“Please Clap”: Applause, Laughter, And Booing During The 2016 GOP Presidential Primary Debates

Appendix 2

CNN DEMOCRATIC PARTY DEBATE

In contrast to the Republican Party debates, the field of contenders for the Democratic Party presidential nomination was relatively small, with only five candidates reaching the threshold average of one percent in three national polls taken from August 1 to October 10, 2015. While many observers and pundits hoped that Vice President Joe Biden would enter the race in time to be a part of the October 13 debate, this was not to be. Instead the debate proved to be mainly a competition between front-runner Hillary Clinton and her chief adversary Bernie Sanders, as the other three contenders - Lincoln Chaffee, Martin O’Malley, and Jim Webb - polled only in the lower single digits.

Although the number of viewers did not reach the level achieved by the first two Republican Party debates, the 15.3 million viewers, along with 980,000 live streams, led this debate to be the most watched Democratic Primary debate in history.[[1]](#footnote-1) And while the choice of holding a debate in a Las Vegas casino was considered slightly odd, Nevada’s swing state status likely played a similar strategic electoral role to that played in the Republican Party’s debates.

Table 1: CNN Democratic Party debate audience utterance: Time (events)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate | Applause | Laughter | Booing | Applause &  booing | Applause & laughter | Laughter &  booing | Total |
| Lincoln  Chaffee | 18.22  (5) | 8.18  (2) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 26.4  (7) |
| Hillary  Clinton | 252.65  (42) | 3.04  (2) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 32.45  (5) | 0  (0) | 288.14  (49) |
| Martin  O'Malley | 122.45  (25) | 3.57  (1) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 126.02  (26) |
| Bernie  Sanders | 390.33  (75) | 3.03  (2) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 19.78  (2) | 0  (0) | 413.14  (79) |
| Jim  Webb | 43.44  (10) | 1.5  (1) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 11.78  (2) | 0  (0) | 56.72  (13) |
| Candidate Total | 827.09  (157) | 19.32  (8) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 64.01  (9) | 0  (0) | 910.42  (174) |

While it can be expected that the Democratic Party front-runners Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders would dominate audience response, with both accounting for over two-thirds of the more than fifteen minutes of applause and laughter, and nearly three-quarters all these audience events (73.6%), Sanders’ dominance was unexpected. Specifically, he received over two minutes more audience accolades (6:53) from nearly half of their auditory utterances (45.4%) when compared with Clinton’s nearly five minutes (4:48) and fifty audience events (49). Although Martin O’Malley lagged behind the front-runners he was well ahead of Webb and Chaffee.

Whereas both Republican debates featured copious amounts of booing, likely reflecting negative audience response regardless of whether it was invited or not, what is most striking is the lack of booing by the Democratic partisans. At the same time, laughter was comparatively sparse. While all candidates elicited laughter, Clinton obtained more laughter, both in terms of total time (:35) and bouts (7) than all other candidates. Sanders, however, was able to invoke substantially more applause (6:30, 75 events) than almost all other candidates combined (47.2% of total applause; 47.8% of total bouts). By comparison Lincoln Chaffee and Jim Webb were substantially shunned by the audience both in terms of bouts and time spent responding to them.

CBS DEMOCRATIC PARTY DEBATE

The second Democratic Party debate on November 14, 2015 was notable for multiple reasons. Despite the debate field shrinking to the two front-runners, Clinton and Sanders, along with Martin O’Malley, there was a renewed outcry concerning there being too few debates to properly introduce the party’s contenders to the electorate. Furthermore, there was the perception that, by airing the debate on a Saturday evening late in the College football season, the Democratic Party was attempting to limit public attention and awareness to protect their front-runner, Hillary Clinton. There appeared to be a good deal of validity to this charge, as the debate was viewed by 8.5 million viewers, and had only 1.2 million live streams.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, the debate itself was overshadowed by terrorist attacks on Paris earlier that week.

A further notable change was the introduction of a novel means of presenting the debate that used the product of co-sponsor Twitter. Here, the screen seen by viewers was set up so that the candidates themselves only took up slightly more than half the television screen (~54%), with the remainder taken up by tweets from a range of individuals, including Republican Party presidential candidates, on the screen’s right hand side and info-graphics concerning the amount of tweets referring to the candidates and different topics on the bottom of the screen. While the saturation of information may have been an attempt to attract younger, more tech-savvy viewers, the information presented in these graphics may have distracted the viewers from the candidates and their message.

Table 2: CBS Democratic Party debate audience utterance: Time (events)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate | Applause | Laughter | Booing | Applause &  booing | Applause & laughter | Laughter &  booing | Total |
| Hillary  Clinton | 144.54  (20) | 3.97  (2) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 19.65  (3) | 0  (0) | 168.16  (25) |
| Martin  O'Malley | 57.2  (9) | 9.44  (4) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 22.89  (3) | 0  (0) | 89.53  (16) |
| Bernie  Sanders | 60.56  (13) | 11.08  (4) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 49.05  (8) | 0  (0) | 120.69  (25) |
| Candidate Total | 262.3  (42) | 24.49  (10) | 0  (0) | 0  (0) | 91.59  (14) | 0  (0) | 378.38  (66) |

Audience response during the CBS debate, especially during the initial stages, was greatly diminished due in great part to the terrorist attacks that occurred the day prior. Specifically, both audience response time and number of bouts was well under half that of the CNN debate even when difference in time was taken into consideration. Even with this in mind, Hillary Clinton was able to reverse course with her CBS performance. Specifically, she was able to receive fifty seconds more audience response time than her closest competitor, Bernie Sanders, in the three candidate debate. This was despite having the same number of audience response events (25) as he did. While Martin O’Malley was the recipient of a minute and a half of audience vocalizations, he was well behind the two front-runners.

When audience response was disentangled, Clinton received more applause than both the other candidates combined. However, when it came to laughter and the combination of laughter then applause, Sanders nearly matched his own applause total of one minute each. Indeed, he had substantially more of these positive audience bouts (12) than both Clinton (5) and O’Malley (7). Finally, as was the case with the CNN debate, no audience booing occurred.

1. Byrnes, Jesse. “CNN debate sets ratings record for Democrats.” The Hill. October 14, 2015. http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/256886-cnn-debate-sets-democratic-record [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gold, Hadas. “CBS Democratic debate draws lowest rating.” Politico. November 15, 2015. http://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2015/11/cbs-democratic-debate-sanders-clinton-omalley-215908 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)