"Please Clap": Applause, Laughter, and Booing during the 2016 GOP Presidential Primary Debates

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ABSTRACT   The 2016 Republican Party presidential primary debates were unprecedented in the amount of media and public interest they generated. Substantially driven by curiosity about reality television celebrity Donald Trump, the initial debates hosted by FOX News and CNN both reflected and validated interest in his candidacy while proffering attention to a full slate of more traditional presidential contenders in front of boisterous audiences. This study considers these audiences' response. Whether applause, laughter, booing, or combinations thereof, these group utterances provide a reliable metric by which insights may be derived concerning partisan attitudes towards Trump and the other candidates, as well as the unity of the Republican Party. Findings suggest that the debate setting in concert with the demographics of the in-person audience may well have influenced initial response to the candidates and as a result have subtle yet lingering consequences for the 2016 presidential election.

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 presidential election has been unique in many ways. Typically the year prior to primary and caucus voting would be "invisible" to the general public, with candidates striving for financial support and party elite endorsements largely out of sight (Dowdle et al. 2013; Steger, Dowdle, and Adkins 2004); however, the year leading up to the 2016 general election was decidedly visible. Not only were party identifiers and the media attentive to both parties' politicians and their positions, so too was the general public. Indeed, the public's early involvement affected the trajectory of the current presidential race and likely future elections.

The elevated public awareness has largely been due to the presence of reality television star and Republican Party candidate Donald Trump whose outspoken populism attracted media and public attention from the start of his campaign. However, his performance during the first two GOP primary debates on FOX News and CNN, each of which drew well over 20 million viewers, established Trump as a serious candidate while fortifying his celebrity.

While the 2016 election might prove anomalous, early debates play a crucial role in providing initial and often lasting impressions that can influence an election's outcome (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003). Thus, candidates seek to build follower enthusiasm and acquire additional supporters through their respective debate performances. With party identity coming second to the candidates themselves, primary debates provide the interested public the opportunity to make choices based upon the contenders' abilities to survive and thrive in a competitive and relatively uncontrolled environment. While not providing the

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unmistakably tangible feedback of votes or financial contributions, primary debates provide the media and general public highly salient indicators of the intensity and type of emotional connection between the candidates and the audience through applause, laughter, boos, and/or combinations thereof.

This article thus content analyzes the debate performance of the Republican Party's candidates during the first two debates held by FOX News and CNN using ANVIL video annotation software (see online Appendix 1). We consider candidate debate performance in terms of the in-person audience's response to the candidates through applause, laughter, and booing and combinations of these group utterances. These utterances not only indicate the level of support and prestige gained or lost by the candidates during their debate performance, they also potentially indicate opposing factions in an audience. Furthermore, these forms of group utterances can exert social influence over the attitudes toward and expectations of the presidential contenders by those watching at home (Fein, Goethals, and Kugler 2007).

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The most obvious difference between primary and general election debates is not necessarily policy differences (Yawn et al. 1998) but

Applause can be seen as an indicator of audience approval of candidate comments, and by extension, the candidate (Bull 2003). Even though applause is contagious and nearly an automatic response, there is a modicum of individual control, as can be seen in the reduction of applause when requested by debate moderators (Stewart 2015). Applause provides a means by which a candidate monitors the attentiveness and appreciation of her or his audience to the points they make, providing "an important barometer of their popular appeal" (Atkinson 1985, 13). We expect applause received by a candidate to reflect both their status and their rhetorical performance during a debate.

Audience laughter is arguably a more reliable indicator than applause of the connection candidates have with audience members because laughter is hard to fake without inducing physiological change (Stewart 2012; 2015). However, like applause, laughter is influenced by candidate status and likability as preferred candidates are often seen as funnier; in turn, their humorous comments lead them to being viewed more positively (Fein et al. 2007; Stewart 2011). Thus candidates with lower standing are more likely to attempt to use humor to increase their likeability, whereas humorous comments by front running candidates are more likely to lead to contagious audience laughter.

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how the candidates position themselves to obtain audible audience support. This typically occurs by candidates taking extreme rhetorical stands (Pfau et al. 1997) accentuating the polarized nature of partisan primary debate attendees. The socially adept candidate may then use the tenor and intensity of audience utterances to alter and hone their messages and delivery during their performance (1984).

Response by audience members to leaders (and those wishing to lead) may be seen as a coordination problem between not just the speaker and the audience, but also between the audience members themselves that is best addressed through simple vocalizations communicating assent or dissent on stated points (Atkinson 1984; Bull 2003; Heritage and Greatbatch 1986). Specifically, the nature of nonverbal activities such as applause, laughter, and booing is contagious and relatively time-constrained, yet serves to effectively communicate audience support or lack thereof for enunciated values (Smith, Seger, and Mackie 2007). Audience response also condenses the time and effort that would normally be required by interpersonal interactions while providing a reliable index of support based upon the type, length, and strength of the "utterance" (Dezecache and Dunbar 2012). Due to the contagious nature of audience response and the mutual monitoring amongst group members (Bull 2003), applause, laughter, and booing may be influenced by the nature of the audience as well as other factors such as seating arrangements, acoustics, and instructions from debate moderators (Stewart 2012; 2015). However, even ideologically diverse audiences may have their applause, laughter, and booing enabled by their being clustered next to each other (Clayman 1992).

To a much lesser extent, booing has been observed in political events (Bull and Miskinis 2014; Clayman 1992; 1993). In those rare cases where booing occurs, audience members apparently do so only in response to attacks by a candidate or perceived affronts to their preferred contender. In other words, booing can be a defensive gesture employed by supporters within a politically mixed audience (Clayman 1992). On the other hand, affiliative booing—booing that is invited through attacks on out-groups and policy positions (Bull and Miskinis 2014)—may occur as well, although its presence during presidential debates has not been noted in the academic literature.[1]

While not as common as applause, laughter, or booing, mixtures of these utterances do occur during primary debates and indicate the presence or lack of shared audience enthusiasm. Specifically, a mixed response might indicate either greater support for a position or the presence of opposing factions within the audience. For example, laughter followed by applause suggests not just an initial appreciation for a candidate's humor but also sustained support for the sentiment communicated. On the other hand, the antipathy communicated by audience booing might be used as a faction's counter to the support of a candidate statement by yet another faction as indicated by applause and/or laughter. Below we explore the range of audience response during the first two GOP debates.

FOX News GOP Debate

The first in the series of 12 Republican Party debates occurred on August 6, 2015 as the top 10 GOP candidates (as determined by the average of the top five national polls) met to take part in

a two-hour prime time debate at the Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, Ohio—the locale for the Republican Party's 2016 presidential nomination convention. Businessman Donald Trump, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker led the field with double-digit poll numbers. They were joined on-stage by former and present Governors Chris Christie, Mike Huckabee, and John Kasich, current Senators Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio, and retired pediatric neurosurgeon Ben Carson. A "sold out" and highly vociferous crowd of 4,500 Republican partisans packed the arena (Beres 2015) with

candidates in applause, yet elicited precious little other response types. On the other hand, Carson not only received a minute and a half of applause alone, he also elicited nearly a half minute of combined laughter and applause, suggesting the audience responded predominantly in a positive manner to him and his performance. On the other hand, Paul appeared to elicit the most negative response from the audience. Whether invited or not, Paul received the largest proportion of response in audience booing. Finally, the most divisive candidate, when considering the range of positive, negative, and mixed responses, was Trump.

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the debate likewise drawing a viewing audience well beyond the cable television norm (Steinberg 2105). Specifically, 24 million viewers watched live with numerous others following through simulcast video streams (2.5 million) or watching it afterwards (8 million video streams).

The nearly 200 auditory audience utterances and just over 18 minutes of applause, laughter, and booing in response to the Republican Party candidates during the just under two hour debate time (1 hour, 49 minutes) provide evidence of an expressive and enthusiastic audience for the first debate. As expected, Trump led the pack with 3 minutes of total response time from 33 audience utterances—over a third more than the closest candidates (see table 1). Trump was followed in total time and audience utterances by hometown Ohio Governor Kasich, Huckabee, Carson, and fellow front-runner Bush. On the other hand, those candidates eliciting the least amount of audience response time and utterances were Christie, at just under 1 minute from 12 utterances, and presumed front-runner Walker with a minute and a quarter of audience response time from 16 utterances.

Further disambiguation of the Cleveland audience's response helps clarify their relationship with the speaker, as well as candidate rhetorical strategies. For instance, Cruz and Bush led all other

Although Christie and Huckabee were both able to elicit a full range of audience response, what they received was dwarfed in both amount and proportion by Trump.

CNN GOP Debate

CNN hosted the second GOP primetime debate on September 16, 2015. CNN originally considered the average of 14 polls to determine eligibility for the debate's 10 podiums. However, due to Carly Fiorina's FOX News drive-time debate performance and her resulting increased poll standings, she was added to the prime time field. With the addition of this eleventh candidate, debate time was increased by an hour to a total of 3 hours. In addition to the added time, the candidates were crowded to within 2 feet of each other in the cramped and sweltering Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, with many of the candidates obviously sweating. At the same time, the crowd was much less boisterous with many of the only 500 seats being reserved for party elites.

The CNN prime time Republican Party debate was watched by nearly as many people (22.9 million on television and 4.5 million live streams) as the FOX News debate suggesting a continued fascination with Trump and his competition (de Moreas 2015). Although the polling numbers showed Trump building his lead

Table 1
FOX News GOP Debate Audience Utterance: Time (events)

Candidate	Speaking time	Applause	Laughter	Booing	Applause & booing	Applause & laughter	Laughter & booing	Total
Jeb Bush	489.78	112.18 (20)	2.57 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	114.75 (22)
Ben Carson	395.73	91.61 (14)	2.81 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	25.83 (0)	0 (0)	120.25 (21)
Chris Christie	387.84	45.24 (8)	1.07 (1)	4.37 (1)	4.87 (1)	3.64 (1)	0 (0)	59.19 (12)
Ted Cruz	400.57	114.07 (21)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1.73 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	115.8 (16)
Mike Huckabee	399.91	83.59 (12)	0 (0)	3.77 (1)	18.05 (1)	18.15 (2)	0 (0)	123.56 (18)
John Kasich	408.50	105.91 (15)	0 (0)	0 (0)	16.22 (1)	9.27 (2)	0 (0)	131.4 (18)
Rand Paul	327.56	71.28 (17)	0 (0)	16.25 (1)	9.48 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	97.01 (19)
Marco Rubio	388.93	77.98 (13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	11.14 (1)	0 (0)	89.12 (14)
Donald Trump	660.00	78.68 (14)	3.04 (1)	12.57 (2)	39.91 (6)	45.71 (8)	0 (0)	179.91 (33)
Scott Walker	352.75	67.03 (15)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7.74 (1)	0 (0)	74.77 (16)
Candidate Total	4211.57	847.57 (149)	9.49 (9)	36.96 (5)	90.26 (11)	121.48 (19)	0 (0)	1105.76 (193)

as fellow front runners Bush and Walker saw their numbers drop slightly, the greatest interest before the debate was how Fiorina would perform, especially given Trump's burgeoning feud with FOX News debate moderator Megyn Kelly over his treatment of women.

Despite his front-runner status, Trump trailed Fiorina, Bush, Rubio, and Christie in total audience response time (see table 2). While potentially revealing an audience not inclined towards Trump, it is notable that he did elicit the greatest number of

field. Further, while there was not the degree of contentiousness as in the FOX debate when considering booing, Trump was the only candidate to elicit a mixed reaction from the audience, as one instance saw him arousing laughter followed by booing.

At the other end of the spectrum, Cruz, Kasich, and Walker were not particularly humorous in their interactions with the audience. Here, each candidate elicited only 1 laughter event apiece of which each lasted less than 3 seconds. While these

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audience utterances with 25, outpacing the next closest candidate (Christie) by 5. At the low end of the audience response was Kasich whose less than a half minute and only 6 audience utterances were well below that of Carson (38 seconds, 8 utterances) and the free-falling Walker (40 seconds, 9 utterances).

Analysis of applause suggests Fiorina was far and away the leader with audience approval of her statements at over two minutes total, nearly thirty seconds more than the next closest candidate Rubio. This was likely due to her being the only candidate with a home state audience. For their part, Carson, Kasich, and Trump received the least applause in terms of both total time and utterances, with Trump's diminished reception notable in light of his front-running status.

Trump, however, elicited substantial amounts of laughter time and events from an audience that, if not unfriendly, was not as positively predisposed towards him as was the case during the FOX News debate. His nearly one minute of laughter substantially outpaced all other candidates, although Bush received abundant amounts of laughter and laughter combined with applause. This, however, came about as the result of only 4 audience utterances, of which 2 accounted for over half of his time. By contrast, Trump aroused laughter 17 times, substantially more than the rest of the

three candidates did not stimulate booing either, the lack of impassioned response likely reflected both their style and the audience's political predispositions.

CONCLUSIONS

While presidential primary debates are serious affairs that introduce the public to potential leaders, any democratic interaction may be seen as potentially messy. The networks and moderators hosting debates, as well as the political parties sanctioning them, must consider the need to balance the audience's right to speech through their utterances with control over the proceedings. As pointed out by Newt Gingrich in response to the apparently unprecedented network moderator attempts to silence presidential primary audience response during the 2012 Republican Party debate in Tampa, Florida, audience applause, laughter, and boos are speech, and thus should be considered protected audience utterances (Stewart 2015). At the same time, and as pointed out by moderator John Dickerson "The Republican National Committee wants people in there excited… It's all about party fundraising. They want the crazy ruckus to make [the debate] seem like a party, but the problem is when the audience gets out of control" (Stith 2016).

Table 2

CNN GOP Debate Audience Utterance: Time (events)

Candidate	Speaking time	Applause	Laughter	Booing	Applause & booing	Applause & laughter	Laughter & booing	Total
Jeb Bush	1008.21	58.78 (10)	20.82 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	29.63 (2)	0 (0)	109.23 (14)
Ben Carson	799.29	24.55 (5)	6.61 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6.84 (1)	0 (0)	38 (8)
Chris Christie	789.37	84.41 (15)	15.12 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	99.53 (20)
Ted Cruz	683.88	46.72 (11)	2.6 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	49.32 (12)
Carly Fiorina	873.11	124.03 (13)	11.41 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	5.11 (1)	0 (0)	140.55 (15)
Mike Huckabee	590.20	45.95 (8)	1.7 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	11.15 (3)	0 (0)	58.8 (12)
John Kasich	605.08	27.49 (5)	1.5 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	28.99 (6)
Rand Paul	671.91	37.94 (9)	5.83 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.34 (1)	0 (0)	48.11 (12)
Marco Rubio	762.20	95.87 (14)	12.59 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	108.46 (17)
Donald Trump	1266.24	33.55 (7)	57.76 (17)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.24 (1)	94.55 (25)
Scott Walker	554.77	37.6 (8)	2.5 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	40.1 (9)
Candidate Total	8604.26	616.89 (105)	138.44 (36)	0 (0)	0 (0)	57.07 (8)	3.24 (1)	815.64 (150)

Arguably the FOX News debate played directly into Donald Trump's strengths as a showman who reads and feeds off of a crowd's energy. Here, his experience with professional wrestling where he interacted with large and boisterous crowds while interacting with antagonists gave him a distinct advantage over the other candidates whose experience with audiences likely tended to be comparatively tame. Indeed, when his performance at the CNN GOP debate, where party stalwarts populated an audience limited to 500, is compared with his FOX News debate performance in front of nearly 5,000, the reaction he received can be seen as relatively subdued. Regardless, in both debates he energized and polarized the audience through his rhetoric, which in turn led to his massively disproportionate amount of free media.

While inarguably a boon for Trump, the prognosis for the Republican Party may not be so rosy. In a manner similar to individual contributions, primary debates can provide information concerning the internal state of a political party and whether a contest election reveals a divided party (Dowdle et al. 2013). Although not as substantial as contributions, audience response provides an audible, salient, and robust index of a party's unity, especially with larger more diverse crowds. However, the effect of these utterances on the media and the viewers watching at home remains unexplored (notwithstanding Fein, Goethals, and Kugler 2007). Future research needs to consider disaggregated audience response, as well as the strength and timing of such utterances and their differential effect on viewer impressions, emotional connections, attitudes, and expectations of the candidates and their political parties.

The research presented here suggests the Republican Party has multiple competing factions, a division more apparent during the initial two GOP debates. In comparison, the Democratic Party's first two debates had no booing (see Appendix 2), nor did the 2012 GOP debates prior to the New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida primaries (Stewart 2015), suggesting an element of partisan negativity for the 2016 Republican Party. Furthermore, the mixture of booing with applause or laughter suggests division within the audiences themselves. While the "big tent" of political parties can accommodate many different and competing factions, what matters is their ability to come together to vote in unity, something that remains to be seen.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516001451.* ■

NOTE

1. The Vocativ's Brian Byrne reports audience booing of Rick Santorum during the final Republican 2012 primary debate in Mesa, Arizona (personal contact September 5, 2015).

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* The URL to access Supplementary Material for this article has been corrected since the original publication. An Erratum detailing this change was also published (DOI: 10.1017/S1049096516002481).