

Lesson Title: Great Debates

Handout #5: History of the Presidential Debates

The tradition of great American election debates is often traced to the Illinois U.S. Senate race of 1856, when seven three-hour debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas were held in outdoor venues in small towns like Freeport and Galesburg. These oratorical contests required the two candidates to speak at great length: the first candidate spoke for one hour, followed by a one and one half hour rebuttal, and then a half hour closing by the opening speaker. The central issue of these debates was slavery in the United States.

The first presidential debates took place in the 1960 election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. There were no debates from 1964 until 1976, because seated Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon refused to appear with their challengers. From 1972 to today, every presidential contest has included televised debates, which have been crucial to the decisions of voters.

1960 • Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy (Democrat) vs. Vice President Richard M. Nixon (Republican)

Four debates were televised nationally—the first debates ever held between presidential candidates. In the critical first debate, Kennedy’s physical presence dominated. Those who heard the debate on the radio thought Nixon was the winner, while those who watched on television chose Kennedy conclusively. Major topics were the Cold War and Communism abroad (USSR, China, Cuba). Two tiny islands off Taiwan, Quemoy and Matsu, emerged as a pivotal subject of the debates.

1976 • Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter (Democrat) vs. President Gerald Ford (Republican)

Three presidential debates were held, along with the first vice presidential debate. Other innovations were candidate rebuttal speeches and follow up questions by the newscasters on the questioning panel. In the second debate, Ford erred badly by saying, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe,” despite the existence of the Iron Curtain in that region. Carter pursued the mistake by responding that he’d like to see Ford convince Polish Americans and Hungarian Americans that their homelands weren’t under Soviet domination. Many thought Ford’s poor performance in this debate was the major turning point that signaled Ford’s eventual loss in the election. Major topics were Watergate and Ford’s pardoning of ex-President Nixon, and taxes.

1980 • President Jimmy Carter (Democrat) vs. California Governor Ronald Reagan (Republican)

Only one debate was held between the two major contenders. A first debate had been held between Reagan and independent candidate John Anderson. Reagan Era conservatism was dramatically revealed, with his attacks on big government. Reagan had all the best lines: “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” and “There you go again.” Reagan’s observed communication skills had a great deal to do with his victory in the election. Carter was criticized for quoting his 12 year-old daughter Amy in a discussion of nuclear weapons. Major topics were the Iranian Hostage Crisis, high inflation and the stagnating economy, inner city misery, and the nuclear threat.

1984 • Former Vice President Walter Mondale (Democrat) vs. President Ronald Reagan (Republican)

Two Presidential debates were held, both in October. Although Mondale was considered the better debater, his improvement in the polls did not prevent a landslide for Reagan. Reagan seemed tired and slow in the first debate; however, he responded in the second debate to the issue of his advanced age by saying, “... I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit my opponent’s youth and inexperience.” Main topics were the Cold War and Reagan’s view of the Soviet Union as the “evil empire,” and his program cuts, especially in programs for the disadvantaged and Medicare.

1988 • Vice President George H. Bush (Republican) vs. Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis (Democrat)

Two Presidential debates were held. Most observers found the first one boring and uneventful. At the opening of the second debate, Dukakis, a vocal opponent of the death penalty, was asked by CNN reporter Bernard Shaw whether Dukakis would support the death penalty for someone who raped and murdered his wife. His response was seen as cold and ineffective, and it hurt him in the polls. Major topics were Dukakis’s liberalism, and the choice of a weak running mate (Indiana Senator Dan Quayle) by Bush.

1992 • President George H. W. Bush (Republican) vs. Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton (Democrat) and businessman Ross Perot (Independent)

There were many changes to the traditional debate format, including one “town meeting” evening when audience members asked questions to the three candidates, who sat on stools instead of at podiums. It was the first time that three candidates appeared together in the presidential debates. All four debates took place within nine days. Perot’s bulldog-like feistiness won the headlines of the debates. Clinton’s down-home magnetism appeared in his attack on Bush’s treatment of the economic recession and unemployment: “...in my state, when people lose their jobs there’s a good chance I’ll know them by name.” Bush was seen checking his watch, which made him seem bored and aloof. Clinton and Perot gained support from the debates marathon, while Bush lost some. Main

topics were the recession, Clinton's opposition to the Vietnam War, and Bush's reversal of his promise "Read my lips no new taxes."

1996 • President Bill Clinton (Democrat) vs. Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (Republican)

There were only two debates held, and Independent Ross Perot was excluded this time. Dole tried to distance himself from the right wing of his party, emphasizing his ability to build bipartisan coalitions in Congress. He attacked Clinton's character, citing "scandals almost on a daily basis" (e.g., the Clintons' Arkansas investments in Whitewater). Clinton responded eloquently that "No attack ever created a job, or educated a child, or helped a family make ends meet." Clinton was considered the beneficiary of the debates. Main topics were the improvement in the economy and in the crime rate, Clinton's character, and Dole's desire to cut taxes.

2000 • Texas Governor George W. Bush (Republican) vs. Vice President Al Gore (Democrat)

Three debates were held, and moderated by the NewsHour's Jim Lehrer, who had been part of several former debates. Bush, who was widely believed to be incapable of standing up to outstanding debater Al Gore, held his ground and gained a great deal of support. Gore seemed wooden and repetitive: he repeated the concept of a "locked box" for Social Security funds many times. Major topics were big government, what to do with the large budget surplus from the Clinton years, and Bush's plan to cut taxes for all citizens, including the wealthiest Americans.

2004 • Incumbent President George W. Bush (Republican) vs. U.S. Senator John Kerry (Democrat)

The debates were held less than 18 months after the start of the Iraq War and three years after 9/11. These events likely contributed to the public's hesitation to not reelect Bush, despite the rising death toll of American soldiers and no evidence of weapons of mass destruction, a major reason cited for going to war. Kerry spoke about reducing joblessness and the national deficit, including rolling back Bush's tax cuts for America's wealthiest, but was seen as lacking personality. Major topics included free trade, abortion, and same sex marriage.

2008 • Illinois Senator Barack Obama (Democrat) vs. Arizona Senator John McCain (Republican)

Polls indicated Obama was the winner in all three debates against McCain. Topics included McCain's choice of inexperienced Alaska governor Sarah Palin for Vice President, the devastating Great Recession caused by an unchecked mortgage bubble under President Bush, and the disastrous war in Iraq. Vietnam war hero McCain brought up a final "surge" tactic in the Iraq War, which seemed to be succeeding.

2012 • Incumbent President Barack Obama (Democrat) vs. Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (Republican)

Both candidates spoke about their very different ideologies as to the role of government. Billionaire businessman Romney cited his desire to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Obama's landmark piece of legislation from his first term, and called for tax cuts. Obama trumpeted pulling the U.S. out of the Great Recession (2007-2009) but Romney repeatedly cited high unemployment. Obama's campaign said he had proved his success as commander in chief by the assassination of Osama bin Laden after Romney argued the U.S. had lost some of its strength as the leader in world affairs. Obama had a weak performance in the first presidential debate but was credited with making up for it by strong showings in the second and third debates.