



With the presidential debate season upon us, many people wonder who will win or if the debate even matters! To help answer those questions, we present a brief history of presidential debates—which some of you will be surprised to find out is a lot briefer than you thought! The first one did not take place until 1960. Here we delve into some of the rich, albeit relatively recent history of presidential debates and the role they play—or don't play—in helping Americans choose their next chief executive.



Face To Face

History of US Presidential Debates

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The debates between the top presidential contenders have developed into an integral part of the hoopla that accompanies US presidential campaigns. Millions of Americans watch or listen as the candidates face off. It is interesting to note that presidential debates are entirely a modern invention. Their history a mere half century old. Various groups encouraged the creation of formal debates for decades, but for a variety of reasons they did not take place until the campaign of 1960.

That first presidential debate was held between John F. Kennedy and then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon. The two agreed to engage in a verbal duel, apparently because each of them believed it would benefit his campaign. The debate only happened because both sides wanted it.

Although the American public was very enthusiastic about the idea—60 million viewers followed the series of four discussions—the next presidential debates did not take place until 1976. Today a presidential contender cannot refuse to face his competitor in a debate without risking his entire campaign.

To understand the effect debates have, it is important to note that a candidate who has built up momentum is unlikely to lose solely because of a poor showing in a debate. However, debates are a valuable means for one candidate to present his views and defend himself against his opponent's attacks, as well as to highlight his opponent's weaknesses. Here is a brief overview of how recent debates helped candidates in their bids for the White House:

In 1976, Jimmy Carter was not doing particularly well in public surveys. At their debate, his opponent, President Gerald Ford, made the foolish statement that the Soviet Union did not have troops in Poland. When offered a chance to revise what was obviously an error, he refused. Only a week later did he clarify that he meant to say that the Soviets could not continue to dominate Poland—as later events proved. Nevertheless, this misstatement was played up by the media and many historians say it paved the

way for Carter's win in the election.

In 1980, Carter tried painting his opponent, Ronald Reagan, as an extreme conservative. Reagan successfully used the debates to convince Americans that he was level-headed, open-minded and even entertaining. Reagan also used the debates to present his agenda, whereas Carter did not have one. Many pundits say Reagan won solely due to his performance at the debates.

By 1984, President Reagan was well known for his ability to present his views in an engaging manner. He good-naturedly waved off intimations by Democrats that he was too old for the job when he stated, "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." The comment induced hearty laughter from the audience and even a chuckle from the Democratic contender, Walter Mondale. With it Reagan convinced Americans that his seniority was a benefit, not a deficit.

In 1988, George Bush debated Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis. Dukakis cemented his drab, emotionless image when he was questioned whether he would advocate the death penalty if a member of his own family were to be murdered. His expression betrayed no emotion whatsoever toward the outrageous question and his terse response of "no" was not followed up with a detailed explanation of his opposition to the death penalty.

In 1992, the Clinton camp demanded a new system of "town hall" debates in which voters could present their own questions to the candidates spontaneously. Bill Clinton, who is especially good at fielding open conversations, was able to capitalize on this approach and develop a strong following among voters.

In 2000, George W. Bush benefited from the fact that he was known to fare poorly in debates. Once he managed to respond reasonably well to the questions, the public accepted him as a viable choice for the presidency.

Still, most political experts believe that debates, with few exceptions, have not

generally changed the course of electoral history. However, they have helped sway voters—especially the undecided ones—to view one candidate or the other in a better light.

Looking back, though, debates may well have significantly affected American history had they taken place decades earlier. Many people who made it to the White House would likely not have won an election if the public had seen them in a head-to-head debate with the other candidates.

Early US Presidential Campaigns

Early presidential campaigns through the first half of the 19th century were largely decided in the media, which reported on candidates' records and speeches. The candidates themselves typically displayed disinterest in high public positions, acting as if it were being forced on them by the public. Campaigning consisted of printed articles in newspapers, distributing pamphlets and making speeches at public assemblies. Candidates rarely campaigned themselves. Instead, such mundane matters were handled by their political parties.

Newspapers in that period were often strongly aligned to a specific party, if not an organ of one of the major political parties outright. Published reports usually were highly biased and included only positive information about the publication's favorite while ridiculing his opponent. The concept of debate between opposite parties in which the wisdom of their opposing views was contrasted did not exist outside of Congress. And in Congress—oh, did debate reign free! Every issue was fought out in lengthy speeches in which the legislator's eloquence could carry more weight than the value of his ideas.

The first time a presidential candidate spoke openly to the public about his candidacy was when Whig candidate William Henry Harrison addressed the public in 1840. Nevertheless, Harrison won the presidency primarily because of a highly inaccurate



US postage stamp, 1958 issue, commemorating the Lincoln-Douglas debates, which attracted large crowds.



Lincoln debating Douglas.

advertising campaign that popularized him as a legendary figure. (In any case, he died of pneumonia within one month of taking office—the shortest term of office of any US president.)

1858: First US Political Debate

The first significant political debate in America took place in 1858, but it was not between presidential candidates. It was held between three-time incumbent Democratic US senator from Illinois Stephen Douglas and Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln, who sought to unseat him. The series of seven debates, which dragged on for hours and aroused widespread public interest, created a new trend in political campaigning that continues to shape American politics today.

Douglas kicked off his campaign with a public speech to which Lincoln responded with a speech of his own the following evening. The next time Douglas spoke in public, Lincoln followed with a reply the following day. This unintentionally created a pattern. After that, Lincoln wrote a letter to Douglas proposing that they meet and