intergenerational justice," defined as "ensuring that choices made today are responsible and fair—not just in how we distribute benefits and costs among people today, but also between people today and people tomorrow." Warren often discusses the hardships her family faced when her father lost his job, and acknowledged in her announcement that "families of color face a path that is steeper and rockier, a path made even harder by the impact of generations of discrimination." These candidates and others in the Democratic field have centered their campaigns around justice and dare to speak about race, gender, and class in ways that do not simply say "I'm not racist" or "I'm not sexist," but actively work to dismantle systems of oppression.

While Democratic candidates advance racial justice and structural change in their discourse, to what extent are gender and racial justice reflected as fundamental values in our public discourse? We have much work to do, as these rhetorical scholars note: Josue David Cisneros's *The Border Crossed Us* is pivotal to thinking about the ways we construct inclusion and division in public discussions of immigration and the Mexican-American border. Catherine R. Squires's *The Post-Racial Mystique* keeps us attuned to post-racial discourses in media and popular culture that mask efforts to advance productive conversations about race.

Justice, specifically gender and racial justice, is central to refashioning our ways of knowing related to questions about the presidency and the individual who inhabits the office.

Theon E. Hill argues in "Sanitizing the Struggle: Barack Obama, Selma, and Civil Rights Memory" that then–candidate Obama reframed collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement in such a way as to weaken Black political agency and undermine the ability of Black Americans to disrupt structural inequalities. Rachel Alicia Griffin's work on race and gender justice spans multiple publications. As one example, "Gender Violence and the Black Female Body" interrogates public discussion of Black female survivors of gender violence using the case of *State of Indiana v. Michael G. Tyson*. She situates this important case as part of the larger conversation of men's violence against women and gender and racial justice. This important scholarship reminds us of what lies ahead as we situate justice as a foundational value of our public culture.

CONCLUSION
The role of diversity in the 2020 presidential campaign cannot be underestimated. On one hand, the early numbers are promising. However, we cannot let what may appear to be a victory blind us when it comes to the importance of prioritizing racial and gender justice to advance a more inclusive, equitable public culture. We must demand more of our political media, which position women and people of color as unelectable against impossible expectations. We must hold our political candidates accountable as they bring issues of race, gender, and class to the forefront of our politics. And, we must hold ourselves accountable as we reshape a political culture that embraces justice as a foundational value. The time is too critical to do otherwise. ▪

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ARE THE **2020 Democratic Primary Debates**

GOOD FOR VOTERS?

**By Benjamin R. Warner, Ph.D.,
Mitchell S. McKinney, Ph.D.,
and Mary C. Banwart, Ph.D.**

T elevised presidential primary debates are among the oldest instances of mass political communication. The very first primary debate was broadcast nationally in 1948 on the ABC radio network and featured Republican candidates Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen. In 1956, the first televised primary debate was broadcast by ABC and included Democratic candidates Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver. As Figure 1 shows, the number of primary debates for both major U.S. political parties per election cycle has proliferated since their inception in 1948. This increase corresponds with the advent of cable news in the 1980s.

The continued increase of primary debates seemed unabated throughout the first two decades of the 21st century. The Democrats, for example, topped their 1988 record of 15 primary debates with a new high and current record of 26 debates in 2008. Likewise, in 2008, the Republicans set a party record of 17 debates, a record the GOP would top just four years later, with 20 debates in 2012.

FIGURE 1: Number of Debates per Election Cycle
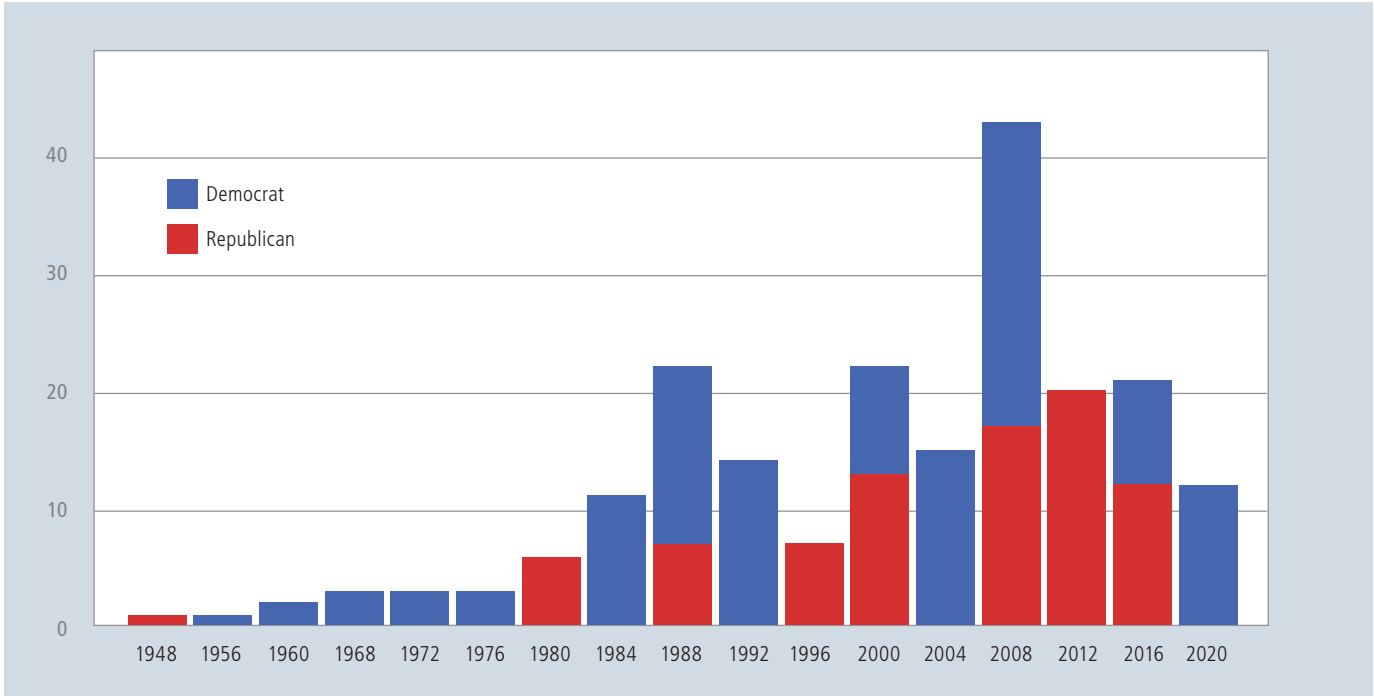
With more debates occurring, the debate season began earlier each election cycle. For example, until 1988, primary debates did not begin until after January of the presidential election year. From 1988 until 2000, the first primary debates occurred in the fall preceding the presidential election. By 2004, primary debates were taking place in the spring and summer, as early as April and May, nearly one year before most primary voting, and a full year-and-a-half before the presidential election.

With no apparent end to the cable networks' appetite for more debates, the parties interceded in 2016. Until this point, primary debates had largely been controlled by the broadcasters, with the debate demand fueled by candidates who were eager to appear early and often for the free national media coverage afforded by their debate exposure. Seeking to bring order to the primary debate season, the Democratic and Republican National Committees (the DNC and RNC) produced a schedule of party-sanctioned debates and required those candidates seeking their party's nomination to agree to participate only in these official debates. Once party control was exerted, the number of debates per cycle declined in 2016, with just 12 debates (plus seven "undercard" debates) for the Republicans and nine for the Democrats. During the current 2020 primary cycle, the Democrats have scheduled a series of 12 DNC-sanctioned debates.

The proliferation of primary debates allowed lesser-known candidates to mount campaigns based largely on their presence in the nationally televised debates, often with very little organization or campaign activity beyond their debate participation. Thus, one of the most contentious matters in debate planning and control has become the determination of which of the various candidates are granted access to the debate stage. The RNC and DNC, in conjunction with their chosen broadcasting networks, have relied largely on candidates' standings in qualifying polls to determine debate inclusion. To address the large field of candidates in 2016, the first seven Republican primary debate nights were divided between a "main" stage and an "undercard" debate, with the main candidates debating in prime time while the undercard candidates appeared in an earlier debate. The RNC debate rules allowed the 10 highest polling candidates to participate in the main debate, while each additional candidate polling at 1 percent or more was included in the undercard debate.

In 2020, the DNC adopted its own strategy for navigating the large number of candidates who sought inclusion in the debates. Instead of dividing the candidates

between main and undercard debates, the DNC scheduled consecutive-night debates, randomly assigning all candidates who met the threshold criteria to one of the two nights of debating. The DNC inclusion criteria employed a two-pronged selection, including a polling threshold of minimum standing in national or early voting state polls and a fundraising threshold that included a minimum number of campaign donors overall and a minimum number of donors per state in at least 20 U.S. states, territories, or the District of Columbia.

The first two 2020 Democratic primary debates featured 20 qualifying candidates and thus employed the subsequent-night debates format. By the third debate, escalating debate qualification criteria caused a steep decline in debate participants. To illustrate the implications of the DNC's strategy of having debates on two nights, followed by quickly escalating qualification criteria, Figure 2 depicts the total number of debate participants (including the 2016 Republican undercard debates) going back to 2008. As the figure illustrates, the assertion of party control by the RNC in 2016 and the DNC in 2020 corresponded with a spike in initial debate participants, perhaps because the parties were weary of being accused of unfair practices and were therefore reticent to exclude a large number of candidates early in the process. However, since the parties assumed control of scheduling and qualification criteria, there also appears to be a more consistent trend toward fewer participants in subsequent debates; just six candidates met the qualifications for the January 2020 debate.

To summarize the recent historical trend, the proliferation of debates resulted in numerous "crowded field" debates that seemed likely to continue expanding if unchecked. However, intervention by the RNC and DNC curtailed the trend in a way that actually expanded the number of early debate participants, but rapidly winnowed the field of debaters. We might then ask two questions about the democratic functions of this structure for primary debates: First, do crowded field debates help voters make informed decisions, or is a large field of debate participants more likely to confuse or overwhelm viewers? Second, does the near-doubling of the number of candidates invited to participate in the early debates (in the 2020 DNC and 2016 RNC debates) allow lesser-known candidates to work their way into contention?

Regarding the first question, evidence suggests that large fields of candidates do not produce the most informative debates. McKinney, Kaid, and Robertson's analysis of a 2000 Republican primary debate ("The front-

FIGURE 2: Number of Primary Debate Participants
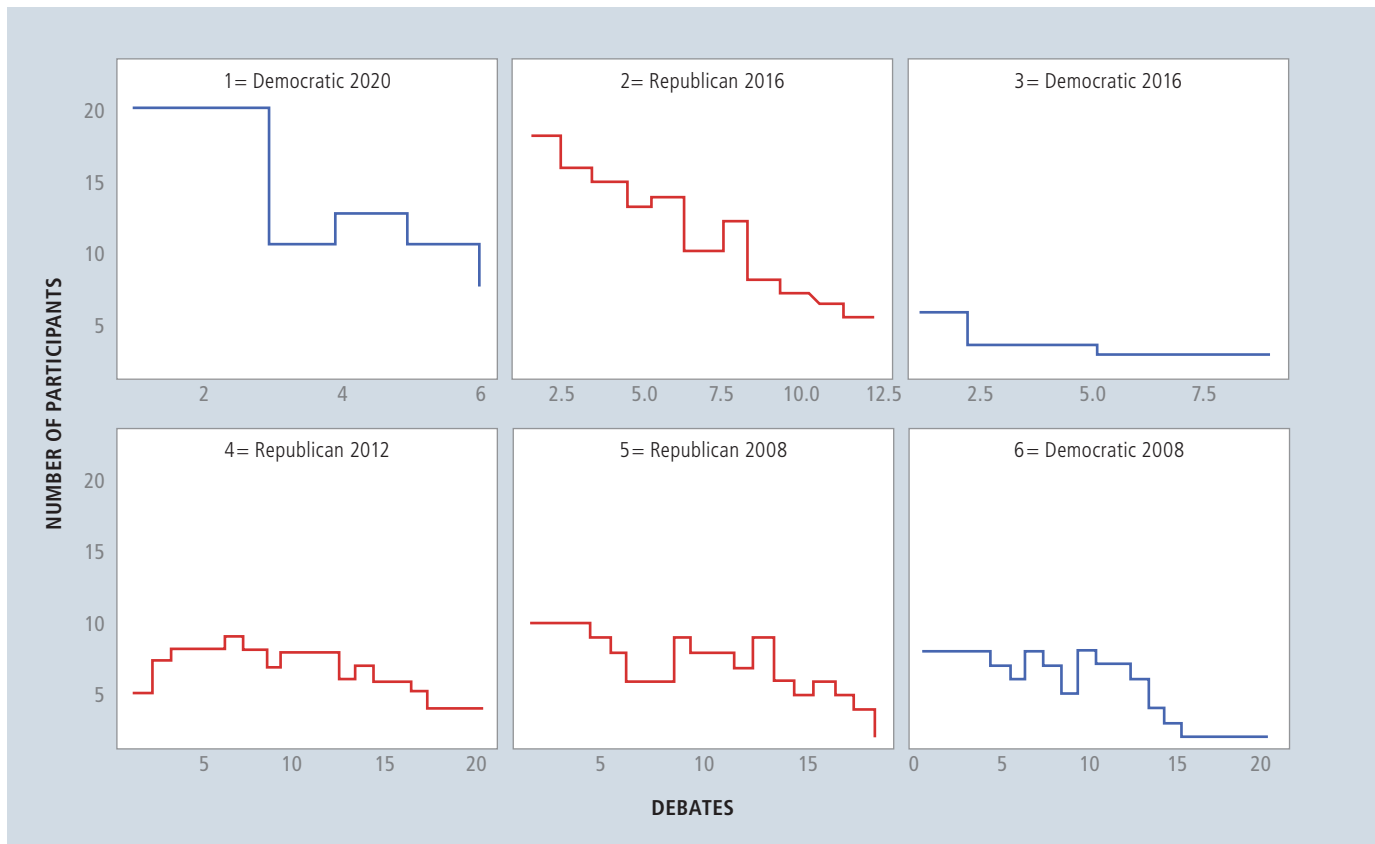
runner, contenders, and also-rans," published in *American Behavioral Scientist*) that featured just six candidates found that debate viewers had difficulty attributing points made in the debate to the correct candidate, and especially struggled to recall arguments made by the lesser-known candidates.

Our analysis of primary debates from 2004 through 2012 ("Do debates matter?" published in *Argumentation and Advocacy*) found that primary debates were associated with a larger increase in people's belief that they had the information necessary to make an informed decision (their political information efficacy), compared with general election debates. In fact, whereas general election debates were associated with about a one-seventh point increase in information efficacy (on a five-point agreement scale), primary debates were associated with a two-fifths point increase. Most of the primary debates included in this analysis, however, were drawn from later in the election cycle and included fewer candidates.

In our comparison of the 2016 "crowded field" debates to 2016 debates with a smaller number of participants ("Presidential primary debates compared," published in

Argumentation and Advocacy), we found the 10-candidate debate to be associated with only about a one-tenth of a point increase in information efficacy. Our as-yet unpublished analysis of the October 2019 12-candidate Democratic primary debate mirrors the 2016 finding. Information efficacy among viewers increased only by roughly one-tenth of a point. Thus, these crowded field debates may not serve the voters – people have difficulty remembering who said what and gain appreciably less efficacy than when viewing smaller primary debates.

On to the second question: Do the debates allow less well-known candidates an opportunity to establish themselves among the contenders? Does doubling the field of debate participants encourage voters to consider candidates who otherwise may be overlooked? To explore this, we can utilize some of the data produced by *FiveThirtyEight* in partnership with *Morning Consult* and *Ipsos*. They have been polling a panel of voters before and after debates to estimate shifts in favorability and support.

Seven candidates qualified for the December 2019 debate. Four of these candidates – Joe Biden, Bernie

Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Pete Buttigieg – were polling in the top five in July, well ahead of the sixth highest polling candidate. Another, Tom Steyer, was not running in July and did not participate in any of the 20-candidate debates. However, Amy Klobuchar and Andrew Yang had meager poll numbers in July and yet managed to survive the steep cut from 20 to six for the December debate. Entering the first debate, Yang was polling at 1 percent and Klobuchar was polling at 0.2 percent in the *Morning Consult* poll. In *FiveThirtyEight*'s *Ipsos* poll, Yang entered the December debate at 11.4 percent and Klobuchar entered at 9.8 percent.

It is difficult to say whether these candidates' ability to grow their candidacies and emerge from a field of 22 different debate participants was a result of strong debate performances or strong overall campaigning. *FiveThirtyEight* did not have either of these candidates identified as top performers in the first set of primary debates but did identify Yang as the candidate who benefited most from the second debate. It is sensible to conclude that, though their debate performances may not be the reason their candidacies grew to survive the steep qualification cuts, their candidacies may not have been able to grow had they been excluded from the early round of debates. Thus, though voters may find larger fields of debates confusing, these debates may allow some candidates an opportunity to establish themselves and grow their campaigns.

The final element of larger fields of candidates that bears consideration is the possibility of increasing the types of people who are featured on the debate stage. One of the more unique features of this series of Democratic primary debates is the diversity of the candidates who participated. In the June debate, there were six female candidates, five candidates of color, and the first openly gay candidate to participate in a major party presidential primary debate. The uptick in representation on the debate stage must at least partially be explained by the decision to feature such a large field of candidates. Indeed, half of the debate participants were white men presenting as straight. Furthermore, as the field has narrowed, it has also become less diverse. All six of the candidates qualifying for the January 2020 debate were white, five were straight-presenting, and four were men. It is worth noting that neither of the candidates who might have benefited from the more inclusive approach to the summer debates were white men. Furthermore, Klobuchar, who qualified for the January debate, was not polling in the top 10 (or even the top 12) prior to the first July debate.

Even the Republican strategy of holding undercard debates was able to modestly improve gender representation in the debates – Carly Fiorina was the only candidate to move from an undercard debate to the main stage in 2016.

By featuring an increase in the number of woman candidates and candidates of color, the 2020 crowded field debates achieved something new – when there is a woman on the debate stage, no longer is she the odd outlier or token female candidate. From June through November 2019, our country heard from a historic three – and in November, four – women presidential candidates on stage each night that a televised debate was held. Additionally, though male candidates still typically received more speaking time, Sen. Elizabeth Warren and/or Sen. Amy Klobuchar were often among the most frequent speakers in each debate. In September, Warren received the most speaking time of any candidate on the stage. Thus, in the 2020 primary debate cycle, our country heard the issues debated by women candidates at a historic frequency.

Despite the pragmatic challenges to the parties and the potentially increased complexity of voter decision making that larger numbers of debate participants brought to the process, the critical mass of women and candidates of color was a positive result. As Elizabeth Tippett (2019) has reminded us, symbolic tokenism is difficult for anyone in a minority position. When there is one woman amidst a field of men, or one candidate of color amongst a field of white candidates, the one becomes the token representation for all. Thus, too often, how a woman runs *as a female candidate* becomes the issue of focus, not the issues themselves. However, as more women participate on the presidential debate stage, criticisms based on how they dress, their facial expressions, or their tone of voice *as a female candidate*, can become less the prevailing story because they all dress and look differently *as female candidates.* Instead, how they and their opponents communicate on the issues – which has direct effects on perceptions of a candidate's credibility – can be the topic of media coverage and a focus for voters in their decision making.

Why does it matter? When female and male candidates share the same debate stage, research finds that women exhibit as many "masculine" attributes in their debate styles as do male candidates, and male candidates exhibit as many "feminine" attributes as do female candidates ("A gendered influence in campaign debates," published in *Communication Studies*). The increased number of women qualifying for debate participation in the 2020 election cycle presents an

Democratic Primary candidates at debates in Miami, Florida on June 26 (TOP) and June 27 (BOTTOM), 2019. "In 2020, the DNC adopted its own strategy for navigating the large number of candidates who sought inclusion in the debates. Instead of dividing the candidates between main and undercard debates, the DNC scheduled consecutive-night debates, randomly assigning all candidates who met the threshold criteria to one of the two nights of debating. The first two 2020 Democratic primary debates featured 20 qualifying candidates and thus employed the subsequent-night debates format."

important opportunity to better understand how a crowded field with increased gender diversity might influence candidate communication styles.

The above paints a picture of a primary debate structure that has evolved through the push–and–pull of the interests of cable networks, candidates with conflicting interests, and the voting public. When the networks were dictating how many debates there would be and who would participate, there was a steady proliferation of debates that included only as many candidates as could feasibly fit on one stage. As the parties have asserted more control, the number of debates has declined, but the number of initial participants has grown. Though these crowded debate stages may present a challenging (and ultimately confusing) information environment for viewers, they also provide some candidates more time to generate support and ultimately increase the opportunities for candidates from historically underrepresented groups. ■

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