

Jeremiah Johnson

Dr. Wilson

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Directed Study

Presidential Debates

Presidential debates are a modern television age creation. The nominees of the two major parties did not debate until 1960, when Republican candidate Richard Nixon faced challenger John Kennedy, the junior Democratic Senator from Massachusetts. This first debate helped Kennedy win the presidency because his youth and vitality showed through the television, and he seemed more energetic and enthusiastic than Nixon. Although the 1960 debates were popular with the public and broadcast nationally on network television, presidential debates took a hiatus until 1976. Their absence is due, for the most part, to incumbents refusing to debate and laws that required equal time for all presidential candidates, even minor ones.

Since 1976, the television networks have used an interesting loophole to get around the equal time law. The debates are sponsored by an outside group (currently the Commission on Presidential Debates) and the networks cover the event not as their own debate, but as an outside news story, which does not require equal time. The debates have been present in the presidential election process since 1976, and although their significance in each election is different, the debates always play an important role. In 1976, Jimmy Carter took advantage of Gerald Ford's statement, "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe." The press ridiculed this statement and it may have

helped Carter take the election. In 1988, Michael Dukakis deepened and cemented his image as a stiff, unfeeling politician when he answered the question “Would you support the death penalty if your wife were raped and murdered?” with a turgid “No.”

Often, debates merely reflect the way the nation feels about the candidates, such as in 1984 when Reagan easily won the debates because he was a popular president who won the election in a crushing victory. Sometimes, however, the debates do more than reflect the national mood, sometimes the debates can swing an election one way or the other. The 2004 election seems to fit into this category. The planned debates include three debates between George Bush and John Kerry, and one debate between Dick Cheney and John Edwards. Going into the first debate, Bush held a large lead, reported at around 8-11% by most reports, the most common report saying that Bush led 52% to 44% for Kerry. However, after the first debate, polls showed a statistical tie. Kerry unanimously won the first debate, due to his clear explanations of his positions and Bush’s clear annoyance at the podium. For weeks Kerry had been hounded as unable to decide on a position on many topics, and the debate gave him a chance to stand in front of the public and clarify many of his stances, which benefited him enormously. Also, he was quicker than George Bush on the podium and Bush often appeared frustrated by Kerry’s comments, annoyed. After this first debate, Kerry pulled even in public opinion polls. Next came the Vice-Presidential debate between Dick Cheney and John Edwards. The older and wiser Cheney seemed to win this debate over Edwards without much argument, but the impact on the polls was little if any at all. The second debate between Bush and Kerry was much more aggressive than the first, and by most accounts a draw. This debate was held in a ‘town hall’ format where the candidates were free to walk

about and answer audience members directly. Bush no longer seemed frustrated by Kerry's attacks on his record in the economy and the War on Iraq, and was just as aggressive in attacking Kerry's perceived changing stances and his lack of accomplishment. All significant polls showed that the second debate was a draw, and the third debate played out much in the same way. Both candidates were aggressive in pointing out the other's flaws, and results were split as to who won the debate, with a slight edge going to Kerry (nowhere near the victory he scored in the first debate, however).

Overall, the debates this year benefited Kerry far more than Bush. The surveys before the debates showed Bush with a sizable lead, but once Kerry got the chance to defend his record and his stances, he took advantage and the race tightened to a dead heat, where it remains as we speak. During this election year we have been fortunate to have had debates that do more than reflect national sentiment. The debates this year clearly changed the public perception of Kerry, and should Kerry win the debates will have had a crucial role in his victory.