

## Split-screen debate coverage benefited Bush in 2004, research shows

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Conventional wisdom about the pitfalls of reaction shots during presidential debates was turned on its head in a study conducted by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Although Republicans argued against allowing split-screen images of both candidates during the first presidential debate in 2004 at the University of Miami, a study of viewers' opinions shows that President George W. Bush — and not Democratic challenger John Kerry — reaped most of the benefits of the coverage.

"Republicans thought they knew what they were doing by asking for single-screen, and the Democrats and all the pundits argued that it had hurt Bush because of the split screen. But the data shows that's not true," says Dietram Scheufele, a UW-Madison journalism professor. "It hurt Kerry quite a bit and didn't hurt Bush at all. The pundits didn't live up to reality."

Although both camps agreed before the debates not to allow split-screen coverage, some networks broke the ground rules insisting that there was no evidence that split-screen shots affected viewers' judgments.

The study, published in the February issue of the journal *Communication Research*, put that assertion to the test, as 700 university students were asked to evaluate a five-minute-long debate clip in single screen and split-screen formats. The study was conducted in the two weeks prior to the 2004 election.

Scheufele, who conducted the study along with UW-Madison journalism assistant professor Dominique Brossard and doctoral student Eunkyung Kim, says Kerry's split-screen performance hurt him among potential swing voters in the Bush camp and did not help move his base.

"The split-screen debates hurt Kerry and not really Bush," he says. "It was largely a function of what people thought about the two candidates in the first place. Split-screen coverage made Bush supporters more extreme in their support for the president and their opposition to Kerry. Kerry voters, on the other hand, didn't like Bush in the first place, but the split-screen coverage also didn't change much about their support for Kerry."

For Bush, the split-screen format shored up his base and helped him with GOP-leaning undecided viewers.

"When they saw Kerry on split screen and saw his smirks or writing something down in reaction to what Bush said, that produced a much more negative view towards Kerry," he adds. "People who leaned toward Bush in the first place felt even worse about Kerry."

That undermines the consensus of media pundits after the debate, who claimed that the Bush campaign was hurt by the split-screen format. The study's findings show the opposite is true.

"Bush's performance solidified his base and didn't surprise people on the fence. Bush's campaign didn't want split-screen coverage, but it helped Bush quite a bit because it wound up hurting Kerry," Scheufele says. "The split screen turned GOP-leaning people off to a candidate who they were not so certain about. And it didn't change perceptions of someone people had seen deliver State of the Union addresses before."

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison

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