

EVALUATION BRIEF

The Impacts of Candidate Debates

The National Democratic Institute

NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Democracy Assistance

NDI and its local partners work to promote openness and accountability in government by building political and civic organizations, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation.

NDI Candidate Debates Programs

NDI, in partnership with the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) has co-founded a 28-country international network of debates organizations, *Debates International*. Collectively, they have supported nearly 370 debates in 35 countries for candidates ranging from mayors and legislators to prime ministers and presidents.



Do Candidate Debates Strengthen Emerging Democracies?

Candidate debates are important, and highly publicized, campaign events. Increasingly, government and non-governmental organizations are organizing them in new democracies and hybrid regimes around the world, with the goals of increasing voter knowledge and access to information about policy platforms and promises, making it easier for voters to vote for candidates who share their policy preferences, promoting policy-based campaign and voting (as opposed to clientelistic or identity-based campaigning and voting), enhancing political tolerance, and reducing political violence. **But, do candidate debates achieve these important goals?**

The Evidence-Base for Candidate Debates

In 2018, NDI commissioned a scoping paper from Dr. Eric Kramon, Professor of Political Science at George Washington University, to summarize how the current evidence-base answers this important question. Focusing primarily on an emerging body of experimental research on candidate debates in new democracies and hybrid regimes — with supplemental research



Key Elements of Candidate Debates

1. *The debates setting is politically neutral*
2. *Debates candidates are in the same location, answering the same questions*
3. *Questions are posed by a politically neutral moderator who asks follow-up questions*
4. *Debates are structured to ensure fairness*
5. *The rules of debates are agreed upon ahead of time by the candidates*
6. *Debates typically involve some interaction between candidates*

These elements make candidate debates distinct from other types of civic education programs. Voters may perceive information as more credible, while the involvement of political parties and their candidates make it more difficult to discredit the information. Debates also allow voters to make direct comparisons between candidates and their policies, incentivizing candidates to focus on their policy positions over rhetoric.



from the US and Norway – Kramon’s study summarizes the key impacts of debates as follows:

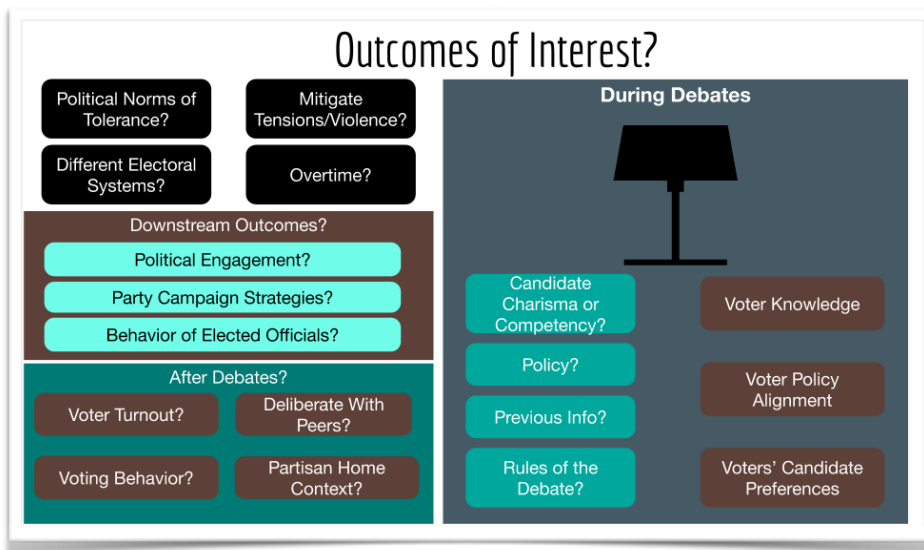
1. **Voter Knowledge:** Experimental evidence from a number of contexts shows that debates inform voters about the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives and provide information about policy positions. Because of their focus on policy issues, debates can also increase voter knowledge about policy and political issues more generally, informing voters about key challenges in certain sectors.
2. **Voter Turnout:** The evidence for the impact of debates on voter turnout is mixed. In some places debates appear to mobilize turnout, while in other contexts there were no impacts.
3. **Candidate Evaluations & Vote Choices:** The impact of debates on voters’ evaluation and choice of candidates also varies by context. In some settings opposition candidates benefited most from debates participation, while in other contexts, incumbents received the most electoral benefit. Capacity and experience of opposition and minor parties seemed to be a contributing factor. Most interestingly, in several contexts, debates seemed to increase voter willingness to vote across partisan and ethnic lines. There is also some evidence that the policy component of debates drove the impact of debates on voters.
4. **Party Campaign Strategies:** The evidence suggests debates can impact party campaign strategies, though the nature of this impact varies across contexts
5. **Behavior of Elected Representatives:** In one setting, debates participation impacted the subsequent behavior of elected representatives, suggesting that debate participation creates incentives for politicians to improve their performance, especially in areas visible to donors.

Areas for Future Research, Evaluation & Learning

While the current evidence-base for debates is promising, it is drawn from a relatively small number of studies conducted largely in Africa. Kramon’s scoping paper highlights a number of areas where future research and evaluation is still needed.

1. **Reproduction & Replication of Existing Research:** Existing evidence is drawn from studies in a relatively small number of

countries and should be replicated and reproduced in other contexts.



2. Political Engagement & Empowerment of Citizens:

Evidence on the role of debates in enhancing political engagement and the political empowerment of citizens is relatively small. Future research should explore the downstream impacts of debates on citizen participation in their democracies.

3. Political Competition:

Though there is evidence that debates impact some campaign strategies, we do not know whether debates have an overall impact on candidates' policy platforms or issue-based campaigning outside of the debate itself.

4. **Political Tensions:** An important goal of debates is to increase political tolerance and reduce political tensions. Debates programs often include symbolic displays of unity for this purpose. However, we lack evidence as to whether debates do increase political tolerance and ease political tensions. Relatedly, we lack evidence about the contexts or conditions under which they might increase polarization and tension
5. **Electoral Systems:** Existing studies on debates are conducted around legislative elections in single-member district electoral systems. More evidence on the role of debates in *presidential* elections and in other types of electoral systems, such as proportional representation systems, is needed
6. **Meta-Analysis Across Contexts:** More research is required to assess the role of debates in contexts with different political histories and traditions. Meta-analyses or coordinated efforts to study debates in different environments would be very helpful. Relatedly, the review makes clear that evidence from outside of Africa would be extremely useful.
7. **Debates Over Time:** Most research on debates is conducted in contexts where debates are new types of campaign events. Future research could focus on understanding how the role of debates may change as they become more routine components of election campaigns, as candidates become more experienced in participating, and as voters observe the extent to which leaders follow through on the promises made in debates

For more information on debates research contact: Linda Stern, Director, Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (lstern@ndi.org) or Matt Dippell, Senior Advisor, Debates (matt@ndi)