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ELECTION 2000

How Citizens "See" a Presidential Debate



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Election 2000: How Viewers “See” a Presidential Debate

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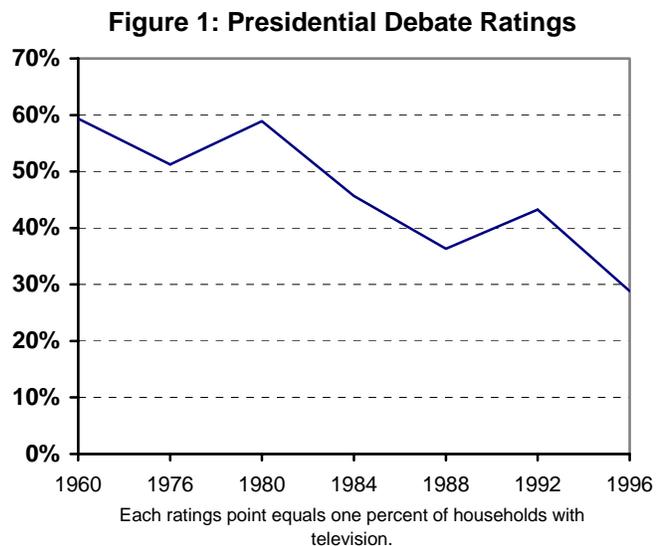
Few televised events have the audience appeal of a presidential debate. The Super Bowl is the only regularly scheduled event that routinely draws a larger minute-to-minute audience. Presidential debates have drawn on average about 75 million viewers, which is roughly the size of the audience for the Academy Awards. By comparison, the typical prime-time program on ABC, NBC, or CBS draws 9 million viewers.

The audience for the televised debates has been shrinking (see Figure 1). The 1992 debates between Clinton, Bush, and Perot were an exception to the trend, but the viewing audience has gradually declined, largely because of the alternative programming available on cable television.

The latest Shorenstein Center weekly national poll indicates that the first general-election debate of the 2000 campaign is unlikely to break the downward trend. Only 28% of the respondents said they expect to watch most of Tuesday’s debate and nearly 40% said they would not watch any of it. These proportions roughly parallel the audience numbers for the first Clinton-Dole debate in 1996.

The debate audience in future elections can be expected to decline further because of generational change. Today’s young adults are measurably less interested in politics than those of even a decade or two ago. Most of them pay little or no attention to the daily news or public affairs programming as a result of the media environment in which they grew up. Unlike the pre-cable generation, they did not as children have regular exposure to television or print news and they did not acquire an interest in it. They do not have a news habit and display only passing interest in public affairs.

In our recent poll, nearly half of young adults (18-29 years of age) said they do not plan to watch any of the debate and an additional 21% claimed they would watch only a little of it. Only 14% said they would watch most of it (see Table 1).



Nevertheless, the debates are still very popular with most Americans. The reasons are obvious enough. Like the Super Bowl and the Oscars, the debates are, as Alan Schroeder observes, “human drama at its rawest.” The stakes are high, and the outcome is uncertain. Debates are staged and ritualized events, but they are not fully scripted or completely predictable, as evidenced by Ronald Reagan’s unexpectedly masterful performance in 1980 and his surprisingly addled performance four years later. Conflict, risk, and suspense are elements of drama, and the debates offer them on a level unmatched by any other scheduled televised political event.¹

If the reasons Americans choose to watch the debates are clear enough, the way in which they watch the debates is less well understood. How do viewers process and evaluate what they see and hear?

Through the Viewers’ Eyes

Journalists tend to look upon debates as decisive encounters that produce a winner and a loser and which can be decided by a single dramatic statement—an artful sound bite or inexplicable blunder. This perspective is not necessarily wrong, but it is decidedly journalistic. Most viewers experience the debate in a different way.

As a debate unfolds, viewers tend to render two judgments. One is whether the candidates seem “big enough” to occupy the presidency. The second is whether one of the candidates is the better choice.

These judgments could affect the outcome of the 2000 campaign. The race is close, and the number of undecided or weakly committed voters is relatively high. Among respondents in our recent poll who say they currently back either Bush or Gore, 17% claimed that it was very or somewhat likely that the debates could change their mind about which candidate to support. Self-identified independents were more likely than either Democrats or Republicans to say that the debates might lead them to switch their vote (see Table 2).

The debates are even more important in the minds of uncommitted voters. Thirty-nine percent of them claim that they are looking toward the debates as a time to make their decision.

	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Bush	15%	8%	29%	10%
Gore	15%	26%	8%	11%
Both equally	61%	61%	57%	64%

Table 3). Fourteen percent said they planned to watch Bush more closely and 15% said they would focus on Gore. Americans have a lot of unanswered questions about both candidates, and they intend to use the debates as a time to resolve some of them.

	All	Under 30	30+
Most of it	27%	14%	33%
Some of it	15%	17%	16%
Only a little	17%	21%	18%
None	37%	48%	38%

Approximately 2% of respondents answered “don’t know” and were omitted from these results.

	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Very	3%	5%	2%	3%
Somewhat	14%	12%	11%	22%
Not at all	83%	83%	88%	75%

Both candidates will be carefully scrutinized. When our respondents were asked “Are you more interested in seeing how George W. Bush or Al Gore handles himself in the debate, or are you equally interested in the performance of both candidates?” a clear majority—61 percent—claimed they intended to pay equal attention to both candidates (see

¹ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 201.

Are the Candidates “Big Enough” to Be President?

It is often said that the outcome of a televised debate rests on “image”—that it rewards the candidate who appears more confident and has the more compelling appearance and delivery. Like many claims about televised politics, this claim is at best a half-truth. Viewers do respond favorably to a poised and artful candidate, but they are looking for something deeper—an indication that a candidate is “big enough” for the presidency.

There is no precise set of standards for this judgment, which is why it is partly a visceral reaction and is colored by partisanship—loyal Democrats and Republicans can usually convince themselves that their party’s nominee meets the test. But it’s a real test nonetheless. Voters expect a presidential candidate to have the characteristics they admire in a president. Does the candidate have the proper temperament, stature, knowledge, and style? Does the candidate appear “presidential?”

It’s a critical test, but it’s also an inexact one, which is a reason why most candidates pass it. If he had been running for president and not vice president in 1988, Dan Quayle would have been among the few to fail. Squaring off against Lloyd Bentsen, Quayle was widely perceived by viewers to lack the intellectual agility required of a president. Ross Perot in 1992 also failed the test, even though his participation in the debates did strengthen his position in the polls. Viewers found in Perot an outlet for their dissatisfaction with the major parties, but they also concluded that Perot was not fully fit for the presidency. He was too blustery, too contentious, too folksy, and too plain. Michael Dukakis in 1988 passed the test narrowly, having failed to persuade viewers that he had the empathy that would enable him to understand their problems fully.

For a candidate who meets the test, the result is enhanced stature and credibility, although not necessarily a surge in the polls. Mondale’s debate performance in 1984 won viewers’ admiration but did not endanger Reagan’s reelection. Most viewers thought Mondale “won” the first debate but continued to believe that Reagan would be the better president.

The favorable response to Mondale was heightened by a pre-debate expectation that he would perform less well than his opponent. For the same reason, George W. Bush will enter Tuesday’s debate with a psychological advantage. In our survey, by a margin of 46% to 30%, respondents felt that Gore is likely to do “a better job” than Bush in the debate (see Table 4).

Past debates suggest, however, that Bush will have to deliver a “presidential” performance to convert his psychological advantage into a real one. A lackluster performance would confirm doubts that some voters harbor about his ability and a Quayle-like effort would likely doom his candidacy. Gore is also at risk. Because he is expected to dominate, he needs to perform at a level equal or higher to Bush, or his weaker performance will be magnified.

Table 4: Which candidate do you think will do better in the debates?

	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Bush	30%	9%	61%	28%
Gore	46%	72%	19%	42%
Both equally	7%	7%	5%	9%

Of greater risk to Gore, however, may be his tendency in debate to attack his opponent. Second-by-second analyses of recent presidential debates reveal that viewers’ most negative reactions occur when a candidate is in attack mode. A candidate can contrast his own views with those of his opponent and can sometimes succeed in attack by using humor to soften the blow. But a debate strategy based on strong and repeated attacks tends to repel viewers. Our research on the 2000 campaign’s primary election debates confirms the generalization: of the dozen debates we studied, the one that viewers liked least by far was the Gore-Bradley encounter in New York City. It was also the most contentious of the debates we examined, and most viewers claimed that the debate had diminished their opinion of Gore. The debating

style that Gore displayed during his New York primary debate and in his NAFTA and vice-presidential debates could work against him if he employs it in Tuesday night's presidential debate. Viewers expect a presidential candidate to act "presidential," which includes proper decorum.

Gore or Bush might fail to reach the viewers' threshold of acceptability for a would-be president in Tuesday's debate, but it's unlikely. The candidates are months-deep into their campaigns, have spent long hours rehearsing for Tuesday's debate, and have been briefed on the do's and don'ts of debating.² Unless one of them gets stage fright or begins to panic under the pressure, viewers' response to the two candidates will hinge largely on how they answer a second question: Which candidate is the better choice?

Which Candidate Is the Better Choice?

Televised debates naturally seem to direct attention to the candidates' images. In the first minutes, viewers are indeed closely attentive to the way the candidates look and act. But as the debate unfolds, issues come to the fore and, in the end, tend to have a greater impact on viewers' response to the candidates.

Second-by-second debate analyses indicate that the audience responds most favorably to the candidates when they are talking about an issue that people care deeply about and are able to frame their position in a way that shows they understand why people are concerned about the issue.³ Even though journalists dismiss most debate issues as old news, most viewers are not highly informed about the issues and rarely have the opportunity to listen at length to what the candidates have to say about the issues.

As a debate unfolds issue by issue, viewers keep something akin to a running tab on what the candidates are saying. After the debate is over, most viewers have difficulty describing in detail what the candidates have said, but they have no difficulty answering the question: "Which candidate came closer to expressing your views on the issues?" Their answers to this question—more than their answers to the question "Who won?"—are closely related to their voting intention.

Both candidates will have numerous opportunities in the debate to discuss issues that are of concern to viewers and that will supply them with new information. In the Shorenstein Center weekly national polls, we have been tracking Americans' awareness of the candidates' positions on a dozen issues and, even though the campaign has been going on for months, most people have only a limited amount of information about many of Bush and Gore's positions. On the typical issue, only 29% were able to accurately identify the candidate's position while 14% guessed wrong and 57% said they didn't know the candidate's stand.

The fact that most people are not highly informed about the issues may work to Gore's advantage. Gore's policy positions are generally closer than Bush's to those of most voters. Indeed, Gore has tended to gain support in the polls when issues are at the forefront of the campaign while Bush has done better during periods where the issues have been less prominent. Our surveys indicate that issues have receded recently in people's minds as the candidates' gaffes have dominated news coverage. Bush has strengthened his position in the polls during this period. The debate offers Gore an opportunity to get people thinking again about issues, just as he did to considerable effect during the Democratic convention.

² In this regard, a reason why Dole did not attack Clinton aggressively in the 1996 debates was the knowledge that it would almost certainly cost him the debate.

³ When one or more of these elements is missing, the viewer's reaction tends to be weaker. That's why, for example, viewers of the second Ford-Carter debate in 1976 took little notice of Ford's remark on Eastern Europe. It was not an issue that viewers cared about. Only after the news media made his remark the focus of its post-debate coverage, and portrayed it as a blunder, did the public attach importance to it.

Can the Debates Be Strengthened?

The televised presidential debates are a success story. At a time when political interest is waning, a debate still has the power to draw tens of millions of viewers to their television sets. A debate also meets the water-cooler test—the next day, millions of people share their impressions of what they saw and heard the night before.

A televised debate is more than an event. It is an act of community. For an hour and a half, millions of Americans involve themselves actively in a collective political experience. These moments do not always have a lasting impact. The 1996 debates failed to revitalize a sagging campaign. But the impact sometimes endures. Polls in September of 1992 revealed an electorate whose interest was fading. Analysts predicted that voter turnout would be no higher than in 1988. But the public's outlook changed with the debates and Perot's reentry into the race. Public interest in and satisfaction with the campaign rose dramatically. And as we know, turnout in 1992 turned sharply upward for the first time in three decades.

Although the debates are now nearly an institutionalized feature of the presidential campaign, there are still open questions about them. The most pressing may well be the test that will be applied to participation by third-party or independent candidates. The Commission on Presidential Debates, which is dominated by the major parties, has decided

that the debates should be restricted to candidates who have the support of 15% of likely voters in pre-debate polls. Most Americans think otherwise. In our recent poll, 56% of the respondents said that Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader should have been allowed to participate in this year's debate. Only 29% would have excluded them. These opinions characterize all partisan groupings—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents (see Table 5).

	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Yes	56%	57%	55%	56%
No	29%	27%	31%	30%
Don't Know	14%	15%	14%	13%

There is also the issue of whether broadcast networks should be required to carry the debates. FOX has elected not to cover Tuesday's debate, and NBC has made it optional for its affiliates, bowing to pressure after first announcing that it would carry only a major league baseball playoff game. In our poll, respondents approved of NBC's initial decision by a narrow margin (49% to 45%).

The debates are too important to a presidential election to be dependent on the self-interested decisions of the major parties or the broadcast networks, although reasonable people can disagree on exactly which policies should govern the debates. Moreover, the debates need not be the only major opportunity for presidential candidates to speak directly and at length to the American people. Despite its decades-long leadership in the communication field, the United States has lagged in devising television forums that are designed to serve the needs of candidates and voters. In its "Nine Sundays" proposal a decade ago, the Shorenstein Center recommended the adoption of a series of prime-time candidate-centered broadcasts that would include, but not be limited to, debates. The basic principle underlying the proposed series was that the telecasts should be designed to enable the candidates to speak directly to the American people, yet under conditions where they could be immediately held accountable for their statements. As citizens increasingly drift away from the campaign, and as candidates increasingly show up on programs such as the Oprah Winfrey Show, it may be time to revisit the question of whether additional prime-time forums of the type outlined in the "Nine Sundays" report should be added to the television opportunities available to voters during the presidential general election.

About the Vanishing Voter Project

The Vanishing Voter Project is a study by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Funding for the project is provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The project has the goal of strengthening public involvement in the presidential selection process. Through research, the project seeks to understand the factors that affect public involvement and to use this information to propose constructive changes in the election process.

A special feature of the Project is the weekly Voter Involvement Index (*see graph*). The index is based on questions asked in our weekly national poll of approximately 1,000 Americans.

The research also includes substantial multi-method efforts during key moments of the campaign to assess how structural variations (for example, debate formats) affect involvement. The Project's web site contains other timely survey results on election-related topics.

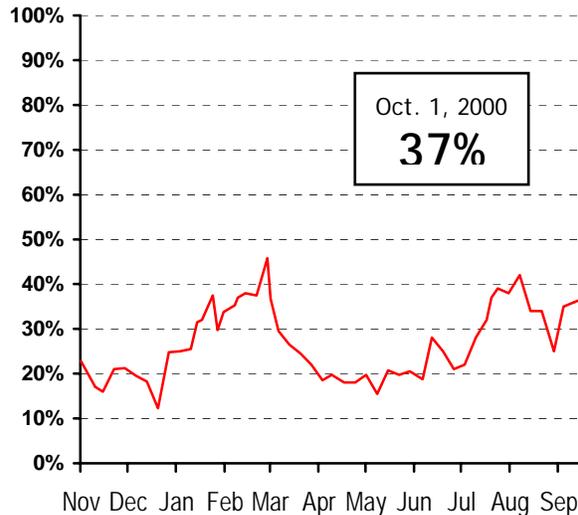
Research Directors

THOMAS E. PATTERSON is the Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press and survey director of the Shorenstein Center. He has conducted several major studies of the media's impact on the presidential selection process. His election books include *The Unseeing Eye* (1976), *The Mass Media Election* (1980), and *Out of Order* (1994). He is also the author of two introductory American Government textbooks: *The American Democracy* and *We the People*.

MARVIN KALB is the executive director of the Washington Office of the Shorenstein Center. He was founding director of the Center (1987-1999) and brings to the project his thirty years of experience in broadcast journalism. He was chief diplomatic correspondent at CBS News and NBC News, and moderator of NBC's "Meet the Press."

TAMI BUHR is the research coordinator at the Shorenstein Center. She has been involved in the Shorenstein Center studies of the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns and was the pollster for the Dartmouth College poll during the 1996 and 2000 New Hampshire primaries. Her Harvard dissertation is on the 1996 New Hampshire primary.

Voter Involvement Index



The **VOTER INVOLVEMENT INDEX** is calculated by averaging the responses to four questions— whether people say they are currently paying close attention to the campaign, and whether in the past day they were thinking about the campaign, talking about it, or following it in the news.

The survey results reported here are from the Shorenstein Center's weekly national surveys of approximately 1,000 adults, conducted between November 14, 1999 and October 1, 2000. Each national poll has a sampling error of approximately plus or minus 3%. Additional results from the national surveys are available on the project's web site at <http://www.vanishingvoter.org/>.

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About the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

The Shorenstein Center is located within Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. It is dedicated to exploring through research, teaching, and deliberation the intersection of communication, politics, and public policy. The Center was established in 1986 with a gift from the Walter Shorenstein family. The Center's advisory board includes distinguished journalists, scholars, and executives.