

Methodological Notes for Nielsen Data used in “Democratizing the Debates”

By Josephine Holz, Visiting Scholar, Annenberg Public Policy Center, and former Senior Vice President for Media Analytics, Nielsen

Page 5: “Nielsen data show that the percent of U.S. TV households viewing the debates has declined from 60% in 1960 to about 38% in 2012.”

These percentages represent the sum of household ratings for all telecasts of each debate. A rating is a percentage that reflects the number of households or persons viewing a program or network divided by the number of US households or persons owning a TV set.

- If anyone in the household viewed any of the debate, that household would be counted as having viewed the debate. This means that if two or three people in the same household watched any of the debate, that household would still be counted only once as having viewed the debate.
- Household rather than person (individual) ratings were used to track debate viewership from 1960 to 2012 because Nielsen’s methodology for measuring viewing by individuals has changed over the years. From the 1950s through the late 1980s, household viewing was measured by TV set meters that only measured what the TV was tuned to in that household, while ratings for individuals were taken from paper diaries that respondents in a supplementary Nielsen panel filled out. These supplementary person ratings were collected for only part of the year. In 1987, Nielsen introduced the People Meter, which is a TV meter that can measure viewing by all individuals in that household year-round, using buttons on the meter that are assigned to each specific household member, which everyone in the household is required to push when they start and stop watching TV.

Page 6: “In particular, Nielsen analysis confirms that: ‘In 2012, 20.2% of viewers 18 or older watched at least some of one debate, 16.2% watched at least some of two debates, 15.3% watched at least some of three debates and 14.9% watched at least some of all four debates...’ ” (Page 6)

These percentages represent the proportion of individuals age 18 or older who watched only one debate, only two debates, only three debates, or all four debates,

based on viewing of at least one minute of the debate. These percentages are mutually exclusive.

Page 9: “The proportion of the electorate viewing debates is substantially lower than it once was...” (Page 8)

Note that the percentages shown in Figure 1 (Average percent across all debates of voting age population that watched the presidential and vice presidential debates on television) and Figure 2 (Percent of voting age population that watched the most widely viewed debate on television) represent persons (rather than households) viewing the debates.