



Debates in New Democracies and Hybrid Regimes: a scoping paper

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Colombia Debates, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Candidate debates are often important, and highly publicized, campaign events. Increasingly, governmental 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 campaigning and voting (as opposed to clientelistic or identity based campaigning and voting), enhancing political tolerance, and reducing political violence (National Democratic Institute, 2014).

Do candidate debates achieve these important goals? This scoping paper summarizes the state of the evidence base on this important question. Although there is some empirical research on candidates debates in the American context (e.g. Druckman, 2003; Fridkin et al., 2004; Geer, 1988; Hillygus and Jackman, 2003), this paper focuses primarily on an emerging body of research on candidate debates in new democracies and hybrid regimes around the world. Where appropriate and informative, however, the paper does engage with findings from research on American politics. In addition, the review also engages with research about other party- and candidate-centered programs in new democracies and hybrid regimes, such as deliberative town-hall meetings (Hyde and Lamb, 2015; Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013; Wantchekon et al., 2017) and videos in which candidates share their platforms and positions with voters (Platas and Raffler, 2019).

The focus of the review is on academic research conducted in new democracies or hybrid regimes (e.g., electoral authoritarian regimes). It mainly focuses on studies that use field experimental research designs to study the role and influence of debates, otherwise known as randomized control trials (RCTs) (see Table 1). Where useful, it also integrates findings from studies using other types of research designs and evidence. The goal of the review is to highlight the key lessons that emerge — and the unanswered questions that remain — from these studies for a policy-maker and program practitioner audience.

Summary of Key Findings on Debates' Impact

Although the final section of this paper emphasizes that the research literature on candidate debates is still relatively young and small — and therefore that evidence from other countries and contexts is crucial — the review of the literature conducted for this paper does highlight the promise of candidate debates programs. Key findings on the impact of debates can be summarized as follows:

1. Debates can improve *voter knowledge*: Experimental evidence from a number of contexts shows that they 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, for example by informing them about key challenges in certain sectors.
2. The evidence regarding debates' impact on *voter turnout* is mixed. In some places, debates appear to mobilize turnout while in other contexts there were no impacts.
3. Debates can impact *candidate evaluations and vote choices*:
 - a. Impact on support for incumbents versus challengers appears to vary by context. In some settings, opposition candidates benefited most from participation in the debates, while in others incumbents received the most electoral benefit. The capacity and experience of opposition and minor party candidates is important in determining whether they can benefit from debate participation.
 - b. In several different contexts, debates have increased voter *willingness to vote across partisan and ethnic lines*. Debates appear to make voters more open to and willing to vote for candidates that are outside of their ethno-partisan group.
 - c. There is some evidence that it is the *policy* component of debates that is most important in driving the impact of debates on voters, though other factors such as candidate charisma and personality are also influential.
4. Debates can impact subsequent *party campaign strategies*, although the nature of this impact varies across context.
5. In one setting, debate 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 voters.

Summary of Important Areas for Future Research

While this evidence is promising, this paper also highlights a number of areas where future research is needed.

1. Existing evidence is still drawn from a relatively small number of studies conducted in several countries: replication and reproduction of existing research is crucial.
2. Evidence on the role of debates in enhancing political engagement and the political empowerment of citizens is relatively small.
3. Although 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

Outline of the Paper

The remainder of this scoping paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses debates programs and the features of candidate debates that make them distinct from other types of civic education programs. This section also highlights many of the reasons that debates are seen as promising tools for informing voters, promoting policy and issue based campaigns and voting, and increasing political tolerance and reducing political tensions. The next section reviews the evidence base on debates focusing on three key areas: 1) which types of candidates participate in debate, 2) how and why do debates influence voters, and 3) how do debates impact political elites, both during campaigns and after they are elected. The final section discusses a range of important questions that remain unanswered, highlighting areas where future research would be valuable.



Jamaica Debates, 2011

WHAT ARE CANDIDATE DEBATES?

Candidate debates are generally high profile campaign events. Although the specific format can vary, they typically share a number of common and central features (National Democratic Institute, 2014). First, the setting of debates is generally politically neutral. Second, in debates, candidates are in the same location answering the same questions, which are often posed by a politically neutral moderator who may ask follow-up questions. Third, debates are generally structured to ensure fairness, for example through rules that govern how long candidates will have to respond to questions. The rules of debates are usually agreed upon ahead of time by the candidates. Finally, debates typically involve some interaction between candidates: they do not simply answer questions from a moderator, but they engage with one another on the questions posed by the moderator.

What is Distinct About Debates?

Debates programs fall into a broader category of programs that aim to use civic education and other mechanisms in order to provide voters with information about the policy positions or promises of political candidates and about the performance or malfeasance of incumbents. Generally, the evidence produced by randomized control trials of these types of programs is mixed. In some cases, increased access to information has influenced voters in expected ways (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Banerjee et al., 2011), for example by leading them to punish corrupt incumbents at the polls. As another example, Cruz et al. (2018) studied a program in the Philippines that distributed the spending priorities of local government candidates, which increased the alignment between voter policy priorities and their vote choices (Cruz et al., 2018).

However, in other contexts such programs have had no detectable impact. In Uganda, Humphreys and Weinstein (2013) evaluated a program that distributed scorecards assessing the performance of incumbent parliamentarians

and found that the program had no impact on voters. Similarly, a meta-analysis of six studies that provided information about incumbent performance in six different countries found that the program had no average effect on voter behavior (Dunning et al., Forthcoming), although it must be emphasized that these programs provided only information and that several of these studies did find that information provision can have an impact in combination with other forms of programming. In other contexts, information provision has produced unanticipated adverse consequences. For example, Chong et al. (2015) studied a program in Mexico that provided information about politician corruption, which had the effect of reducing voter turnout.

Debates are distinct from other types of information provision and civic education programs in ways that may, at least in principle, make them more promising. First, by definition these programs involve and have buy-in from the political parties and political candidates that participate (Platas and Raffler, 2019). Generally, candidates and parties agree to participate, are aware of or are involved in the process of setting the rules and parameters of the debates, and are aware of how the debates will be disseminated. Moreover, candidates are the main actors involved, giving them some control over the content of the information debates convey.

Candidate and party involvement can be important for several reasons. First, their involvement can make it much more difficult for them to work to undermine the credibility of the program. Having been involved so centrally, it is difficult for politicians to try to paint the debate program as being politically biased or from a non-credible source, although post-debate “spin” can be important in shaping how voters react to debates. This is important because party efforts to undermine the credibility of those involved in civic education programs or to block the dissemination of information have hindered other types of information provision programs (Arias et al., 2018; Bhandari, Larreguy and Marshall, 2018; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2013).

Second, and relatedly, voters may perceive the information from debates as being more credible because it comes directly from the candidates. Research on “source credibility” highlights that the source of information can play a central role in determining whether people will believe or act on it (e.g., Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Iyengar and Valentino, 2000; Porpitakan, 2004). Since the information is coming directly from candidates — in a politically neutral arena in which all (or most) candidates are participating — voters may be less likely to be suspicious of potential political bias or partisan motivations behind a program.

Debates can also be distinct because voters can directly compare their candidate choices, who are generally answering the same questions under the same time constraints and in the same conditions (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming; Platas and Raffler, 2019). In addition, candidates can directly engage with the arguments of their competition, a crucial feature of debates that should allow voters to assess not only campaign promises but also the rationales and justifications that motivate them. If voters only learn about the incumbent or about one candidate, it may be difficult for them to know how to use that information absent information about their other

candidate options. Or, as was the case for the corruption information program in Mexico, they may become disillusioned and choose not to vote at all (Chong et al., 2015).

Debates also provide multiple types of information about candidates that can be useful for voters. Generally, research on debates has distinguished information about policy positions — what the candidates plan to do, their priorities, and so on — from information about candidate quality, which would include experience and background as well as characteristics such as trustworthiness and competence.

Debates may also be distinct in that they incentivize candidates to stake out policy positions that are different from their competition (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming). This can be important in many contexts, especially in new democracies, where parties and candidates generally rely most heavily on valence appeals when seeking to attract votes (Bleck and Van de Walle, 2013; Lupu and Riedl, 2013): that is, the types of appeals with which almost no one would disagree, such as promising to reduce corruption or alleviate poverty. As Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu (Forthcoming) highlight in their discussion of the content of parliamentary debates in Ghana, the debates appeared to have pushed the candidates to focus more clearly on how they would achieve their goals, rather than on making valence promises. Thus, debates can provide information to voters that they may not get in other venues, such as campaign rallies, during the course of an election.

Beyond providing information, a central goal of debates in many contexts is the promotion of political tolerance. Relative to other information programs and campaign events, debates may have unique potential in this regard. Namely, debates involve all (or most) candidates standing together on the same stage/platform. If designed correctly, the candidates will engage with one another respectfully, focusing on the issues of importance to voters. This can send important signals to the population and be key in establishing social norms that emphasize civil discourse and respectful disagreement within the political arena. These impacts can be amplified if debates are coupled with symbolic displays of unity or commitments to peace: in Ghana, for example, candidate debates have also generally involved a joint peace pledge, where all candidates stand together pledging to run a peaceful campaign and encouraging their supporters not to engage in violence. In Malawi, the presidential candidates hold hands after the debates while the national anthem is playing.

Debates may also impact tolerance by exposing voters to competing candidates' justifications for their policy positions. Even if voters are ultimately not persuaded by these policy appeals, awareness that the competition possesses reasoned arguments and justifications for their positions and beliefs can promote greater tolerance of them (Mutz, 2002). Put simply, debates have the potential to promote tolerance by creating greater understanding across partisan lines.

Finally, while debates are distinct in these ways, it must be emphasized that the content of the debates and the behavior of the candidates involved play a central role in determining whether debates actually have the potential

effects outlined above. If the candidates resort to personal insults, use fear-based or misleading arguments, or rely on subtle (or not so subtle) identity-based appeals, debates are not likely to do much to improve the democratic process, and in fact they could degrade it. Thus, the structure of the debates, the skills of the moderator, the preparation of the candidates, and norms that evolve which shape candidate behavior are all ultimately important.



Cambodia Debates, 2012

EVIDENCE FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

This section reviews the existing evidence on the impact of debates programs in new democracies and hybrid regimes. The paper's focus is specifically on academic research that utilizes field experimental methods (randomized control trials) to evaluate the influence and role of debates. Where appropriate, the review also discusses findings from other programs that are not debates but which involve candidates and parties, such as town-hall meetings. Although such programs are not debates and are different in some important ways, they do share some common features with debates — candidate or party participation, discussion and justification of policy platforms, and so on — and so evidence on their impact is relevant for those interested in debates. The paper also integrates evidence from older democracies such as the United States, where useful. Table 1 presents the main studies analyzed. As emphasized further below, the review highlights that the evidence base in this area remains relatively small and that more evidence from other environments is necessary.

Table 1: Studies Included in the Review

Authors	Country	Election type	Program
Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster (2016)	Sierra Leone	Legislative	Debates
Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu (Forthcoming)	Ghana	Legislative	Debates
Bowles and Larreguy (2018)	Liberia	Legislative	Debates

Ichino (2019)	Nepal	Legislative	Debates
Kramon (2019)	Malawi	Presidential	Debates
Platas and Raffler (2018)	Uganda	Legislative	Meet the candidates videos
Fujiwara and Wantchekon (2013)	Benin	Presidential	Town-hall meetings
Wantchekon et al. (2017)	Philippines	Legislative	Town-hall meetings
Hyde and Lamb (2015)	Cambodia	Legislative	Town-hall meetings
Fridkin et al. (2004)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Geer (1988)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Hillygus and Jackman (2003)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Sigelman and Sigelman (1984)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Prior (2012)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Druckman (2003)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Abramowitz (1978)	USA	Presidential	Debates
Benoit, McKinney and Stephenson (2002)	USA	Presidential primaries	Debates
Aalberg and Jenssen (2007)	Norway	Legislative	Debates

Candidate Participation

Before discussing how debates influence voters and the broader election environment, two prior but critical issues must be discussed. The first centers on a key challenge in debates organization: there are some candidates who simply do not want to participate (National Democratic Institute, 2014). Incumbents appear most resistant to participation, and indeed there are a number of instances where incumbent presidents have decided not to participate. For example, in Malawi, then incumbent President Joyce Banda chose not to participate in the presidential debates held in advance of the 2014 elections. In 2019, the incumbent Peter Mutharika made the same decision not to participate. This reluctance appears to hold for legislative elections as well. In their study of parliamentary candidate debates held in Liberia in 2017, Bowles and Larreguy (2018) report that, in their control group districts, only 20 percent of incumbents and 40 percent of serious challengers decided to participate. Incumbents may fear that they will be politically attacked during the debate, while candidates who are already

politically strong and electorally viable may fear that they have more to lose than to gain from participation (Bowles and Larreguy, 2018). For their part, lesser known candidates and those from minor political parties are likely to be most interested in participating and will have more to gain from participation.

Although incumbent participation can be a challenge, Bowles and Larreguy (2018) provide evidence that “intensive” invitations can lead to substantially higher rates of participation, especially by incumbents and those they categorize as serious opposition candidates. In some Liberian districts, all candidates were emailed 4 days ahead of the debate with information about it and its purpose; were called 2 days before the debate by a high profile Liberian journalist, who encouraged them to attend, discussed the importance of debates, and discussed any concerns the candidates might have had; and were sent an SMS reminder the evening or morning before their debate. These efforts led to quite substantial increases in debate participation from both incumbents and serious challengers. One promising area of future research would be to investigate why these intensive invitations were so effective. For example, was it the information they received, the feeling that they were being observed carefully by a high profile journalist, or some other reason(s). Unpacking this mechanism further would be helpful as it could inform the design of future programs aimed at increasing candidate participation.

Who Watches or Listens to Debates?

The second issue concerns the question of who watches or listens to the debates. This is a central question given that an objective of debates programs is to reach a broad audience. Most of the research reviewed, however, focuses on the impact of exposure to the debates, rather than on the question of what drives potential voters to watch or listen to debates in the first place (my own research included). Given that research on this question could help to inform efforts to broaden the audience of debates and to ensure access for a broad range of social groups, more work in this area is needed.

In Malawi (Kramon 2019), one of the most important predictors of exposure to the 2019 presidential debates was residence in a rural or urban area. In Malawi’s major cities, about 56 percent of the population watched or listened to at least one of the three presidential debates organized in 2019. By contrast, only about 27 percent of those in rural areas were exposed to the debates. In rural Malawi, people predominantly listened to the debates on the radio, while in urban areas people were more likely to watch on television. Other demographic characteristics were also predictive of debates exposure. Women were about 15 percentage points less likely to have watched or heard the debates than men. Younger Malawians were also less likely to have watched or heard the debates. The likelihood of viewing/hearing the debates also increased substantially with educational attainment: for example, those with some secondary schooling were about 30 percentage points more likely to have viewed/heard the debates than those with no formal schooling, all else being equal. Finally, those who are employed in the formal sector were also more likely to have watched/heard the debates.

In Malawi, partisanship also predicted debate exposure. As noted above, the incumbent president chose not to participate in the debates. Perhaps not surprisingly, supporters of the incumbent's political party were substantially less likely to tune in to the debates relative to independent voters and supporters of the main opposition parties. Supporters of the main opposition parties were most likely to watch or listen to the debates.

These patterns should be interpreted with one major caveat in mind: people are very likely to over-report their exposure to events such as debates when responding to survey questions. For example, comparing self-reported information about debate viewership gathered in surveys to data about actual viewership of debates in the United States, Prior (2012) shows that the self-reported survey data substantially over-estimates the share of the population that watches debates. The researcher suggests that the over-estimate is about double that of the true viewership, with greater bias among younger survey respondents.

For those organizing debates and seeking to measure their viewership and influence, these findings have important implications: self-reported information may be subject to some bias. Fortunately, there are well established methods to overcome this challenge. One approach, which is used in most of the studies discussed in this paper, is to deliberately randomize exposure to the debates in order to measure their influence. Because estimates of impact are produced by comparisons between those who were randomly assigned to view the debates versus those who were not, we can avoid the need to ask directly about debate influence when conducting the analysis — though it should also be emphasized that such direct questions can still be very helpful in terms of learning about how voters think about their experience with the debates. In addition, there are a range of survey-based methods that can be used to reduce the over-estimation that is likely to result from direct self reports.

Impacts on Citizen Learning and Political Knowledge

Turning to the influence of debates on citizens and voters, the existing evidence base suggests that debates do provide information that enhances political knowledge. For example, voters who have been exposed to debates have greater knowledge of their candidate choices (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming; Platas and Raffler, 2018). Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster (2016) find that debates in Sierra Leone had substantial impacts on voter knowledge of candidate and party policy positions: citizens became better able to correctly identify the policy priorities of their candidate options. Citizens who view the debates also knew more about the roles and responsibilities of MPs, and had more detailed information about the amount of money that MPs had to spend in the constituency development fund.

Platas and Raffler (2018) find that the “meet the candidate” video screenings in Uganda produced similar effects. Those who watched the video screenings became more knowledgeable of the responsibilities of MPs and were more aware of the priority sector of each candidate. They also show that these learning effects were most pronounced for opposition party candidates, which suggests that debates can play an important role in single-party dominant regimes where opposition parties can have a difficult time reaching voters. In Cambodia, Hyde

and Lamb (2015) find similar results regarding the impact of town-hall dialogues between ruling and opposition party MPs; voters became more knowledgeable about the roles and responsibilities of their representatives in the National Assembly. Relatedly, Bowles and Larreguy (2018) examine how debates in Liberia impacted the certainty of voter beliefs about candidates' priority issues and competence. Here, they find that voters became more confident that they were aware of candidate's policy priorities, especially regarding incumbents. Kramon (2019) finds similar impacts of presidential debates in Malawi. Exposure to the debates made voters more confident in their understanding of the policy positions of the candidates that participated.

Relatedly, deliberative town-hall meetings in the Philippines increased voter awareness of the policy issues that were central to a party's campaign platform and led to shifts in the importance that voters placed on certain policy issues (Wantchekon et al., 2017). Although the latter could be driven by an increase in the salience of those policy issues driven by the town-hall meetings, it is likely that voters learned new information about policy issues that led them to focus on them during the campaign. Thus, in addition to informing voters about policy positions and platforms, debates can also inform voters about key issues of importance.

Evidence from older democracies also demonstrates the role that debates can play in informing the electorate. For example, Benoit, McKinney and Stephenson (2002) show that debates during presidential primaries in the United States enhance knowledge of candidate policy positions, especially for less well known candidates. Fridkin et al. (2004) also find that exposure to presidential debates in the United States increased voter knowledge of the participating candidates. Abramowitz (1978) reports that the 1976 presidential debate in the US also increased voter knowledge of candidate policy positions.

Overall, the evidence highlights that debates can play an important role in informing the electorate. Voters become more aware of the responsibilities and roles of their elected representatives — which in itself can be important for accountability — and also gain information about candidate policy positions. Debates also appear to decrease voter uncertainty about policy platforms, which can be useful in guiding policy and issue-based vote choices.

Political Engagement and Participation

Turning to impacts on political engagement and participation, a few of the experimental studies analyze these types of outcomes. Several focus on voter turnout, where the results are mixed. In Sierra Leone, the debates had no overall impact on voter turnout (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016). In Nepal, exposure to debates had no impact on self-reported voter turnout (Ichino, 2019). In Liberia, voter turnout was higher in constituencies where debates were intensively rebroadcast (Bowles and Larreguy, 2018). In Uganda, the meet the candidate sessions mobilized turnout for some types of voters (Platas and Raffler, 2018). In the Philippines, participation in the town-hall meetings had no effect on voter turnout (Wantchekon et al., 2017).

Regarding other forms of political engagement, the evidence from Liberia shows that voters were more likely to seek access to listen to news on the radio, discuss politics with friends, and to seek other forms of political information, which suggests that exposure to the debates activated political participation in ways that went beyond voter turnout (Bowles and Larreguy, 2018). Hyde and Lamb (2015) find some suggestive evidence that town-hall meetings in Cambodia increased indicators of political engagement, such as discussing politics with friends and family. More evidence regarding the impact of debates on such outcomes is required.

Voting and Candidate Evaluations

Results from existing studies provide evidence that debates can shift voter evaluations of candidates and can have an influence on voting decisions. In Ghana, debates led to an overall average positive impact on voter evaluations of candidates, positive gains that were of greatest benefit to minor party candidates (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming). In Sierra Leone, debates benefited candidates who performed well, as judged by a panel of experts: on average, the best performing candidates increased their voteshares in 3.5 percentage points (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016). In Liberia, debates increased electoral support for incumbents—if the incumbent showed up—largely because incumbents in that context were better debaters than challengers (Bowles and Larreguy, 2018). In Uganda, the meet the candidate videos improved the voteshares of opposition party candidates (Platas and Raffler, 2018). In the Philippines, the parties that participated in the town-hall meetings improved their voteshare among voters who participated (Wantchekon et al., 2017). By contrast, in Nepal (Ichino, 2019), the debates shifted perceptions about the candidates (for example, about their trustworthiness) but did not impact vote preferences.

Why do debates have these effects? At the most basic level, they appear to provide information to voters that they might not otherwise have. For example, minor party candidates in Ghana and opposition party candidates in Uganda are generally less well known than are the major or dominant party candidates, and so they benefit most from debate participation.

A number of studies address the question of whether the quality of a candidate's performance in the debates is important. Here, the evidence is mixed, likely in part because of the challenges of objectively measuring performance in a debate. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, the researchers found that the debates did increase the voteshare of candidates who performed well in them (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016; Bowles and Larreguy, 2018), findings that resonate with research from older democracies (see, for example, Aalberg and Jenssen, 2007, on parliamentary debates in Norway). Similarly, in Nepal, debates did improve support for the candidate that performed well in the debate in a district where there was general agreement on the debate "winner." On the other hand, in Ghana and Uganda, performance played less of an important role (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming; Platas and Raffler, 2019).

Several studies also address the important question of whether debates are important because of their emphasis on policy. This is important because debates could influence voters by providing information about candidate qualities, such as their qualifications, trustworthiness, or leadership qualities (Benoit, McKinney and Stephenson, 2002; Platas and Raffler, 2019; Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming) — all important pieces of information for voters — or for reasons that are likely unrelated to their potential as a leader or representative. For example, charismatic or more attractive politicians may be judged to perform better in debates for reasons unrelated to what they say (see, for example, Lawson et al., 2010; Lenz and Lawson, 2011). Evidence from the USA also shows that televised debates can also lead voters to focus more heavily on perceptions about candidates' personalities when evaluating them (Druckman, 2003). There is also evidence from the USA that television can lead voters to vote based on candidate appearance (Lenz and Lawson, 2011).

In Sierra Leone, the researchers sought to disentangle the influence of charisma versus policy information, and find that they are jointly important in driving the impact of debates (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016). The researchers also find that the debates increased the policy alignment between voters and their preferred candidates; that is, the debates made people more likely to vote for candidates who shared their policy preferences. They also note, however, that they cannot rule out the possibility that the debates led voters to change their policy preferences to align them with their preferred candidates positions, a dynamic that has been observed in the United States (Abramowitz, 1978; Lenz, 2009).

In Ghana, study participants were randomly assigned to view components of the debates that either focused on candidate qualities — candidates discussed their backgrounds, qualifications, and values — or on policy issues (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming). Participants were also randomly assigned to either watch the debates or listen to them. The study found that both the quality segment and the policy-centered segments both had an effect, suggesting that information about candidate quality and policy-centered debate were important. However, the impact of the policy segments was substantially larger. The authors also report no difference between the video and audio dissemination of debates, suggesting that visual information and candidate appearance were not important factors driving the influence of the debates. These findings provide evidence that it is the policy-centered components of the debates that had the most impact on voters.

In the Philippines, there is also evidence that the deliberative town hall meetings influenced voters because of their focus on policy issues (Wantchekon et al., 2017). For example, citizens who participated in the town halls reported greater interest in the issues that were discussed in the meetings. The town halls also increased support for parties among voters who would stand to benefit from their platforms. For example, one participating party emphasized a pro-feminist platform, and this party gained greater support from women voters. Another participating party emphasized a pro-poor platform, and this party gained greater support from poorer participants in the town halls. Relatedly, in Nepal, there is evidence that debates shifted the issue areas that voters believed the national government should prioritize (Ichino, 2019).

Partisanship and Voter Reactions to Debates

Another important question pertains to the role of partisanship in shaping how voters react to the debates. Much of the American politics focused research suggests that partisan or other politically salient social identities can serve as a “perceptual screen” through which people filter information and events (Campbell et al., 1960), which can lead to partisan bias. Furthermore, research on motivated reasoning highlights that those with strong partisan commitments are likely to defend their prior beliefs and attachments in response to new information (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014). As a result, there is a strong possibility that voters will “see what they want to see” when engaging with debates. Consistent with this, there is evidence that voters tend to believe that their preferred candidates have won debates (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming; Sigelman and Sigelman, 1984) and research on debates in the American context suggests that they often do little to impact voters with partisan commitments (Geer, 1988). Rather, the evidence from the United States highlights that debates have the most influence on swing and undecided voters (Geer, 1988; Hillygus and Jackman, 2003).

Research on debates outside of the American context does, however, suggest that debates do have the potential to encourage voters to be open to and even vote for candidates outside of their partisan or ethnic group. In Sierra Leone, candidates who performed well were able to attract votes from citizens from different ethnic groups (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016). In Ghana, the debates had the largest impact on those with strong partisan attachments to one of the two major parties in the country: they became more favorable toward and more likely to vote for candidates from other parties, including the other major party. Importantly, this effect was driven largely by the policy-centered components of the debates (Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu, Forthcoming). In Uganda, the meet the candidate sessions led supporters of the National Resistance Movement (NRM), the dominant party in the country, to be more likely to vote for opposition party candidates, an effect that was largest among NRM supporters whose preferred candidate had lost in the NRM primary (Platas and Raffler, 2018). In Malawi, exposure to the presidential debates led citizens to be more likely to vote across partisan lines (Kramon, 2019). This effect was largest among Malawians who reported learning a lot about candidate policy positions during the debate.

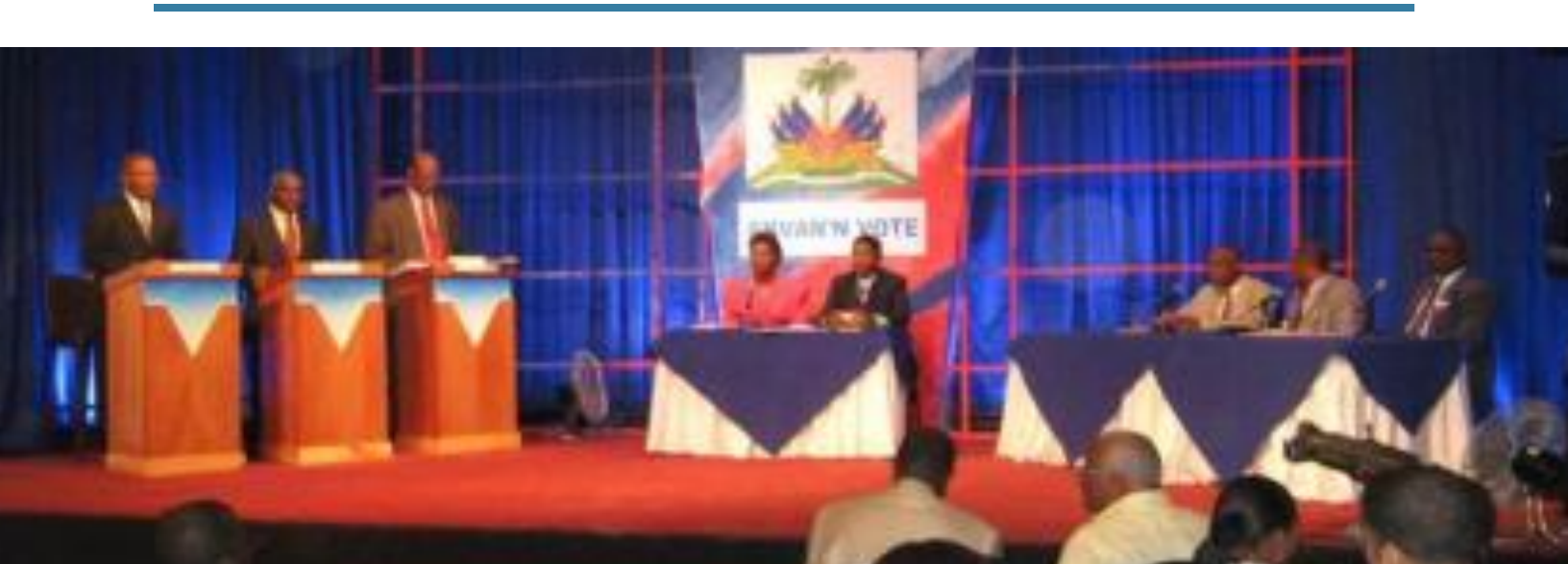
Impacts on Elite Behavior

Participation in debates can also impact elite behavior, both during the campaign period and after they are elected. Regarding the former, there is evidence that debates and related campaign events can have an impact on party campaign strategies. In Sierra Leone, candidates increased their campaign efforts and expenditures in the areas where the debates were held, as measured by the frequency of door-to-door canvassing as well as the frequency and size of electoral handouts (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016). In Liberia, debate participation appears to have had an opposite effect on challengers, many of whom performed poorly in the debates (Bowles and Larreguy, 2018); for these candidates, debate participation led to reductions in campaign effort. By contrast, there is some evidence that debate participation led incumbents to invest more resources in campaigning over the radio (and to be invited more frequently to be on the radio) (Bowles and Larreguy, 2018). In Benin, deliberative town-hall

meetings with party representatives reduced the use handouts during the campaign (Fujiwara and Wantchekon, 2013).

Overall, there is an emerging body of evidence highlighting that debate participation can impact subsequent party campaign strategies. However, the results are based on a small number of studies and are relatively mixed. In Sierra Leone, debates appeared to increase campaign effort, while in Liberia they had the opposite effect, at least for challengers who performed poorly. The latter highlights that debate performance is likely an important factor that conditions subsequent party strategies. In addition, in Sierra Leone, the debates led to increases in the frequency and size of electoral handouts, while in Benin the town-hall meetings appeared to reduce party reliance on handouts during the campaign. It is clear that further research is required to help better understand this pattern of results.

The impact of candidate debates on elected politicians is among the least explored areas. Leveraging the fact that debates were not held in all parliamentary constituencies in Sierra Leone, Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster (2016) are able to provide some suggestive evidence that debate participation can indeed impact politician behavior once in office. Specifically, they find that MPs elected in constituencies where debates were held spend more effort on constituency service: they hold more meetings with constituents and spend substantially more of their constituency development fund on development projects. As noted below, research of this type is a promising area for future investigation.



Haiti Debates, 2010

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the evidence regarding debates programming is in many ways quite promising, the review of the literature also makes clear that the body of evidence on debates programs is still relatively small. Thus, a focus area for the future should be efforts to reproduce and replicate results from this “first generation” of studies. Given how widespread debates are around the world and that they share common features and structures wherever they are organized, debates may be particularly well-suited to Metaketa-style research efforts (Dunning et al., Forthcoming); here, researchers studying debates and practitioners organizing them in various contexts around the world could coordinate their efforts in order to more systematically assess the role of debates in different settings.¹ In addition, there remain a number of important open questions that future research should address, which are detailed below.

Policy and Issue-Based Campaigns

As the above discussion of the literature illustrates, much of the empirical research on debates focuses on how they impact candidate evaluations and vote choices, as well as related outcomes such as voter knowledge of candidate policy positions or the responsibilities of elected officials. Although these are all important outcomes that are quite central to understanding the role of debates during election campaigns, these are not the only outcomes that debates programs hope to impact (National Democratic Institute, 2014).

¹ *Metaketa* is a funding model organized by the Evidence in Governance and Politics network (EGAP).

For example, one goal of debates programs is to promote policy-centered and issue-based campaigns beyond the debate event itself (National Democratic Institute, 2014). There are both “supply” and “demand” side components to this objective. Regarding the supply, the process of preparing and participating in debates may drive candidates to hone their policy positions and to develop strategies for communicating with voters on issues of importance to them. Once developed, candidates may be more likely to emphasize these policy positions and issue-based communication strategies on the campaign trail. Furthermore, because debates are public events in which candidates declare and discuss their policy positions, this may create incentives for them to discuss policy issues more frequently after the debates. Regarding demand, the process of watching debates is likely to make candidates’ policies and issue positions more salient to them. This greater salience may arise from exposure as well as from the knowledge that is gained; having been exposed to policy discussions, voters might care about these issues more and, having learned from the debates, they may feel that they are better able to evaluate candidates on policy and issue-based dimensions. This increased salience would lead voters to demand more issue-based campaigning.

Although these are reasonable expectations, more research is needed to assess them empirically. There is evidence that debate participation can impact campaign strategies (Bidwell, Casey and Glennerster, 2016; Bowles and Larreguy, 2018), but we do not know whether this extends to policy or issue-based campaign strategies. That is, we do not know whether candidates shift to more policy-based campaigning as a result of debate participation. Because some candidates could actually respond to increases in voter information through increased effort in non-issue based campaigning such as vote buying (Cruz, Keefer and Labonne, 2018) — though see Fujiwara and Wantchekon (2013) who find that town-hall meetings reduced clientelism in Benin — it will be important for future research to more broadly investigate how debates shape campaign strategies.

Political Tolerance and Tensions

An additional important goal of debates is to increase political tolerance and reduce political tensions. Indeed, if debates increase tolerance and ease tension, they would be hugely consequential even if they had no impact on how voters ultimately make their decisions. Thus, understanding how and why debates impact tolerance and tension is crucial. There are several reasons why debates have the potential for positive impact in this regard. First, as the NDI handbook on debates programming notes, “debates provide an opportunity for political rivals to show that despite their differences they can treat each other with mutual respect even while they disagree on the issues” (National Democratic Institute, 2014). By engaging with one another in civic debate, candidates send signals to the population that they too should be tolerant of their political opponents. Moreover, debates often involve public and symbolic displays of unity and support for tolerance and non-violence that are included specifically to try to reduce political tensions. For example, the “handshake” between candidates is often carefully planned (National Democratic Institute, 2014), while other types of symbolic displays are also often utilized. In Malawi, for example, the presidential candidates hold hands as the Malawian national anthem is played. In Ghana, debates are often

accompanied by joint peace pledges, where the candidates stand together and publicly pledge not to use violence during the campaign and encourage their supporters to remain peaceful.

Once again, while it is reasonable to expect that debates could positively impact tolerance and political tension, thus potentially reducing the chances of electoral violence or conflict, more empirical research is required to be confident that this is the case. The evidence that debates can increase the chances that partisan voters vote across ethnic or partisan lines is very promising in this regard, but future research on debates could more explicitly measure political tolerance and indicators of political tension.

The issue of tolerance and tensions highlights hugely important issues regarding the conduct of debates and their overall atmosphere. Unfortunately, there is nothing inherent in a debates program that guarantees candidates will engage in mutually respectful dialogue about their policy differences, and it seems clear that the tone of the debates and the conduct of the candidates will go a long way in determining whether the debates can have the impact on tolerance and tensions. Put simply, if the candidates resort to insults or implicit (or explicit) identity-based appeals, their impact on tolerance could be minimal or, worse, detrimental. In this regard, the skills of the moderator and the process of establishing rules and norms that will govern how the debates are run are very important.

Other Social Norms, Expectations, and Attitudes

Beyond impacts on tolerance and political tensions, future research could examine the influence of debates on a range of other social norms and attitudes that might, over the medium to long term, be expected to be affected by the integration of debates into election campaigns. For example, debates may influence norms surrounding deference to authority or norms about whether it is acceptable to ask pointed and difficult questions of political leaders. Debates may shift norms and expectations about what is appropriate in political discussions, as well as what forms of campaigning are legitimate. They might also influence attitudes about the electoral process and democratic politics more generally. As noted, some of these norms and attitudes are likely to be slow moving, and so we would perhaps expect more changes over the medium to longer term as debates become a routinized part of elections.

The Role of Institutional and Social Context

More evidence is also needed to assess how debates operate in different institutional and social contexts. For example, almost all of the studies on debates using randomized control trials have focused on legislative elections in single-member district electoral systems. Thus, we lack strong evidence about how debates impact voters during presidential elections (the Malawi study discussed in this review is the exception). Yet there are reasons to expect that voters may respond differently to presidential debates. For example, ethno-partisan (or regional) attachments may play a stronger role in shaping voter responses to presidential debates, compared to legislative ones; ethnic or local identities are often constant across all candidates in legislative elections, and ethnic, regional,

and partisan divisions may be more salient at the national level, especially in contexts where voters have strong expectations that presidents will favor their own with public goods and resources (Carlson, 2015; Posner, 2005). In addition, the information environment can be very different in presidential elections. Many voters will be more familiar with the presidential candidates and will likely have stronger prior opinions of them, and their political party, before watching the debate. Great familiarity is important not only because it means that voters may have more firmly entrenched attitudes and preferences, but also because it can impact voters' affective responses to the candidates — both positive and negative — which can impact how voters react to information and events (Taber and Lodge, 2006).

Relatedly, more evidence is needed on how debates work in different types of electoral systems. As noted, most of the evidence we have is drawn from legislative elections with single-member districts (Ichino 2019 is an exception). These electoral systems tend to promote more candidate or personality-based voting than exists in proportional representation systems, where voters cast ballots for party lists rather than individual candidates. Because proportional systems tend to emphasize party over candidate, it will be important to examine how debates impact voters in those types of institutional contexts.

Beyond questions about institutional differences across the settings where debates are organized, more research is required to assess the role of debates in contexts with different political histories and traditions. In this regard, meta-analyses or coordinated efforts to study debates in different environments would be very helpful. Moreover, the review makes clear that evidence from outside of Africa would be extremely useful.

The Role of Local Context

Further evidence is also required to understand how voters' local contexts and social networks shape the influence of debates. This is important because voters are exposed to the debates in the height of campaign season when they are also exposed to other types of information, when they are discussing politics (and potentially the debates) with their social networks, and when party activists and supporters are actively campaigning. Consistent with the idea that such factors may be important moderators, Brierley, Kramon and Ofosu (Forthcoming) find that debates only had a persistent impact on Ghanaian voters when they lived in partisan diverse communities; in communities strongly supportive of one of the two major parties, the influence of debates attenuated over time. This evidence highlights that voters' community characteristics may be very important in shaping how they process and ultimately act on what they learn from debates.

There are a number of reasons why the local context might matter, which can be investigated in future research. For example, the nature of social interactions and political discussions may be different in communities with different partisan profiles. The ways in which people discuss debates, and other political topics, is likely to impact how they subsequently act on it. In addition, some voters live in contexts where they face pressures to conform to the partisan preferences of their community or to the preferences of important community leaders. If particular voters are vulnerable to pressure from community members or community leaders, this would likely constrain their

ability to act on the information they learn from debates. Although this is not an exhaustive list of potential reasons, these are examples of the kinds of lines of inquiry that could be fruitful.

What Happens When Debates Are No Longer New?

Most of the studies reviewed above were conducted in contexts where candidate debates are relatively new. This means that they are a novelty to voters and that most candidates are not experienced debaters. What happens when debates become more routine elements of political campaigns? What happens when parties and political candidates become more adept at preparing for debates, participating in them, and potentially leveraging post-debate “spin” to their advantage? As these questions imply, it is quite possible that the role of debates in the democratic system can change substantially over time, a possibility that future research should investigate.

What Makes Debates Distinct?

As noted, there are a number of features of debates programs that make them distinct from other types of information and civic education programs. For example, they directly involve competing candidates and parties who engage in a politically neutral environment, which could reduce the potential for “backlash” against the program and enhance the credibility of the information from the perspective of voters. Debates also allow voters to directly compare their candidate choices in a context where they are answering similar (or the same) questions with the same time constraints and platform. Relatedly, they level the playing field between incumbents and opposition candidates, which can be especially important in contexts where opposition candidates are at a major disadvantage. In addition, debates often involve symbolic displays designed to increase tolerance and reduce political tension.

Moving forward, research on debates could focus more specifically on building evidence around why debates programs may be different from other types of civic education and information provision programs. That is, research could focus on which of the potentially distinct features discussed above are most consequential. This is important for several reasons. First, at this stage, there are reasons to believe in principle that debates are distinct for a number of potentially important reasons, but we lack evidence to support these arguments. Second, evidence in this area can help to shape future debates programming and inform other types of civic education programs, by identifying components that are key to program success.



Chile Presidential Debates, 2017

CONCLUSIONS

This scoping paper has reviewed the empirical academic literature on candidate debates in new democracies and hybrid regimes around the world. The review makes clear that there is reason for optimism about the impact and role of candidate debates in these types of contexts: for example, debates have improved voter learning and engagement in politics, appear to have been influential because of their policy-centered components, and have encouraged voters to be open to and willing to vote for candidates outside of their ethno-partisan group.

At the same time, the review demonstrates that the evidence base remains small, highlighting the need for replications and extensions of existing studies in other contexts. It also highlights the many unanswered questions that should be addressed in order to paint a more complete picture of debates' role in the democratic process.

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