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FROM JFK TO TRUMP
The Evolution of U.S. Presidential Debates

Alan Schroeder

Introduction

When John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon met in 1960 for history’s first televised presidential debate, few observers could have foreseen that TV debates would soon emerge as a global phenomenon. The future of presidential debates at first looked fragile—in the U.S. another 16 years would pass before they happened again—but today the institution is flourishing, not only in the U.S. but worldwide.

Sixty years of debate experience have given the U.S. a unique perspective from which to consider this increasingly popular and durable political institution. What have we learned since Kennedy–Nixon? Which aspects of televised debates remain challenging? How have American debates influenced their counterparts in other countries, and vice versa?

Let us explore several topics of relevance.

The Inevitability of Debates

Live debates viewed by tens of millions of people are terrifying events for the men and women who star in them. Given the option, most politicians would probably decline the opportunity to meet their opponents face-to-face in front of vast numbers of viewers, because the risks generally outweigh the rewards. Debates demand a level of transparency and personal accountability that can be uncomfortable; this is why autocrats avoid them. Even politicians known for their superior performing skills—Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama among them—have suffered humiliating failures on the debate stage (Schroeder, 2016, pp. 160–2, 191–2). So it comes as no surprise that candidates fear debates and approach them cautiously.

Candidate reluctance notwithstanding, voters in most democratic societies now expect their would-be leaders to take part in some form of pre-election debate, although what that means in practice varies greatly from place to place. Some countries (Mexico, Argentina, Ukraine) compel debates by law. In the U.S. debates are customary but not legally required, although it seems doubtful that any presidential candidate in the modern era could survive a refusal to debate at least once before election day.

Such a strategy would defy not just tradition, but logic. During America’s lengthy and geographically expansive presidential primaries, debates are a singularly effective way for candidates
to introduce themselves to the public, particularly in a crowded field, as with Republicans in 2016 or Democrats in 2020. Once the party nominees have been selected, debates play a different role: they give the contenders a chance to drum up enthusiasm and remind supporters what is at stake. The enormous audiences that exist for televised debates, especially in the general election, make these events extremely valuable communication opportunities that no sensible campaign operation can afford to pass up.

One lesson from American presidential debates is that the longevity of debates as an electoral fixture increases their likelihood going forward. Presidential candidates in the U.S. have debated at least once in every campaign cycle since 1976, making the prospect of a debateless election increasingly remote. Voters and the media have too much invested in presidential debates to let the institution wither away. Once debates become a public expectation, candidates can no longer dictate whether the events take place, which is why it matters that debates be allowed to take root as standard features of national elections. Inevitably the candidates and their advisors will try to shape debates to their advantage—frontrunners seeking fewer face-to-face meetings and challengers seeking more, for instance—but American politicians now find it virtually impossible to shirk debating altogether.

Debate Sponsorship

The question of who sponsors campaign debates may at first seem so arcane as to be of marginal relevance. But 60 years of debates in the United States have demonstrated the necessity of sponsors who have clout and independence—not to mention the skills required to pull off the logistics of a high-profile television production. Debate sponsors must navigate a complex set of challenges as they serve the needs of the public, the media, and the political establishment.

Because of its long history with televised debates, the U.S. has experimented with a range of sponsorship models. The 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debates were sponsored by the three major television networks. Between 1976 and 1988 a national civic organisation called the League of Women Voters took charge. Since 1988 the independent Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) has sponsored and produced all general election debates between presidential and vice-presidential candidates, earning high marks for fairness and professionalism.

During the primary season a different sponsorship model applies to debates among would-be presidential nominees. Beginning with the 2016 cycle the two major political parties, Republicans and Democrats, have teamed with various cable news networks to stage a wide range of debates and candidate forums around the country. It is accurate to say that these programs have been of mixed quality, depending on the network, participants, format, and production values.

When professional broadcasters stage campaign debates, the temptation exists to favor conflict and drama over audience enlightenment. The 2016 Republican primary debates present a stark example of how campaign debates can devolve into spectacle when the goal is to generate ratings and revenue. That year, with Donald Trump front and center, primary debates became must-watch television—24 million viewers for the first event of the season, nearly ten times the usual prime time audience for Fox News, which produced the program (Patten, 2015). As the season continued, the circus-like atmosphere of the debates intensified. Boisterous live audiences were recruited to add spice to the events, and the candidates competed for attention by sniping at each other and at the moderators.

The CPD has shown far more restraint in its long history of sponsoring the general election debates. With every election cycle, the Commission bolsters its standing, gaining enough institutional clout over the years to withstand the relentless demands of candidates and their handlers.
In the past few rounds of debates the CPD has determined schedules, formats, and venues with minimal interference from campaign operatives. This favorable trend notwithstanding, campaign staffs still negotiate a number of debate details with each other, apart from the Commission, and occasionally insist on changes that the CPD has little choice but to grant.

The CPD, a non-governmental agency that receives no taxpayer funds, has drawn criticism on two fronts. First, because it came into existence in 1987 as an initiative of the Republican and Democratic parties, the Commission has been construed by some observers to represent the interests of the established political parties over those of independent and third-party candidates. Early in its tenure the CPD changed its status from a bipartisan to nonpartisan Commission, and over the decades it has developed reasonable, attainable criteria for including potential presidential debaters who are unaffiliated with the major parties. That said, only in 1992, when Ross Perot joined Bill Clinton and the first President Bush, have outsider candidates participated in general election debates.

The CPD also draws fire for being excessively beholden to the corporate entities that help finance its day-to-day operations and foot the bill for the debates’ production costs. Although in theory this concern may be valid, most of the Commission’s operating budget comes from the communities and universities that host the debates—$2 million per site in 2016—and not corporate contributors. Furthermore, no evidence suggests that the CPD’s corporate partnerships have in any way tainted the debates themselves. And the Commission has been transparent in disclosing the identity of its funders. The reality is this: when presidential debates are being produced by an independent Commission, as has been the case in the U.S. for 40 years, that organisation depends for its survival on deep-pocketed patrons—patrons whose only payback comes in the form of prestige for having supported an important civic institution.

To its credit, the CPD has also heavily involved itself in voter education efforts, using presidential debates as a springboard for public initiatives across the country. Because American debates are frequently held on college campuses, the CPD partners with academic institutions in debate-related events for students and community members during the campaign season. Furthermore, the CPD does an admirable job sharing its expertise in countries around the world in which electoral debates are being organised. The CPD’s work on this front has been of particular value in emerging democracies.

Debate Formats

Since the Kennedy–Nixon debates, in which a panel of reporters took turns questioning the candidates, debate formats in the U.S. have evolved dramatically. Perhaps the most significant shift involves how questions are asked in debates, and who asks them. Journalists, of course, remain key players in the questioning of candidates, but to an increasing degree it is voters who set the agenda.

American presidential debates did not deviate from the press conference format until 1992, when Bill Clinton’s negotiators successfully argued for a town hall debate in which citizens would pose the questions. Although this was a self-interested move on Clinton’s part—his communication style lent itself particularly well to this format—it also proved to be beneficial for debates, which for the first time directly included the vox populi.

General election debates now typically feature at least one town hall event, along with other debates moderated by journalists. The feel of all these events is considerably looser than the Kennedy–Nixon series. For decades American presidential contenders studiously avoided directly addressing each other, preferring instead to direct their comments to the person asking the question; in fact, debate rules over several decades prohibited any candidate interaction
whatsoever. Such reticence has vanished in more recent debate cycles, especially as the physical set-up of debates has expanded beyond the standard arrangement of each candidate standing behind a lectern—witness the notorious stalking of Hillary Clinton by Donald Trump during the 2016 town hall. In several recent presidential and vice-presidential debates the candidates and moderator have been seated around a table, creating a more conversational atmosphere that encourages dialogue and informality.

It is essential to understand that formats differ greatly between America’s primary and general election debates. Primary debates, which typically include multiple participants (all from the same Party, of course), have been far more structurally innovative than their relatively staid general election counterparts, in ways both positive and negative. In large measure this reflects the fact that commercial television networks produce the primary debates, while the non-profit CPD controls the general election events. While many primary debates have been burdened by glitzy, bloated formats, other innovations have proven worthwhile. For example, a 2012 Republican primary debate in Washington DC, focused on national security, with questioning by members of the two conservative think tanks that cosponsored the event. The tone of this debate was remarkably serious and substantive, despite an almost 15 minute opening setup on CNN that delayed the candidates’ discussion in favor of video profiles and the singing of the national anthem.

Primary debates now take a variety of forms, especially since the arrival of social media. Presidential candidates have participated in Spanish-language debates (using translators), debates with video questions submitted via YouTube, and, in the 2012 Republican cycle, a debate conducted entirely on Twitter. The Twitter experiment, though well intentioned, generated an especially disjointed discussion, with questions and answers frequently not synchronising and suspicions that campaign staff were the ones tweeting responses.

Does American debate history indicate an ideal format for presidential debates? Because different formats reveal candidates in different ways, the best option would seem to be a mixture of program structures. This has been the philosophy of the CPD, which favors a unique format for each general election debate within a given cycle. Varying the format keeps candidates on their toes by placing them in constantly changing circumstances. Mixing formats also helps to level the playing field; a candidate who is particularly effective in one setting (Bill Clinton in the town hall) may be less fluent in another.

Whatever the format, it is important that debate producers do not overburden presidential debates with overly complicated rules, absurdly brief time limits (“discussion periods” in American debates can be as short as one minute), and extraneous production elements. With that thought in mind, U.S. debates might take a cue from presidential debates in France, which unfold as a largely unfettered dialogue between the two key participants, with limited input from the moderators and a much more candidate-centric focus overall. French debate producers recognise that because these events are inherently confrontational, there is no need to stoke conflict. A simpler format keeps the emphasis on the candidates, where it belongs.

Debates as Media Events

After 60 years of existence, general election presidential debates remain essentially the same proposition they have always been: two (or more) people on a stage discussing topics raised by interlocutors, televised into the homes of the public. The cast of characters may vary and formats may change, but the basic exercise follows a template that has held steady since Kennedy met Nixon.
Yet over the past couple of cycles presidential debates have undergone a radical shift—not so much the events themselves but the manner in which they are received and digested. Debates have migrated from television to a second home on social media, generating interactive, real-time reactions. To an ever-increasing extent debates are a dual-screen, participatory experience. Viewers have been promoted from their traditional role as passive observers and injected directly into the conversation. At the same time debates now provide fodder for commentary outside the usual political/journalistic contexts: memes, animations, drinking games, comedy routines, musical tributes—all manner of non-traditional interpretations of the actual event. When this ancillary material enters the public bloodstream, it inevitably affects how a given debate will be perceived, not just in the short-term but for the ages.

What are the implications of this rapidly changing landscape for the institution of presidential debates? For voters the layering of social media onto debates can be seen as a generally positive development. Debate viewers were once relegated to spectator status, necessary to the exercise but not expected to play an active role. Citizen reaction came in the form of faceless poll results, generic focus group interviews, and ten-second person-on-the-street sound-bites. The debate conversation was largely a closed, two-way loop between campaigns and the press.

Now the public has a mechanism for getting its voice heard, with equal or greater force than that of the media pundits and campaign spinners. On balance, this is good, because debates rightfully belong to the voters. The bad news is that viewers who interact with debates in real time may not be fully absorbing the reality in front of them. As live television par excellence, debates can move quickly and unpredictably. Anyone not paying close attention runs the risk of missing something major—an unflattering camera angle, an infelicitous phrase, a telling bit of body language—that could alter the course of the event.

Furthermore, watching debates on social media offers a classic example of confirmation bias, in which people surround themselves with others of like mind. When reaction on social media splits American voters into separate echo chambers, the organising principle of presidential debates—the idea of debates as rare moments when the entire nation experiences the same event at the same time on the same terms—gets diluted. As we learned in 2016, debates are also susceptible to manipulation via social media platforms; to cite one example, organised groups of Russian trolls dumped thousands of real-time debate-related tweets designed to heighten divisions among the American electorate (O’Sullivan, 2019).

For debaters a heightened level of micro-attention from the masses brings its own challenge: glaring, relentless scrutiny by the millions. Anything a candidate says or does during a live debate can instantaneously be launched into viral heaven—or viral hell. For the individuals onstage there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, which creates enormous pressure for a flawless performance. An offhand remark, such as Mitt Romney’s passing reference in a 2012 debate to the Sesame Street character Big Bird, can launch a thousand memes that overshadow the candidate’s attempt to deliver a serious message (Parker, 2012).

Alongside the dangers of social media, potential benefits exist for politicians and their handlers. Campaigns may be wary of the new debate-watching environment, but they are also learning to take advantage of it—detonating planted hashtags at key moments during debates, creating click-ready websites and videos, advertising on social media with demographic precision. Political handlers used to limit their spinning to the reporters and commentators who covered debates; now everybody gets spun.

The role of the press has likewise shifted in this supercharged, multi-platform debate realm. Journalists have more opportunity than ever to disseminate their debate observations, with Twitter leading the way as the medium of choice for campaign reporters and pundits. As with
Consider the case of Barack Obama in his first 2012 debate with challenger Mitt Romney. At 9.42 pm Eastern U.S. time, less than halfway into the program, a nine paragraph post appeared on the influential website BuzzFeed, headlined “How Mitt Romney Won the First Debate”. Political editor Ben Smith wrote: “Romney’s core success was that he won by not losing. He has barely weathered a campaign that reduced him to a smaller figure than President Obama. On stage, they were roughly the same size”. (Smith, 2012).

Through extensive retweeting Smith’s pronouncement instantly gained traction among his fellow campaign journalists, whose real-time commentary had already begun to coalesce around a similar narrative. The debate proceeded for almost another hour, but the verdict had been rendered: Obama loses, Romney wins. More than ever, televised debates had become an exercise in present-tense reactions, snap judgments, and confirmation bias.

But there are positives as well. Perhaps one of the most useful manifestations of contemporary debate-viewing is real-time fact-checking. Candidates’ words are now tested for veracity even as those words are being uttered. Journalists and citizens no longer have to wait until after the event to evaluate claims made in the debate; untruths get exposed at the moment they are made. In theory, at least, this ought to help debaters resist the temptation to play fast and loose with the facts.

Debates and their Stakeholders

It is useful to consider campaign debates as serving three principal groups of stakeholders: voters, the media, and the political establishment. For each constituency different considerations apply. For politicians debates are ordeals to be survived, while journalists regard them as blockbuster news stories and the public see them as a mix of information and entertainment. How well do debates serve these individual, sometimes incompatible, constituencies?

For citizens debates offer an easy and educational way to engage in the electoral process. Even low-information voters who do not normally follow politics are likely to tune in to presidential debates, if only to claim a voice in the national conversation. In election years U.S. presidential debates rank among the most-watched programs of the year in national ratings surveys; only Super Bowl football games attract higher numbers. (A key difference: general election debates include no advertising and therefore generate no revenue; the Super Bowl, by contrast, can seem like an endless parade of big-budget advertisements interrupted by brief spurts of athletic competition). The first debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump drew 84 million domestic television viewers, not including those who live-streamed via the web. This extraordinary number made the opening Clinton–Trump match the second highest-rated program of 2016 in the United States, and one of the most watched presidential debates of all time (Nielsen, 2016).

How influential are debates? The consensus among political experts is that American presidential debates have not, on their own, been sufficiently decisive to determine the outcome of an election. “Debates are to elections what treaties are to war”, says political scientist Sam Popkin. “They ratify what has already been accomplished on the battlefield”. (Popkin cited by Brownstein, 1992). Popkin made this observation in 1992, yet it carries perhaps even more weight today, when a polarised electorate watches debates in order to reinforce voting decisions that have been made well before the programs air.

On balance it is probably a good thing that debates have not been overly consequential in U.S. elections—no country should elect its leader because of what happens during an hour and
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a half of live television. Although debates loom large in presidential campaigns, they are only one of a number of factors that voters take into account, particularly in American elections, which give the public many months and many opportunities to evaluate their options. Debates are a key ingredient in the equation, but it is impossible to isolate them from other campaign ingredients, such as advertising, social media, day-to-day news coverage, and rallies.

For the media, particularly the political media, debates are a commodity of great value, a story with massive audience interest that unfolds over multiple news cycles, day after day. For journalists in the U.S., where campaigns can run for nearly two years before a single vote for president is cast, debates represent pivotal plot points. They crystallise the endless and amorphous presidential campaign into defining moments, bringing the race into sharp focus as the nation takes stock of its choices. Debates are the tent poles that hold up the circus big top. They let journalists revisit and reset the story line, as familiar characters either stumble or soar.

Debates make a great news story because they can be talked about weeks in advance—even though any such chatter is pure speculation—and also weeks after the fact. Although coverage of debates is often denounced for being too much like theater criticism and therefore unhelpful in informing voters, the true picture is more complex. Journalistic coverage of presidential debates runs the gamut, from subjective declarations of winners and losers to nuanced examinations of the candidates’ substantive remarks. In recent cycles professional journalists have become more attuned to social media, and therefore more inclusive of the wider audience in their coverage.

For the political establishment, as history has repeatedly shown, debates represent both great risk and great reward. Debates have enormous implications for everyone with a role in bringing them to fruition—the candidates, obviously, but also the behind-the-scenes handlers, a small army of whom attends to the needs of the principal players. American presidential debates are replete with a backstage cast of negotiators (usually lawyers), political strategists, pollsters, performance coaches, vocal trainers, researchers, writers, production consultants, clothing consultants, lighting specialists, makeup experts, and so on. Over the course of a live 90-minute debate all these supporting cast members may see their standing rise or fall, depending on what happens during the live broadcast.

Naturally it is the candidates themselves who have the most to gain or to lose in a debate. Even for seasoned politicians who routinely appear on television in front of vast audiences, presidential debates are a thing apart. Debates mark the only occasion when the finalists for the White House will stand side by side in a competitive format before tens of millions of viewers—perhaps the largest number of their entire careers. To seekers of political office, debates are the equivalent of Olympic competitions, the culmination of years of effort distilled into a single evening of live, make-or-break television. As such, debates constitute a unique rite of passage for the handful of men and women who participate at this stratospheric level of electoral politics.

Because debates are so widely watched, and so definitive, they can wreak long-term damage on individual careers and reputations. In the 1988 vice presidential debate, Indiana senator Dan Quayle, who had drawn criticism for his youth and lack of credentials, made the costly mistake of comparing himself to another young politician, President John F. (Jack) Kennedy. This misstep inspired perhaps the most famous rebuke in American debate history from Quayle’s opponent, Texas senator Lloyd Bentsen: “I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy”. More than 30 years later, this moment of public humiliation remains the thing for which the hapless Quayle is best remembered.

For George H.W. Bush, it was a quick glance at his wristwatch during a 1992 town hall that entered the pantheon of things not to do during a presidential debate. Although the camera shot
lasted only a few seconds, Bush left an impression that came across as insulting to his audience—insulting to the citizens in the debate hall who had come to ask questions and, by extension, insulting to the millions of viewers at home. If we think of debates as job interviews, Bush sent exactly the wrong message to his prospective employers by displaying annoyance at having to justify why he should be hired. In the end, the voters did not hire him. And no American presidential candidate has ever again worn a wristwatch to a debate.

Beyond their long-term implications, debates obviously have a more immediate political effect. A strong performance can boost a candidate’s standing in the polls, while a weak one can move the numbers downward—this happened to Barack Obama after his less-than-stellar showing against Mitt Romney in the first 2012 debate. In recent cycles the traditional view of debates as an opportunity to sway undecided voters has given way to a new objective: bolstering enthusiasm among supporters. With swing voters a rare commodity in contemporary America, the marketing pitch is aimed less at those in the middle than those who have already chosen a side. More than ever, debates are part of the get-out-the-vote effort, giving candidates further incentive to deliver a superior performance.

Conclusion

The 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debates caught the political and media establishment by surprise. On the morning of their first encounter, neither the Washington Post nor the New York Times ran more than a few words about an event that would forever change the way in which Americans would elect their presidents. The television and radio networks carried no predebate coverage, and when the debate went off the air, the stations resumed their regular programming without a single word of postevent analysis (Schroeder, 2016, pp. 291–2).

To a remarkable degree, campaign and media professionals failed to anticipate the power of that first televised debate. But within 24 hours the story of Kennedy beating Nixon had assumed its place among the great political parables of American history, and no one has ever underestimated presidential debates again.

Have debates proven their value over time? In the early 1960s skeptics feared that these joint televised appearances would trivialise national elections. Historian Daniel Boorstin, in his seminal work The Image (1964, pp. 43–4), cited the Kennedy–Nixon debates as a “clinical example” of what he derided as pseudo-events. Warned Boorstin: “If we test presidential candidates by their talents on TV quiz performances, we will, of course, choose presidents for precisely those qualifications”. That this prediction has not come to pass—not in the way Boorstin envisioned, at any rate—speaks well of the public’s ability to keep debates in perspective.

Yet troublesome signs from more recent debate cycles appear less positive. As the tone of electoral politics in America darkens, so does the aura surrounding presidential debates. Perhaps the ugliest manifestation came at the 2016 town hall debate when Donald Trump invited as his personal guests four women who claimed they had been sexually assaulted by Bill Clinton, the husband of his opponent. Ninety minutes before the debate Trump joined these women for a strange, uncomfortable panel discussion on Facebook, the purpose of which was to rattle his rival in the already tense moments before the broadcast. The stunt fit perfectly into the ethos of the programming genre known as reality TV, a milieu that, not coincidentally, spawned Trump himself.

In taking inappropriate advantage of the high-profile spectacle of a presidential debate, Trump used the occasion’s prominence to subvert and undermine what ought to have been an inviolable civic event. Debates are job interviews, and job interviews prioritise the wishes of those who do the hiring—in this case, the voters—and not the antics of the applicants. By
twisting an occasion of national importance to serve his own ends, Trump degraded the very concept of what a presidential debate should be.

Even before Trump, debates had begun to lose some of their loftiness. The Obama–Romney debates of 2012 were marked by moments of sarcasm that would have been unthinkable in earlier decades. Debate moderators, who used to draw limited attention, now find themselves under microscopic scrutiny for any perceived bias. Candy Crowley of CNN, who dared to correct a misstatement by Mitt Romney during the 2012 town hall debate, came in for relentless and career-damaging criticism from Romney supporters.

Politics being cyclical in nature, the current negativity infecting politics in the U.S. (and around the world) may eventually give way to more uplifting attitudes. Meanwhile, on balance, American presidential debates can be described as a healthy institution. There will always be room for improvement, and much depends on the character and comportment of the men and women who appear together onstage. Whatever happens, just as in 1960, the world will be watching.

Note

1 Eight Republican candidates participated in the CNN national security debate on 22 November 2011. Six Republican candidates participated in the all-Twitter debate on 20 July 2011.

References