

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES IN HISTORY

(From the Bill of Rights Institute)

Summary:

Divisive presidential campaigns are not new in American history. Politics has always been a brutal sport in which different factions vie for any advantage on voting day. While the competitive spirit of elections has little changed over the centuries, the modes in which candidates communicate their platforms and tear down their opponents have changed significantly. Now, presidential contenders are tasked with crafting a unique brand, cultivating a positive public image, and must appeal to a broader base of voters with a wider array of backgrounds and interests than ever before. The ways in which voters come to perceive and judge candidates have likewise changed with time. Visual media, especially the Internet, is one of the most important factors in modern elections.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, presidential candidates did little personal campaigning, preferring to let their supporters do the heavy lifting of attacking opponents and persuading voters. Even though the candidates were not campaigning on their own behalf, presidential elections could be intensely personal and vicious affairs. In the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson's Federalist opponents warned that Jefferson would bring about "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery," and that the air would be "rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil...soaked with blood and the nation black with crimes." Jefferson's own partisans attacked Adams, saying, "The grand object of [Adams'] administration has been to exasperate the rage of contending parties to calumniate and destroy every man who differs from his opinions."

As a U.S. Senate candidate, future President Abraham Lincoln gained notoriety for participating in a series of seven debates with Stephen A. Douglas. These dialogues, which eventually became known as the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, provided the conceptual framework which brought about formal presidential debates in the modern era. These debates helped establish the precedent that candidates should present their cases and state their criticisms before the public, and engage in a constructive dialogue with each other about the future course of the nation.

The advent of radio and television revolutionized the election process. Prior to the early twentieth century, voters who could not attend rallies and speeches in person were left to read printed accounts long after the fact. With radio, large swathes of the American electorate could listen to candidates address the nation in real time. Broadcast debates became an important element of political competition. It also became important for campaigns to take debates into their election strategy. In 1940, Republican nominee Wendell Willkie challenged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to a series of radio debates. Roosevelt, perhaps knowing Willkie's talent for public speaking, declined the proposal.

Televised debates finally gave the whole nation the ability to see candidates for themselves. In 1960, Democrat nominee John F. Kennedy met Republican nominee Richard Nixon in the first nationally televised presidential debate. Kennedy appeared to viewers as calm and collected, well groomed, and handsome, maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact with the camera and exuded an inviting demeanor. Kennedy also had makeup applied before broadcast. Nixon, on the other hand, began to sweat, looked unshaven, and shifted his eyes between the camera, the moderators, and the clock. In the opinions of many voters, Nixon appeared ill-at-ease and unprofessional. In the ensuing election, Nixon lost by a narrow margin.

Since 1960, televised presidential debates have become a staple feature of the election cycle. It has evolved from a method of engaging in constructive dialogue into an exchange in which soundbites and pithy retorts can make and break candidates. President Ronald Reagan developed a reputation as a talented debater, mastering the art of short and effective soundbites that energized his political base. Mistakes in the age of televised debate can also harm campaigns. In 2000, many voters were bothered by what they perceived as Al Gore's repeated audible sighing while George W. Bush spoke. In 2011, during a Republican primary forum, candidate Rick Perry forgot core parts of his platform. In the age of the internet, debate footage never dies. It can be shared and viewed limitlessly and is preserved for the public to see for posterity.

In the modern era, presidential debates have become less about substantive discussions of public policy and principle, and more about dispensing brief statements of opinion and platform easily conveyable in media broadcasts. Voters and candidates are left to consider whether this phenomenon is beneficial to the electoral process and whether the modern mode of debate is the most effective method for candidates to compare positions and ideas for the benefit of the American people.

Questions:

1. How have the ways in which candidates' campaign changed over time?
2. Why do you think that candidates in the nineteenth century tended to avoid direct personal involvement in day-to-day campaigning?
3. Why were the Lincoln-Douglas Debates important at the time? What effect did they have on future presidential debates?
4. What effect did the Kennedy-Nixon debate have on the 1960 election? What effect did it have on future presidential elections?
5. Why do you think campaigns and debate organizers today place so much emphasis on soundbites rather than substance?
6. How do you think the Internet will change how presidential debates are conducted in the future? Are debates still a worthwhile means for voters to judge candidates?
7. How has Twitter influenced the political process? Does its limit on the length of messages help or harm political discussion?
8. If you were in charge of the Presidential Debates, what debate format would you design? How would it work? What rules would you put in place? Who would moderate the debate?

Michelle Hess

Vice President of Education
Bill of Rights Institute
200 North Glebe Road, Suite 200
Arlington, VA 22203
703.894.1776
info@billofrightsinstitute.org