

# Author says presidential primary debates allow audiences for candidates, can influence election

September 14 2011, By LeAnn Brazeal

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Primary debate season, an important time in each presidential election, is under way, and a Kansas State University political communication expert says these debates can influence the direction of the election.

LeAnn Brazeal, associate professor of [communication studies](#), is the co-author of the book "The Primary Decision: A Functional Analysis of Presidential Primary Debates." Brazeal said that despite the changes the debate format has undergone, it has several enduring characteristics. This includes that having numerous, often colorful [candidates](#) can complicate voters understanding of their politics. This can appeal to the debate's primary audience: party faithful.

"People who identify strongly with a party's ideology are most likely to vote in primary elections," Brazeal said. "Candidates campaign more to the left or right in the primaries, while the discourse shifts toward the center in the general election."

Appealing to voters of the same ideology can create some terse situations between candidates. Candidates engage in more attacking and defensive discourse in debates than in television spots, Brazeal said. This is often because candidates are unable to resist responding to one another in a live forum. For Republicans, the philosophy runs counter to that of one of the party's favorite leaders.

"Ronald Reagan famously proclaimed the 11th commandment, 'Thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican,' but our research suggests that candidates do not follow it," Brazeal said.

Historically, there are a variety of successful approaches in primary debates. Strong records of accomplishment help offer proof of the ability to lead. Likewise, experience as a governor can be an asset for executive decision-making, familiarity with budgets and possible success of agendas. The increased focus on policy issues combined with the aforementioned approaches play well to certain candidates in 2012, Brazeal said.

"Rick Perry, for example, could boast that he handled a state economy that is the 15th largest in the world and this qualifies him to work with the federal budget," Brazeal said.

Front-runners may choose an above-the-fray posture, where they present themselves with an extra measure of dignity and speak as though already anointed; this can also be a successful strategy, Brazeal said.

Although potential policies receive greater attention during debates, the rhetoric does not change much. Brazeal and her co-authors found that candidates mostly spoke in generalities during the campaign rather than offer specifics. Political communication itself also remains tightly controlled, with candidates offering the same message consistently -- and not always succeeding. She said this is important to remember in a technologically connected world.

"A candidate's outburst or mishap is sure to be uploaded and viewed a million times and perhaps even picked up by more traditional news outlets," Brazeal said.

All of these factors reinforce the importance of the primary debates, she

said. Viewers make decisions about each candidate's policies and their character. Voters who watch the primary debates are more confident in their decisions than those who do not. The stakes can be sizable.

"A good debate performance, especially one that exceeds expectations, can bump the candidate in the polls and create some momentum," Brazeal said. "Debate performances can draw media attention to lesser-known candidates and pique public interest, especially if the debates dovetail with campaign ads."

But the complexity of campaigns can sometimes mean a strong debate performance is not enough. The potential for scandals and crises along with a fickle public present a host of challenges, Brazeal said.

"Effective [political communication](#) is powerful and important, but it's no guarantee," she said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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