

Izvorni znanstveni članak
32.019.51:654.19]:[324:342.511](497.5)"2005"
Primljeno: 14. srpnja 2005.

Role of TV Debates in Presidential Campaigns: Croatia's Case of 2005

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Summary

The author looks into the role of TV debates in presidential campaigns, how the pioneering attempt at their production in Croatia in 2005 was received by Croatian voters and how these TV debates differed from the American model.

Namely, a novelty in the Croatian 2005 presidential campaign were three TV debates between the leading contenders, Sjepan Mesić and Jadranka Kosor, who competed in the run-off ballot. The debates were organized by the three national TV networks (HRT, RTL and Nova TV) and the ratings were high.

Key words: TV debates, candidates, television, USA, Croatia, voters, public relations



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Introduction

The presidential elections in the United States, as well as in most democratic countries have become unimaginable without the TV debates between presidential candidates in which – most often – the two leading contenders for the office of the president of the state spell out for millions of TV viewers their opinions and visions and try to convince them in the one-on-one exchange that they are a better choice than their opponent.

In this component of presidential campaign, candidates are under intense public scrutiny which enables voters to better “size them up” and to make an informed choice. At the same time this is one of the most demanding and

challenging forms of public appearances of politicians, when they can demonstrate their competence and knowledge, but also reduce their chances due to a single mistake in front of TV cameras. Although presidential debates are a product of democratic development and almost an American institution, they are also a first-rate TV spectacle.

For the first time in its history Croatia organized the presidential debates in 2005, in line with the now universal American standards. The regular elections for the President of the Republic were held on 2 January 2005. Eleven candidates competed. Jadranka Kosor and Stjepan Mesić went into the run-off as the two leading candidates after the first round. The second round took place on 16 January 2005 and ended with a landslide victory for the incumbent president, Stjepan Mesić (65.93 percent of the votes cast), who thus won his second mandate. Jadranka Kosor won 34.07 percent of the votes.¹ De to a large number of presidential candidates in the first ballot, it was exceptionally difficult to organize first-rate presidential debates, the reason why the Croatian national TV networks (Hrvatska radiotelevizija, RTL Televizija and Nova TV) focused on the run-off ballot. Each network organized a debate in the week before the second round and broadcast them live and during prime time.

TV debates are programs in which two presidential candidates, following special rules, state their opinions and attitudes concerning different aspects of social life and the issues from the presidential domain. In these debates – and within the strictly limited time slots – they have an opportunity to communicate the vision of their presidency, to reply to the moderators' prepared questions and to hackle their opponents, in order to provide pertinent information to voters about their views, programs and personalities, which will facilitate voters to make an informed electoral choice.

The intention of this paper is not to analyze the quality of the production of these debates or the verbal and the nonverbal aspect of presidential candidates' appearances (this is going to be the subject of my future papers). In this paper I will try to give an account of the phenomenon of presidential debates with a special focus on the American experience and to answer the following questions: How much did the Croatian debates reach the standards of the American Commission on Presidential Debates? To what extent did they meet the expectations of Croatian voters and raise the level of the poll respondents' awareness? Did the debates influence the voters' opinion of the candidates? I will use the results of the poll carried out on a sample of TV viewers and potential voters in Croatia before and after the debates. The assumption of this paper is that the voters watched the debates with great interest and hoped to obtain some additional information on the presidential

¹ <http://www.izbori.hr/arhiva/arhiva.html>, 1 June 2005.

candidates and their programs (particularly the undecided voters), but that the debates did not significantly change their allegiances.

Regarding the production of the debates, the networks tried to copy the American standards and at the same time leave their own stamp. Unlike their American counterparts, the Croatian candidates did not prepare meticulously for the debates, and consequently did not offer anything new or different from the rest of their campaigns; their performance will be remembered for their occasional gaffes.

History of presidential debates in the United States

Although election debates in modern time are associated exclusively with television, which greatly changed the relationship between politics and the public, the debates between contenders for high political offices commenced in the USA in 1858. That year Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, and Stephen Douglas, a Democrat, campaigned for the office of the senator of Illinois. Between 21 August and 15 October of that year they took part in as many as seven debates in all seven districts of that state. Each debate lasted for three hours.² On 17 May 1948 there was a professionally organized Republican presidential primary debate on the KEX-ABC radio-station in Portland. The debate lasted one hour; the opening statements lasted twenty minutes. This was the first and the last single-issue debate: the activities of the Communist Party in the United States. It is estimated that between 40 and 80 million people listened to the debate.

As far back as 1956 ABC Miami organized a Democratic presidential primary debate. During this one-hour debate, Adlai Stevenson, former Illinois governor, and Estes Kefauver, former US senator, discussed on 21 May 1956 American foreign and domestic policy. The debate was divided into three-minute opening statements, the moderator's (Quincy Howe) questions and finally the five-minute closing statements.

The presidential debates of 1960 transformed the history of political communication. Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon had four TV debates that year, televised live by the then biggest American TV networks – ABC, CBS, and NBC. On 26 September 1960 the candidates held a debate that was televised live from Chicago from 21:30 and 22:30 p.m. EST. This one-hour debate, moderated by Howard Smith of CBS News, was seen by 66.4 million people. The format was: eight minute opening statements; two and a half minute responses to question; optional rebuttal; three minute closing statements. Domestic issues were discussed.

² http://www.debates.org/pages/his_1858.html, 15 June 2005.

On 7 October 1960 the debate was held in Washington; 61.9 million people tuned in. The debate was moderated by Frank McGee of NBC, there were no opening or closing statements, each candidate was questioned in turn with optional rebuttal. The third debate was a split-screen telecast from two different locations: Nixon was in the NBC studio in Los Angeles, and Kennedy in the NBC studio in New York. There were no opening or closing statements, each candidate was questioned in turn with two and a half minutes to answer questions by the ABC's moderator Bill Shadel, and they had one and a half minute rebuttal option. This third debate took place on 13 October 1960 between 19:30 and 20:30 EST; 63.7 million people watched it. The fourth Nixon-Kennedy debate was held in New York on 21 October between 22:00 and 23:00 EST, again organized by NBC. This final debate was devoted to American foreign policy. Apart from the usual rules regarding the questions, replies and rebuttals, the candidates again had eight minutes for the opening and three minutes for the closing statements. The debate was viewed by 60.4 million people. In each of the debates the panelists who posed the questions were four eminent American journalists from the press or the electronic media.³

The Nixon-Kennedy debates revolutionized the organization of American presidential campaigns, the more so since political analysts attributed Kennedy's narrow victory to his more telegenic and convincing performance.

The organization of presidential debates again gained momentum in 1976 with the three debates between the incumbent President Gerald Ford at the end of his first presidency and his opponent Jimmy Carter, former Georgia senator. The debates were organized by the League of Women Voters, the chief sponsor of the debates until 1988. The debates were seen by between 62.7 (the third one) and 69.7 (the first one) million viewers. Two women were among the moderators – Pauline Frederick of NPR and Barbara Walters of ABC News. The debates were held at the end of September and the beginning of October 1976 in Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Williamsburg. The candidates had two and a half minutes to reply, two minutes for rebuttals, and three minutes for the closing statements. The candidates could put questions to each other. The debates were thematically divided into domestic and economic policy, foreign and defense issues. During that presidential campaign, there was the first vice presidential debate between Walter Mondale and Bob Dole, in Houston, also organized by the League of Women Voters. Their ratings were lower (43.2 million of viewers), and the rules were the same.

³ <http://www.debates.org>, 16 June 2005.

During the presidential campaign of 1980 there were three TV debates in which the three leading contenders – the incumbent President Jimmy Carter, the former California Governor Ronald Reagan, and former US Congressman John Anderson – took part. The debates were also organized by the League of Women Voters. The debates were somewhat more dynamic than the previous ones due to the manner in which the questions were posed. The issues were domestic policy, economy, foreign policy and national security. A record 80 million viewers tuned in.

In 1984 the incumbent President Ronald Reagan met three times with his challenger Walter Mondale, former Vice President. There was also a debate between George Bush and Geraldine Ferraro, the vice presidential candidates. The same questions were posed to both candidates, a few questions for the candidates individually, two and a half minutes to respond, one minute for rebuttal, and four minutes for the closing statements. These were the last debates organized by the League of Women Voters; in 1988 their role was taken up by the professionally organized Commission on Presidential Debates. In that year two presidential debates were held between the Republican George Bush, Reagan's Vice President, and the Democrat Michael Dukakis, Massachusetts Governor. The viewerships were 65.1 and 67.3 million respectively.⁴ There was one vice presidential debate between the contenders Dan Quayle and James Stockdale.

In 1992 there were three debates, organized along the similar rules by the Commission on Presidential Debates among the three leading presidential candidates: the incumbent President George Bush, Bill Clinton, Democratic Governor of Arkansas, and a businessman Ross Perot. The viewerships for the three TV debates with these three contenders ranged between 60 and 70 million. There was a vice presidential debate among three candidates – Al Gore, Dan Quayle, and James Stockdale.

Four years later, in 1996, there were two presidential debates between the incumbent President Bill Clinton and his Republican opponent Bob Dole, and one debate between their vice presidential candidates, Al Gore and Jack Kemp. That year the ratings dropped (46.1 million viewers for the first debate and 36.3 for the second). The ratings for the presidential debates were also lower in 2000. In that year it was the first time that the debates, organized by the American Commission on Presidential Debates, took place at American universities. The three debates between the presidential contenders Al Gore (Clinton's Vice President), and George Bush, the Republican Governor of Texas, were held in October at the University of Massachusetts, Wake Forest, and Washington. The debates were moderated by Jim Lehrer of PBS. The rules were: two minute replies, 60 second rebuttals, and two

⁴ Ratings data: Nielsen Media Research, <http://www.debates.org/pages/his>, 15 June 2005.

minute closing statements. The ratings were 46.6 million (the first debate), 37.5 million (the second), and 37.7 million for the third debate. The vice presidential candidates, the Democrat Joseph Lieberman and the Republican Dick Cheney, debated at Denville College in front of 28.5 million TV viewers; the rules were similar. During the last presidential campaign George Bush, the incumbent President, and his opponent, the Democrat John Kerry met three times in October 2000, also in the organization of the Commission; the venues were the Universities of Miami, Washington, and Arizona State. One debate was devoted to domestic policy, the second to foreign policy and the third to a miscellany of issues. During the ninety minute debates, there were the usual two minute responses, 90 second rebuttals, but this time – at the moderator’s discretion – there were discussion extensions of one minute. The ratings for the first debate were 62.4 million, for the second 46.7 million, and 51.1 million for the third debate. The vice-presidential candidates, the Republican Dick Cheney and the Democrat John Edwards, debated at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland in front of 43.5 million TV viewers.⁵

Role of the Commission on Presidential Debates

The Commission on Presidential Debates or CPD was established in 1987 in the United States to ensure the provision of the best possible information to voters. Its primary purpose is to sponsor and produce debates for the presidential and vice-presidential candidates and to undertake research and educational activities related to the debates. The Commission is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization and has so far, with the help of volunteers, prepared and sponsored the debates in 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004. Previously, the debates were sponsored by the League of Women Voters.

The Commission is led by eminent experts for political science, the media and public relations, and by distinguished American public figures. All living former American presidents are the honorary members of the Commission.

Apart from its domestic activities, the Commission has provided advice and technical expertise for the preparation of the debates in other countries (Brazil, Ecuador, Jamaica, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Taiwan, Ukraine).⁶ After a presidential debate, which the Commission organizes at some American university and televises it in cooperation with one of the national TV networks, the Commission organizes the

⁵ The data taken from the official web pages of the Commission on Presidential Debates <http://www.debates.org/pages>, 15 June 2005.

⁶ <http://www.debates.org/pages/candset2004.html>, 20. June 2005.

post-debate symposiums and research which are used for scientific purposes and to improve electoral process.

The Commission decides on who may take part in the debates on the basis of the candidates' realistic chances in the elections; whether a candidate is considered to be among the principal rivals for the Presidency is estimated on the basis of public opinion polls i.e the voters' support. In practice, these are usually the official candidates of two major American parties – the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Independent candidates appear much more seldom.

The Commission decides on the rules, selects the moderators and the panelists (the journalists who participate in the debate), chooses the venue and compiles the questions for the participants, and so on. The Commission mediates between the candidates' campaign camps, hammers out the details, and runs the proceedings. Although the rules are improved and modified every year, they are similar to those used in the Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960.

The debates are organized in the standardized improvised studio on a university campus in front of a live audience who do not have any role in the questioning or the proceedings. The questions are compiled by experts, journalists, and voters. The rules are laid down to the tiniest details: from the set (where the candidates and the moderator sit), the protocol of the candidates' entrance, their preparation and the rooms for the members of their staff, to the rules or the angles of shooting.

According to the present rules, the American presidential debates last 90 minutes, the candidates stand behind separate podiums facing the audience and the moderator, or sit at a table with the moderator, have two minutes to reply to the moderator's questions, a minute and a half for the rebuttals, and a maximum of two minutes for the closing statement; the moderator has the discretionary right of discussion extensions of one minute if the statements or the discussion are exceptionally interesting.⁷

Television and voting behaviour

In the 1960s Marshall McLuhan labeled television a global village that would eventually captivate the people and become the center of their attention. Each night the three television networks news programs participate in an information ritual as a part of that focus. They try with varying success to gain the competitive audience edge and at the same time, chase each other with similar news presentations (Windhauser, Riley Evarts, 1991: 67).

⁷ According to: <http://www.debates.org/pages>, 15 June 2005.

Higher ratings enhance TV networks influence and power, which they in turn sell to their advertisers, but also use it for imposing their own views and trends on the society. Television thus tries to influence political developments, but at the same time politics tries to influence television and its programming in order to subjugate it to its own interests. This way or another, their paths cross and become mutually dependent.

In Croatia, professional TV reporting and the accountability of television to the public and not to the political institutions is a recent development. On the other hand, the television market and the genuine competition began only a few years ago. That is why it is justified to say that the Croatian TV networks are still learning their role (stumbling along between the public, commercial, and group interests), and the citizens are getting used to the role of television in the democratization of the society and are trying to critically assess the contents of TV broadcasts. Zvonko Letica claims that the fundamental task of TV networks and stations in parliamentary democracies is to support the democratic system and the rule of law as the vital partner of that system. "Those are the two cornerstones of freedom. It is this freedom that enables the broadcast media their independence. This is a good reason to support television wholeheartedly. In carrying out its task it has two responsibilities: it has to ensure that the democratic society is kept fully informed thanks to the accurate and comprehensive coverage on which citizens base their opinions and decisions; television is also responsible for providing a fair and free forum for debating major social issues" (Letica, 2003: 38). This role of television, as seen by the author, is an almost ideal platform for organizing TV debates because they combine both tasks.

Although there is much controversy about the influence of the media in general and television in particular on voters, many authors cite the so-called limited effect model of television and say that, despite its informative nature, television is much less convincing than the press (Miller, 1991: 198). However, John Street argues that this limited effect can be attributed to the lack of research and scanty attention devoted to this media. Despite the fascination of television with election campaigns and the saturation coverage of campaigns, it seems viewers do not care much for that (Street, 2003: 77). Miller thinks that television may be a useful source of information, but that it is of no great help in making judgements, partly because television, restricted by electoral legislation and broadcasting regulation tends to support the messages promoted by parties. TV coverage fortifies the ideas of party unity and popularity (Miller, 1991:137).

Although it is difficult to prove the direct influence of television on voting behaviour and consequently on electoral outcomes, it is a proven fact that television does influence attitudes, information, perceptions, and agenda, which consequently proves that television influences electoral proc-

ess. More than twenty years ago Colin-Seymour Ure warned about the danger of focusing research on voting behaviour at the expense of everything else. He wrote in 1974: “Do mass media change votes? Many studies have sought to answer that question. Indeed, it must be the most studied question of all about the political role of the media. But... such an interpretation is not just unnecessarily narrow but even dangerous. For it invites a simple and superficial conclusion that if media exposure by the electorate, studied over a few weeks or months, has changed few votes, the effect of media on the election is insignificant” (Seymour-Ure, 1974:43). And while researchers have been looking for some enduring changes in voting behaviour, their attention remained focused on voting as the key political act. In this way, however, the bulk of politics remains unexplored. Perception and action are left out when the experience of politics, affected by the media exposure, cannot be directly translated into a decision to vote for a certain leader or a party (Miller, 1991: 137).

Roderick Hart, on the other hand, thinks that television’s crucial political influence lies in the way in which it shapes viewers’ feelings, in the emotive way in which viewers react to politics. John Street adds to his argument the conclusion that the effects of the mass media extend via the voting decision to the perceptions of the political process and the feeling for it. He says that television should be seen as a provider of information which is seen as a political means that shapes the ability of people to act (Street, J., 2003: 78).

In any case, since 1948 when television for the first time covered political conventions, television has been acknowledged as an exceptionally significant medium for politicians’ lives and actions. Although its role in politics in the 1950s was somewhat less active, the 1960 presidential race confirmed television as image maker. Few people, for example, remember what issues were discussed during the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates but they recall that former President John F. Kennedy looked the best. The impression counted (Windhauser, Riley Evarts, 1991: 67).

Many analysts label television as image maker and attribute to it the fact that the key contributing factors to electoral victory are the ability to attract public attention and the polished image, and that in TV debates the image has become more important than the substance of political issues of the moment (Windhauser, Riley Evarts, 1991: 67).

Nimmo and Combs argue that presidential debates are solely TV events and not political events (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 154). They give the example of the first Ford-Carter debate in 1976. “As Carter commenced his final rejoinder of the debate, the TV audio went off. For 28 minutes, it remained off. There was no debate. Ford remained riveted at the podium, Carter remained at the podium, sitting briefly. When the trouble was corrected, the debate re-

newed. The lesson was clear: no media, no debate” (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 154).

The study of the 1980 presidential debates carried out by Berquist and Golden emphasizes the role of the media in the debates proceedings. The authors argue that in 1980 the media people organized a campaign of their own demanding that the presidential debates be held. After they had eventually taken place, the media coverage of these debates (particularly criticism of the candidates and the debate format) determined the way in which the viewers perceived them. In this specific case, the critics (within the media) concluded that the major issues were secondary to the candidates’ delivery, appearance and manner, and that the debates’ format favoured perceived candidate advantage rather than the public interest.

Presidential debates are undoubtedly a television product, but it is also a fact that they occurred at a certain level of democratic development. Accordingly, they are also a product of democratic standards and an event in the interest of the public good and not solely of the media or political interests. The Commission on Presidential Debates nurtures this role of presidential debates in the USA and has been trying to balance the general, political and media interests.

In Croatia, the presidential debates have exclusively been a product of TV networks which tried to cover the presidential campaign the best they could. According to the organizers and judging by the media reports of the time, the candidates were very reluctant to take part in the debates.

Impact of TV debates

A 1988 nationwide poll found that 84 percent of Americans said that their choice for president would be influenced by how the candidate performed in TV debates (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 62). Of course, it is difficult to confirm whether it was really so. But for many analysts of political communication the contemporary era of political public relations begins with the Nixon-Kennedy TV debates in September of 1960 (Kraus, Davis, 1981: 273). Political scientists agree that this event was crucial for that year’s election campaign. Namely, these TV debates brought under public scrutiny the candidates’ views on certain issues or the political contents they were advocating, but also their packaging and delivery, and finally the image of the candidates as message conveyors. Naturally, the manner of presentation and the image tipped the scales in favour of the younger, more communicative and more telegenic Kennedy. It is these parameters that leave a stronger impression on TV viewers than the message. Ray Birdwhistle, one of the

first researchers of that subject, in his 1970 classic *Kinesics and Communication* cites the results of a research which show that a person on television is perceived in accordance with the following parameters: 7 percent by the content of what was actually said, 38 percent by how it was said (tone and pitch of their voice, and so on), and as much as 55 percent by the nonverbal communication (appearance, manner, clothes, and so on).

Having in mind the power of television concerning the packaging of candidates to viewers i.e. voters, as well as the impact of political public relations that greatly influence the delivery and the posture, or the manner of a candidate's packaging and delivery of political messages, it seems that TV debates are quite an artificial product which is easy to manipulate. This is undoubtedly true. However, if compared to other forms of political communication – public relations and even propaganda in election campaigns – and particularly to the managed *pseudo-events*, the huge advantages of such form of campaigning are obvious. That is why in this section we will look at the advantages and in the next at the shortcomings, from the public's perspective. At the same time we will try to identify the advantages and the disadvantages of debates for candidates.

Brian McNair calls TV debates an American institution now copied in many other democracies. For him this is an archetypal “free media” event. He claims that in such broadcasts the liberal-democratic role of broadcasting is found in its purest form, *mediating* between the public and its politicians, providing the former with access to raw political discourse, and providing the politicians with a channel of direct access to the people (McNair, 2003: 83).

TV debates guarantee the politicians extensive live coverage, since the serious broadcasting organizations must all report it fully, providing acres of follow-up coverage of the issues raised and the respective performances of the participants. In a contemporary US presidential campaign the debate *sets the agenda*. It provides a platform for a candidate to appeal directly to the mass audience and to demonstrate their superiority over the opponent. And for the politician it is, in contrast to advertising, free (McNair, 2003: 83).

A key rationale for these debates is to give voters an opportunity to size up the candidates, their qualities, and their positions on issues and, thus, make a more informed choice than if they had to rely solely on news-mediated or candidate-mediated fare. Watching candidates go at one another (“let’s you and him fight”), however, has become a mediating ritual in its own right, one providing yet another means of fantasy creation and chaining. In fact, presidential debates provide an ideal forum for candidates to espouse their rhetorical visions (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 152).

Regardless of the advantages offered by presidential debates in front of millions of viewers and potential voters, this form of TV appearance is a considerable challenge as every, even the smallest mistake, comes under public scrutiny. Live and unedited, mistakes are more difficult to cover up and a candidate's detailed, intelligent articulation of policies may be fatally undermined by one slip. McNair cites the example of the 1976 debate between Gerald Ford and his opponent Jimmy Carter, when Ford unintentionally reinforced a growing image of him as stupid and lightweight by appearing to suggest that Poland was not part of the Soviet bloc. Ford probably knew what he was trying to say, as no doubt did most of his audience, but this verbal *faux pas* haunted him for the rest of the campaign, contributing substantially to his defeat by Carter (McNair, 2003: 132). To prove the power of debates to turn the scales of public affection, the same author cites the debates between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000. Although Bush's image had been that of a bumbling, ignorant cowboy, he managed to change his image as an attractive, electable candidate. Gore, by contrast, emerged from the debates with a reputation as a timid, pedantic bore.

McNair concludes: the massive exposure which debates generate can win elections, which has, for example, become the received wisdom about John F. Kennedy's narrow victory over Richard Nixon in the 1960 campaign, which he won by only 17,000 votes, but it can also lose them over such a simple matter as a slip of the tongue.

Britain, in contrast to the US, which has a long tradition of presidential debates, has not developed a tradition of live debating between candidates for the highest governmental office, although each passing general election campaign is accompanied by calls for such debates from the challengers. British prime ministers, Labour and Conservative, well aware of the dangers debates can throw up, have taken the view that one of the privileges of incumbency is to refuse to participate in such an uncontrolled spectacle. The assumption here is that there is more to be gained by playing the role of a dignified statesperson, operating above the glitzy presidentialism of the debate format, than could be lost by being seen as aloof and inaccessible (McNair, 2003: 132).

Nevertheless, recently even Britain has taken to TV debating. The first debate was the one following the death of Labour leader John Smith, between the three candidates for the succession – Tony Blair, Margaret Beckett, and John Prescott – on BBC's *Panorama* programme in June of 1994. Confident of Tony Blair's telegenic appeal and his ability to perform well, his public relations advisers tried in 1997 to come to an agreement on the terms and conditions of live TV debates. In the end they backed off, however. Some speculated that Labour allegedly did not want to risk Blair's

popularity after all. Others claimed that it was the Tories, fearful of allowing a face-off between their untelegenic leader John Major and Blair.

However, unlike the US, in Britain the Prime Ministers can be seen on television answering unpleasant and provocative questions in the weekly prime ministerial *Question Time* in the House of Commons, which some consider to be a more than adequate substitution for the one-off presidential debate. Brian McNair says that the British Parliament is an important place for a party leader's success because their success is not measured in terms of soundbites and slip-ups alone, but on performance over a parliamentary session, which may be thought to be a harsher and more accurate test of debating skill than the 90 or so minutes of a US presidential clash (McNair, 2003: 132). Besides, British politicians during campaigns give a number of interviews and appear in popular TV shows, which offers some additional opportunities of comparison and analyses, and voter evaluation.

Shortcomings and manipulations of presidential debates

The common understanding of a debate is that it is a conflict or argument over a clearly defined proposition. Each side speaks about that proposition for an allotted time, has an opportunity to rebut and interrogate the opponent, and sums up their position. By comparing presidential debates with these principles we can say – as Nimmo and Combs argue – that presidential debates are not confrontations or debates in the proper sense (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 153). According to them, presidential debates never involve clearly defined propositions for argument. At best, the point at issue is vague. It boils down to: “There should be a change.” The ins should be replaced by the outs. They claim that in each presidential debate thus far that implicit proposition has favored the challenger: Kennedy challenging the Eisenhower-Nixon administration in 1960, Carter challenging the Ford administration in 1976, Reagan challenging Carter in 1980. Nor is there an exchange over the implicit proposition. Instead, the basic format has consisted, with variations, of questions asked of each candidate by a panel of journalists, each candidate responding or counterresponding, but rarely confronting one another. Although follow-up questions by panelists or follow-up comments by the candidates have been worked into the debate format, the candidates are able to sidestep them. What comes from the candidates' lips are ‘grooved responses’. Grooved refers to what one would get if a phonograph needle were placed in a recording groove, that is, a pat, predictable response generally borrowed from the candidate's standard speech made throughout the campaign. In sum, the grooved response is a rerun of the candidate's rhetorical vision (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 154).

Also, presidential debates are scarcely spontaneous, unrehearsed confrontations. Instead, they are what Daniel J. Boorstin calls pseudo-events. In fact, debates join most other campaign events in that respect. A pseudo-event is one that is planned for the immediate purpose of being reported, yet what actually happens is never clear, even though the event was intended to have a self-fulfilling character. In sum, a pseudo-event is a media event (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 149).

On the other hand, and in order to understand that in TV debates almost nothing is left to chance and that behind this form of presidential campaigning there are trained public relations experts, let us consider the planning of presidential debates. Considerable thought goes into deciding whether to challenge an opposing candidate to debate or whether to accept a challenge. Thus, a predebate between candidates' advisers takes place in the news media over whether to debate at all. Once that is resolved, elaborate negotiations between candidates' advisers work out details of attire, rostrum sizes, makeup, lighting and camera angles, the format of the debate, who will participate, location, time, and so on. Indeed, as little as possible is left to spontaneity (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 149).

The enormous influence aides and public relations experts have on presidential debates can be seen from the following quote: "Advisers thoroughly brief candidates on likely questions, frame appropriate answers, even provide one-liners and humorous diverting remarks. They are 'handlers' of contenders much as boxing managers handle their fighters. Candidates carefully rehearse their answers and performances with stand-in opponents. They so finely tune their performances that the key problem they face in debates is not with knowing the answers but with guessing the questions to which they will give their memorized responses. The realities of presidential debates imitate their own mediation, mediation through pageantry" (Nimmo, Combs, 1990: 64).

Nimmo and Combs claim that TV debating does not fulfill even its basic function, which is to be informative. When debates end it is not always clear just what happened. The thirst to determine immediately 'what happened' is, however, considerable. The quenching takes several forms. First, there is the question: Who won? Within minutes after the debate (sometimes even during it) pollsters man their phones in efforts to conduct surveys of who people think won or lost. It may be that most people do not know, but once told that a nationwide poll said that candidate A won, people buy that fantasy. As later polls are taken, the candidate early surveys labeled the victor is likely to increase their victory margin (Nimmo, Combs, 1984: 149). Most of these polls cannot be called scientific, and some do not comply even with journalistic standards. The authors cite the example of ABC network which in 1980, after the Carter-Reagan debate, invited the viewers to dial special telephone

numbers to register their verdicts of winner and loser. According to Nimmo and Combs, debate postmortems focus on gaffes and allow them to eclipse the substance and directly affect the results of such polls. Gaffes are unexpected, unrehearsed, ungrooved, lie outside the ritual and hence easily make news in debate coverage. Gaffes in fact serve to underscore the difference between the successful and the unsuccessful candidate. A gaffe is inconsistent with the rhetorical vision of the candidate making it. For example, when President Ford in a 1976 debate said and later reaffirmed that “there is no Soviet domination in Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford Administration”, he scarcely evoked the image of an informed leader.

All this suggest that presidential debates are in fact a joint product of television and candidates themselves, from which both sides try to profit as much as possible: popularity and voter support for one side, and ratings and influence on electoral process for the other.

Mildly making fun of the American form of presidential debates, Nimmo and Combs compare it to beauty pageants. They cynically point out many similarities: celebrity moderators, the panel of judges also made up of celebrities, frequently celebrity journalists whose presence signifies that the debates are serious: “Pageant contestants devote hours to proper makeup, posture, and stance; so too do presidential candidates preparing for a debate. Beauty pageants are divided into segments – talent competition, evening gown competition, bathing suit competition, and so forth. Presidential debates set aside segments for questions on foreign policy, defense policy, and domestic policy. The studio audience at beauty pageants may applaud favourites but not be unruly. Moderators admonish studio audiences at presidential debates to ‘restrain’ demonstrations of support for candidates. And at beauty pageants the finalists have an opportunity to state their ‘goals in life’, ‘goals for America’, or what they will try to accomplish ‘during my reign’. At presidential debates each candidate has time for a closing statement, a summing up of the candidate’s vision for America and what the candidate plans to accomplish during the presidential reign” (Nimmo, Combs, 1990: 63). And finally, the authors say, both pageants are thoroughly planned, rehearsed, and timed to the last second. However, the outcomes are always unpredictable. In both show-programs, the goal is the same: to get high quality and high ratings and leave an impeccable impression.

Presidential campaigns in Croatia in 2005

All the three national Croatian TV networks organized a presidential debate between two presidential candidates, Stjepan Mesić and Jadranka Kosor, in the week preceding the run-off ballot, held on 16 January 2005.

RTL TV broadcast its debate on Monday, 10 January, at 21:15 p.m. The debate lasted one and a half hours. The debate on Nova TV took place on Wednesday 12 January at 20:00 p.m., and lasted one hour and seven minutes. Croatian TV held its debate on Friday 14 January, on the eve of electoral silence, at 20:15 p.m., and lasted 90 minutes.

All the three debates were moderated by the well-known hosts of these networks (Tomislav Jelinčić, Miroslav Lilić, and Branimir Bilić respectively). On RTL Television and HRT the candidates' answers and rebuttals and the closing statements were limited, while on Nova TV things were more relaxed. Each network, with its choice of the questions, the moderators, the staging, the set, and so on, gave its own stamp to its debate and created their own product. By comparing the staging and the formats, we can conclude that all the three TV stations obviously modeled their debates on the US example, as in the US presidential debates have become a tradition and an institution.

According to the data RTL Television gleaned by the method of peopletre, 56.7 percent of the people who watched TV that evening (about 1.3 million viewers) tuned in to watch its debate.⁸ There were similar ratings for the other two debates, a sign of the interest of TV viewers and potential voters for this type of election campaign. This was a novelty in Croatian presidential campaigns, which explains part of its appeal. Namely, before 2005 there were no TV debates of this kind (comparable to the American experience), because the leading contenders were not interested, and also because Croatia did not have a developed television market and consequently no competition among TV networks at the national level. The debates took place in improvised TV studios without an audience.

Results of viewers polls about the debates

In order to ascertain the opinions of respondents (potential voters) and the drift of their thinking about the debates, we conducted a poll. This chapter includes the most interesting findings. The method used was the telephone automated data collection⁹ on a sample of 600 respondents (older than 18, with the right to vote, who watched at least two of the three debates) from all over Croatia. The method enabled us to collect the data in a short period. The poll was conducted one day after the last TV debate i.e. on the day of election silence.

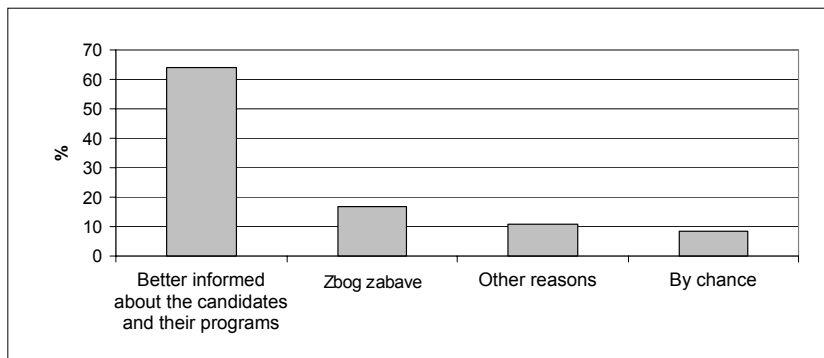
⁸ Večernji list, 12 January 2005, p. 6.

⁹ The poll was conducted by the Markottel Agency from Zagreb.

We wanted to find out whether the respondents voted in the first round and what their electoral choice was. Then they answered the questions: why they watched the debates, which candidate left a better general impression, which candidate was a better verbal or non-verbal communicator, what annoyed them most in the debates, whether they were going to vote in the second ballot and if yes, who going were to vote for, and whether the debates affected their prior views of the candidates. Out of 600 respondents 81.67 percent voted in the first round of the presidential elections and 18.33 percent did not.

Regarding the reasons for watching the television debates, 63.83 percent of the respondents cited they wanted to be better informed i.e. to get more familiar with the candidates and their programs, 16.67 percent cited entertainment, and 11 percent other reasons. 8.5 percent of the respondents said they saw the debates by chance. The high percentage of the respondents who wanted to get more information is a proof that they had serious expectations from the debates which confirmed the fundamental role of debates: the candidates have an opportunity to properly present themselves to the voters, and the citizens get better informed about the candidates and their programs.

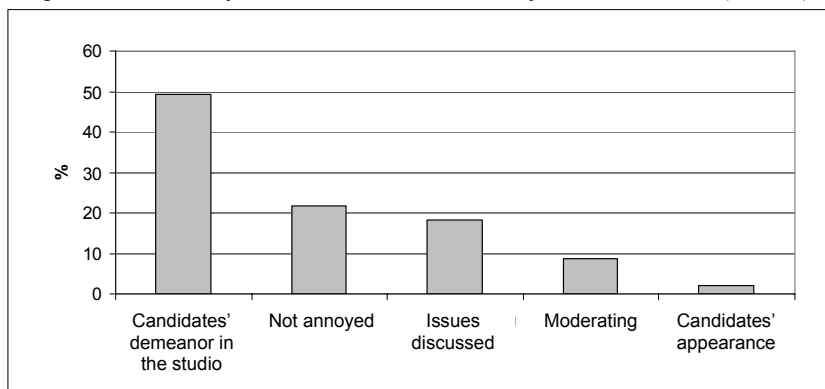
Graph 1: Reasons for watching presidential debates (N=600)



The question: “What annoyed you most during the debates?” was meant to gauge how the viewers took to the way TV debates were produced and to the candidates’ performance. The viewers were most annoyed by the candidates’ manner (49.17 percent), which clearly suggests that the candidates did not comply with the usual rules of verbal and nonverbal communication, which also means that they were not well-prepared for such a demanding public appearance. The dissatisfaction with the moderating was cited by only 8.83 percent of the respondents which means that the TV networks passed

the test as far as their viewers were concerned. The viewers were dissatisfied with the issues covered (18.33 percent), which suggests several things: the candidates often wrangled about unimportant issues not offering anything original and new about the issues relevant for the citizens' everyday life and very often digressed from the questions asked by the moderators.

Graph 2: What annoyed voters in the debates they watched on TV (N=600)



Concerning the question: Which candidate left a better general impression? 71.17 percent chose Stjepan Mesić and 28.83 percent Jadranka Kosor. It is interesting that Jadranka Kosor achieved somewhat better results in individual items (the quality of the verbal and the nonverbal communication) than in the total impression rating. Regarding the nonverbal communication in the studio, Ms Kosor's approval rate was 32.50 percent and Mr Mesić's 67.50 percent. Regarding the verbal aspect, Mesić's approval rate was 68.67 percent and Kosor's 31.33 percent. There is a correspondence between the impression the candidates left on the voters and the total number of votes they gained in the presidential elections.

Table 1: Which candidate left better general impression

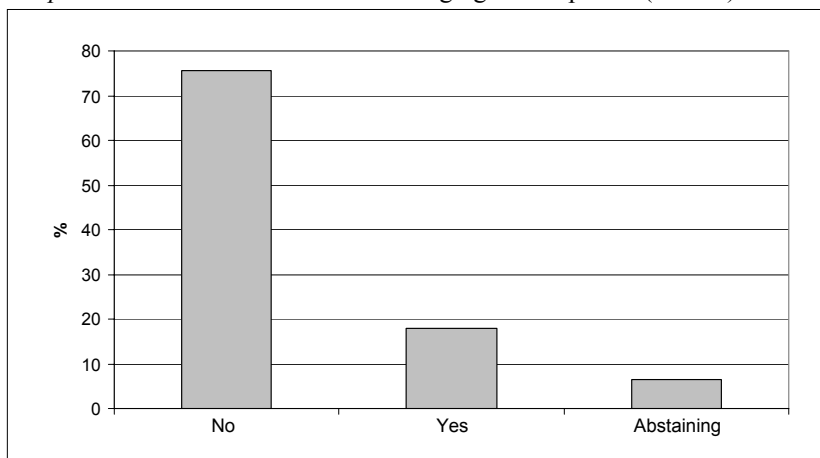
Better impression	Number of respondents	Percentage
Stjepan Mesić	427	71.17
Jadranka Kosor	173	28.83
Total	600	100,00

The question: "Have you changed your opinion of the candidates after the debates?", was answered negatively by 72.17 percent of the respondents.

18 percent changed their opinion, and 9.83 percent decided not to vote at all in the run-off ballot of the presidential elections.

The relationship between the voting in the first round and the change of opinion is interesting. Of all the respondents who voted in the first round, 17.96 percent changed their previous opinion of the candidates, 75.51 percent confirmed their previous opinion, and 6.53 percent decided not to vote in the second round. Of all the respondents who did not vote in the first round, 24.55 percent persisted in their decision not to vote, 57.27 percent did not change their opinion of the candidates, and 18.81 percent changed their opinion.

Graph 3: TV debates' influence on changing voter opinion (N=600)



To sum: it seems that the most interesting finding is that as many as 18 percent of the respondents changed their opinion about the candidates after the debates, regardless of whether they voted in the first round or not. This result should be taken with reserve because the respondents directly replied about the change, whose effects in the actual voting were impossible to keep track of. However, the result may be indicative: these are the respondents who had already been biased in favour of one of the contenders and then switched their allegiance or ignored both, or those who had supported some other candidates in the first round and then chose one of the two leading candidates.

The paper deliberately does not include the individual data on the structure and the preferences of the respondents who have changed their opinion, nor do we want to delve into the reasons for this change, but primarily focus

on the role and the achievements of the debates as a form of election campaign.

Conclusion

Despite all the shortcomings of the American model of presidential debates, this form of election campaigning is one of the “purest” forms of the interaction between the candidates and the public during a campaign. Presidential debates help politicians to directly convey their message to their voters and to voters offer the possibility to compare candidates’ personalities, programs, and visions and to make or confirm their electoral choice more easily.

An additional guarantee for the quality of TV debates in the US is the Commission on Presidential Debates which organizes them in cooperation with experts, universities, journalists and voters with the purpose of keeping the public better informed.

The Croatian productions of presidential debates in 2005 was a worthy project of three TV networks and obviously kept the voters better informed and partly changed the views of the public about the candidates.

It is interesting that the TV debates in Croatia were initiated only by TV networks. Their efforts should be followed up by a consensus of the candidates, the media, the experts and the public on the further professionalization and standardization of these debates.

The Croatian presidential contenders, unlike their American counterparts who thoroughly prepare their nonverbal communication and content, obviously did not pay enough attention to that part of the campaign, which was reflected in their performance. Obviously, Croatian candidates did not use this opportunity to convey new messages, breach new topics, correct prior mistakes, or present themselves in a more favourable light, which was partly responsible for the respondents’ dissatisfaction with the candidates’ performance and manner. This is corroborated by a few verbal and nonverbal gaffes that were front-page news for days on end that stuck in the memory. This aspect of the debates can be studied in more detail by replaying the videos and by analyzing the transcripts.

There is a correspondence between the percentages of the votes the candidates gained in the elections and the percentages of the respondents’ approval regarding their verbal and nonverbal performance; they are about the same.

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