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Presidential Debates

Are the presidential candidates scheduled to debate this fall? Have there always been presidential debates?

Debates provide one of the few opportunities for high drama in an election season, and this fall there will be three of them, as well as one vice presidential debate. Here is the schedule as set out by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD):



First presidential debate: Thursday, **September 30**, at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, FL.

Vice presidential debate: Tuesday, **October 5**, at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH.

Second presidential debate: Friday, **October 8**, at Washington University in St. Louis, MO.

Third presidential debate: Wednesday, **October 13**, at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ.

The CPD also announced two back-up sites, Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY, and the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC. All debates will start at 9:00 p.m. ET.

The debate schedule was announced back on November 6, 2003, by Paul G. Kirk and Frank J. Fahrenkopf, co-chairmen of The Commission on Presidential Debates. To keep abreast of any changes, check out the CPD's Website: www.debates.org/
WHAT TO WATCH FOR (A DEBATE STRATEGY PRIMER)

Conventional wisdom says four things about debates.

1. To debate or not to debate. It is usually in the incumbent's interest to debate a challenger as few times as he can get away with. Contrarywise, it is in the challenger's interest to get the incumbent to debate as much as possible. The idea is to create the opportunity for a major misstep that will diminish the stature of the president. This is what happened in a 1976 debate between challenger Jimmy Carter and incumbent Gerald R. Ford. To the amazement of his audience, Ford said, "There is no Soviet domination in Eastern Europe, and there never will be during a Ford administration." The president had to endure sustained criticism for that misstatement. John Kerry will try to create and take advantage of a similar situation when he debates George W. Bush in 2004.

2. The are-you-better-off question. Once in a debate, the incumbent must try to convince the audience that they are better off now than they were four years ago. By contrast, the challenger will be trying to persuade voters that they are worse off. This is what Jimmy Carter did in 1976, when he set out to beat incumbent Gerald R. Ford. Carter's campaign created the "misery index" -- the sum of the inflation rate and unemployment rate -- and asserted again and again that President Ford had not been a good manager of the nation's economy -- the numbers proved it. Ah, but the misery index came back to bite Carter in the 1980 campaign, because unemployment and inflation had risen dramatically during the Democrat's four years in office. Reagan asked Americans, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" and he beat Carter in a landslide that sent the incumbent packing to Plains, Georgia, a melancholy man.

3. Presidential presentation. Both the challenger and the incumbent must possess self control and act presidential during their entire 90 minutes onstage. They must also do something paradoxical: they must look like the ordinary guy next door (I'm just a good ol' Bubba), and yet convey an inner character that says, in effect, I am superior to my opponent and, indeed, to most Americans, for I am the one who can stare terrorists down, send young men and women into war, and do whatever it takes to increase the security and prosperity of Americans. In 1988, Democratic challenger Michael Dukakis sometimes had a tough time looking as if he could be commander in chief. (Admittedly Ronald Reagan was a hard act to follow.) He hardly helped his case when handlers got him to don a military helmet and ride around in a U.S. Army tank in Michigan. The nation laughed, and the image stuck to Dukakis during his debates with George H. W. Bush, who was able to paint the Massachusetts governor as just another Northeastern liberal who wasn't tough enough to lead America and the free world. Four years later, in 1992, Republican George H. W. Bush was portrayed as totally out of touch with ordinary Americans when it was shown that he did not recognize the scanner in a grocery store, and he lost to a skillful Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton.

4. Whose mission makes people want to march? Successful presidential contenders need an idealistic streak -- they need to appeal to something greater than self-interest. Throughout American history, politicians have looked to Americans' love of freedom -- not just for themselves but for others -- to inspire the nation. The more expansive the freedom, the better. The 1980 debates are instructive. Carter had premised his presidency on limits -- limits to economic growth, limits to American power, limits to energy, limits even on the American spirit (which he said suffered from malaise). * Reagan self-consciously took the opposite tack, emphasizing that Americans can do anything if they are free -- free from burdensome taxes and regulations at home, and free from Communist intimidation abroad. Voters responded positively to the more positive message. It was Reagan's mission that made them want to march, and he won the 1980 election in a landslide.

EARLY DEBATES**

It's hard to believe nowadays, but public presidential debates are a recent development in American politics. Only since 1976 have they been a regular feature in America's political landscape.

What about the most famous debates in American history, Lincoln-Douglas? Those seven sparring matches that took place throughout the Illinois countryside during the summer and fall of 1858 were not presidential debates; they were debates between U.S. Senate candidates. The Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, was challenging the Democratic incumbent, Stephen Douglas. Each debate lasted three hours. Although Lincoln won the popular vote the following November, he lost the 1858 election in the Illinois legislature (consistent with the manner of electing senators prior to passage of the 17th Amendment). Lincoln clearly won in the longer run. The cogency of his arguments concerning Union and slavery made his reputation soar and positioned him to win the Republican nomination for president two years later.

The first modern public debate between presidential candidates took place in 1948, in the Oregon Republican primary where Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen were battling it out. The one-hour debate, over the question of whether to outlaw the Communist party, was broadcast nationally over radio to more than 40 million listeners. It was the only debate in which the contenders were restricted to one topic.

The next debate occurred in 1956, in the Florida primary, where Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver were duking it out for one hour on ABC radio. Topics ranged from foreign to domestic policy.

1960

The year 1960 saw truly momentous developments in presidential debates. They were the first nationally televised debates, and they were the first debates between contenders from different parties. Each of the four debates between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy was seen by more than 60 million television viewers, and heard by millions more radio listeners. The setting for combat was a new milieu -- the TV studio -- in Chicago, Washington DC, New York, and Los Angeles. Most of the debates lasted one hour.

Interestingly, people who listened to the candidates on radio tended to think that Nixon won; people who watched them on television tended to think that Kennedy won. (Nixon's recent illness and his propensity to sweat under klieg lights did not help his presentation.) Media handlers still study the 1960 debates to understand audience response and to prepare their candidates to act like Everyman -- the plain ol' Bubba next door -- yet look authoritative and sound presidential.

There would be no more public, nationally broadcast debates among presidential candidates for another 16 years.

1976 to the present

The continuous tradition of having major candidates debate before a national TV audience is less than three decades old. The number of debates and their format are basically the same today as in 1976, the year America was celebrating its bicentennial. Democratic upstart Jimmy Carter challenged Republican incumbent Gerald R. Ford in three debates, hosted in cities redolent with the nation's founding -- Philadelphia and Williamsburg -- as well as in San Francisco. Interestingly, there were not many more television viewers of the debates in 1976 than in 1960 (despite a larger population and more access to television), probably because of the cynicism generated by the Watergate scandal that unfolded after the 1972 election.

A new twist in 1976 was to see the vice presidential contenders debate on national TV: Democrat Walter Mondale and Republican Bob Dole had at each other in the Alley Theater in Houston, Texas. Some 43 million Americans tuned in.

In 1980, Republican nominee Ronald Reagan took part in two debates on the road to the White House. His first was in Baltimore against Independent candidate John Anderson and lasted one hour, and his second was in Cleveland against Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter and lasted an hour and a half. The Cleveland debate was seen by more than 80 million viewers, a record that has not since been matched.

In 1984, Democratic nominee Walter Mondale challenged Republican incumbent Ronald Reagan in two debates in Louisville, KY, and Kansas City, KS. Each was one and a half hours in length and viewed by some 60 million Americans. In addition, the two vice presidential nominees, Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush and Democratic challenger Geraldine Ferraro (the first woman vice presidential candidate in U.S. history), fought it out for an hour and a half in Philadelphia.

In 1988, Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis challenged Republican nominee George H. W. Bush in two nationally televised debates, in Winston-Salem, NC, and Los Angeles, CA. The vice presidential nominees -- Lloyd Bentson and Dan Quayle -- made for some memorable moments in Omaha, NE.

In 1992, Independent candidate Ross Perot added color to the debates between Democratic challenger Bill Clinton and Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush in three nationally televised debates that were crammed into nine days. The settings for the dramas were St. Louis, MO (at Washington University, which hosted a 2000 debate and is hosting a 2004 debate as well), Richmond, VA (University of Richmond), and East Lansing, MI (Michigan State University). Vice presidential nominees James Stockdale (I), Al Gore (D), and Dan Quayle (R) went at each other in one debate in Atlanta, GA, before 51 million TV viewers.

Note this: During each of the three debates in 1992, viewership ranged between 60 and 70 million people, which was fairly consistent with the number of viewers of all previous presidential debates, reaching back to the Nixon-Kennedy debates more than three decades earlier. The exception was the Reagan-Carter debate in 1980, which saw a spike of more than 80 million viewers. That record has not been beaten, despite the presence of more Americans, more television sets, and more news channels than ever before. After 1992 there would be a dramatic fall off in the number of viewers of nationally televised presidential debates.

In 1996, Republican candidate Bob Dole challenged Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton in only two debates, the first in Hartford, CT, and second in San Diego, CA. Only 36 million Americans tuned in -- fewer than watched the VP debate in 1976. And in 1996, only 26 million Americans watched the lone vice presidential debate between Jack Kemp (R) and incumbent Al Gore (D) in St. Petersburg, FL -- half the number who watched the 1992 VP debate.

In the lead up to one of the most contested presidential elections in U.S. history, that of 2000, there were three debates in which George W. Bush (R) and incumbent Al Gore (D) fought it out. The venues were Boston (University of Massachusetts), Winston-Salem (Wake Forest University, its second), and St. Louis (Washington University, its third in all). The length of each debate was one and a half hours -- not long by Lincoln-Douglas standards. Nevertheless -- and despite the headline Al Gore earned because of his visible exasperation in the first debate -- the contests were viewed by fewer than 47 million people. Vice presidential aspirants Joe Lieberman (D) and Dick Cheney (R) battled it out in Danville, KY, before 28 million viewers.

(Question from Dan P. of Boulder, Colorado)

*Steven M. Gillon, "Jimmy Carter," in *The American Presidency*, ed. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), pp. 457, 465.

**For an overview, see "Debate History," in Commission on Presidential Debates Website: <http://www.debates.org/pages/history.html>