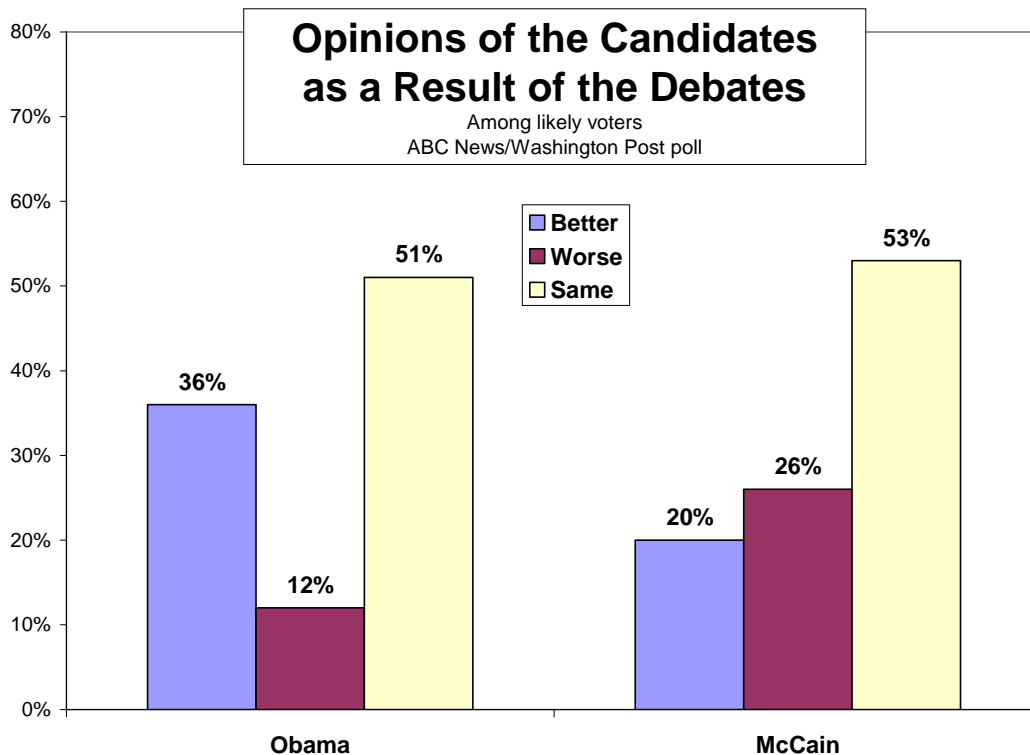


Debate Scores: McCain Improves But Obama Takes the Prize

John McCain improved his debate scores in his final encounter with Barack Obama, but not enough to challenge Obama's dominance across their three meetings – an advantage that's improved Obama's image well beyond his core supporters.

Likely voters by 3-1 say they have a better rather than worse opinion of Obama because of his debate performances. It's helped him in key groups including white voters overall, working-class whites, independents, married women, white Catholics – even among conservatives and perhaps evangelical white Protestants, core Republican constituencies.

Overall, 36 percent of likely voters in this ABC News/Washington Post poll say they have a better opinion of Obama as a result of the debates, 12 percent worse. That compares with McCain's result: Just 20 percent think better of him, vs. 26 percent worse.



Nonetheless, that's a good deal less negative than it was for McCain after the second debate, when just 12 percent thought better of him, 28 percent worse. The last debate did help McCain's overall score – but not enough to rival Obama's.

Debates rarely have a measurable, direct impact on vote preferences, and Obama's overall advance against McCain came before the debates began, fueled by the global economic crisis. Nonetheless debates can more subtly influence campaign dynamics, either by reassuring voters or raising doubts. And the number of voters who say the debates had no impact on their thinking declined sharply from two-thirds after the first debate to barely over half now.

| | Opinion of the candidates as a result of the debates | | | | | |
|------|---|-------|------|--------|-------|------|
| | Obama | | | McCain | | |
| | Better | Worse | Same | Better | Worse | Same |
| Now | 36% | 12 | 51 | 20% | 26 | 53 |
| 9/29 | 19 | 7 | 68 | 14 | 11 | 68 |

GROUPS – The advantage is Obama's not just overall but among important groups. Independents, for example – classic swing voters – by 33-13 percent say the debates made them think better rather than worse of Obama. For McCain, by contrast, the assessment among independents is 19 percent better, 28 percent worse.

Obama's also seen more favorably rather than less so by white Catholics, 26-13 percent, and by married women, 35-14 percent, two more swing voter groups. McCain's debate rating is about the same among white Catholics, but weaker among married women.

Whites overall, a group in which Obama (like most Democratic presidential candidates in recent years) has trailed, think better of him as a result of his debate performances by 2-1, 30 percent to 14 percent. Whites meanwhile split evenly on McCain, 21-23 percent better-worse. It's very similar among the subset of working-class whites, those with less than \$50,000 in household incomes.

Among all middle-class voters (in the \$50,000-\$100,000 income range) – the group so ardently courted by McCain and Obama alike – the advantage in debate performance again is Obama's. Middle-class likely voters by 2-1, 34-16 percent, think better rather than worse of Obama as a result of his debate performances. Of McCain, 22 percent think better, 28 percent worse.

Even conservatives are more apt by 11 points to say they think better rather than worse of Obama as a result of the debates. And evangelical white Protestants do so by 5 points – not a significant margin given the sample size, but certainly a less-than-negative assessment of Obama in this core Republican group.

| | Opinion of the candidates as a result of the debates | | | | | |
|-----------|---|-------|------|--------|-------|------|
| | Obama | | | McCain | | |
| | Better | Worse | Same | Better | Worse | Same |
| All | 36% | 12 | 51 | 20 | 26 | 53 |
| Democrats | 55 | 2 | 42 | 10 | 40 | 49 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Independents | 33 | 13 | 53 | 19 | 28 | 52 |
| Republicans | 16 | 22 | 60 | 31 | 6 | 61 |
| Whites | 30 | 14 | 55 | 21 | 23 | 56 |
| Whites | | | | | | |
| <\$50K | 29 | 13 | 56 | 18 | 22 | 59 |
| \$50K-\$100K | 30 | 18 | 52 | 25 | 23 | 51 |
| \$100K+ | 36 | 12 | 51 | 17 | 25 | 57 |
| All \$50K-\$100K | 34 | 16 | 50 | 22 | 28 | 48 |
| Men | 33 | 12 | 54 | 21 | 24 | 53 |
| Women | 39 | 11 | 48 | 18 | 26 | 54 |
| Married women | 35 | 14 | 51 | 21 | 24 | 55 |
| Liberals | 48 | 9 | 44 | 8 | 43 | 49 |
| Moderates | 39 | 8 | 52 | 17 | 31 | 50 |
| Conservatives | 27 | 16 | 56 | 28 | 11 | 60 |
| White Catholics | 26 | 13 | 58 | 25 | 16 | 57 |
| White evangelical Protestants | 27 | 22 | 51 | 28 | 12 | 59 |
| Age <65 | 37 | 10 | 52 | 20 | 27 | 52 |
| Age 65+ | 35 | 16 | 48 | 18 | 21 | 57 |

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone Oct. 16-17, 2008, among a random national sample of 666 likely voters, including landline and cell-phone-only respondents. Results have a 4-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollingunit>

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Full results follow (*= less than 0.5 percent).

1-10 held for release.

11. (ASKED OF LIKELY VOTERS) As a result of the presidential debates, do you have a better opinion of [NAME], a worse opinion of him, or haven't the debates changed your opinion of [NAME] one way or the other?

10/19/08 - Summary Table

| | Better | Worse | Has not changed | No opinion |
|-----------|--------|-------|-----------------|------------|
| a. Obama | 36 | 12 | 51 | 1 |
| b. McCain | 20 | 26 | 53 | 2 |

Trend:

a. Obama

| | | Better | Worse | Has not changed | No opinion |
|-----------|----|--------|-------|--------------------|------------|
| 10/19/08 | LV | 36 | 12 | 51 | 1 |
| 10/11/08* | LV | 33 | 8 | 58 | 1 |
| 9/29/08* | RV | 19 | 7 | 68 | 7 |

b. McCain

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----|----|----|----|---|
| 10/19/08 | LV | 20 | 26 | 53 | 2 |
| 10/11/08* | LV | 12 | 28 | 59 | 1 |
| 9/29/08* | RV | 14 | 11 | 68 | 7 |

*10/11/08: "As a result of the two presidential debates..."; 9/29/08: "As a result of the debate..."

12-17 held for release.

END