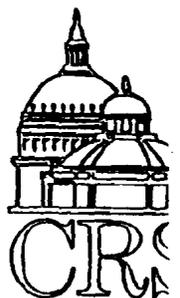


CRS Report for Congress

Campaign Debates in Presidential General Elections

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CAMPAIGN DEBATES IN PRESIDENTIAL GENERAL ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

Televised Presidential general election debates in the United States originated in 1960, when Democratic and Republican nominees John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon met in four one-hour debates which were broadcast nationwide. The first debates were made possible by a temporary congressional suspension of the Federal Communications Commission's "equal time" rule.

Due to the reluctance to debate of candidates holding a commanding lead over their opponents and to the reimposition of the equal time rule after 1960, no further debates were held until 1976, after the FCC modified its ruling to exempt from equal time requirements debates conducted as "bona fide" news events.

Since that time, televised general election debates have become a familiar part of Presidential campaigns, having been held in every succeeding election, although often only after protracted negotiations by the Presidential candidates' campaign organizations. Debates were sponsored from 1976 to 1984 by the League of Women Voters' Education Fund, but have been sponsored since 1988 by the Commission on Presidential Debates, another non-partisan organization.

Proposals to establish the debates as permanent or mandatory have been introduced in Congress on several occasions and are pending in the 103rd Congress. Generally, such proposals would require any candidate receiving funds from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund to participate in televised debates in order to qualify for funds.

Debates have generally attracted substantial audiences (as high as an estimated 131 million viewers for the first debate in 1976) and are widely considered to be the only occasion during a campaign when the attention of a large portion of the American public is focused on the election, as well as the only campaign information format which potentially offers sufficient time to explore issues and policies in depth in a neutral forum. As such, they have been characterized as a Presidential job interview conducted before the American people.

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CAMPAIGN DEBATES IN PRESIDENTIAL GENERAL ELECTIONS

EARLY EXPERIMENTS

Experiments with Presidential campaign debates began as early as 1948, when Republican candidates Thomas E. Dewey and Harold Stassen conducted a one-hour radio debate four days prior to the crucial Oregon primary. Broadcast nationwide by ABC, NBC, and Mutual Radio, the debate attracted an audience estimated at 40 to 80 million listeners.¹ Additional broadcast debates were held on a limited basis in 1952 and 1956, featuring candidates for the Democratic nomination. On July 12, 1960, Senators John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, front-running contenders for the Democratic nomination, debated before the Massachusetts and Texas delegations at the Democratic National Convention in a program which was aired nationally by CBS.² Against this background, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, the certain Republican nominee, indicated his willingness to participate in televised debates with Senator Kennedy, who had received the Democratic nomination on July 13.

THE EQUAL TIME RULE

The "equal time rule" of the Communications Act (47 U.S.C. 315 (a)), as then interpreted by the Federal Communications Commission, was the most serious obstacle to the projected debates. Under the provisions of a 1959 FCC decision, any appearance by a candidate for public office on television (even in news broadcasts) required that *all* other candidates for the office receive an equal amount of coverage. Although Congress soon eased many of these restrictions by legislation, it remained unclear in 1960 whether a broadcast debate by the Democratic and Republican nominees would trigger equal time requirements for numerous minor party and independent candidates for President.³

In response to concern over the equal time rule, the 86th Congress initiated consideration of a temporary suspension early in 1960. On June 27, the Senate

¹ Swerdlow, Joel L., editor. *Presidential Debates: 1988 and Beyond*. Washington, Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1987. p. 151.

² Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and David S. Birdsall. *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 222, 223.

³ Firestone, Charles M. Legal Issues Surrounding Televised Debates. In: *Presidential Debates: 1988 and Beyond*, p. 18, 19.

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passed S.J. Res. 207, which canceled the requirement for the duration of the 1960 election campaign and required a report on the effects of the suspension from the FCC by May 1, 1961. House passage followed on August 22, and the resolution was signed into law (P.L. 86-677) by President Eisenhower two days later, thus paving the way for the 1960 debates, which were even then being planned.⁴

1960 DEBATES AND REIMPOSITION OF THE EQUAL TIME RULE

Following Nixon's indication that he was willing to debate, NBC issued an invitation to both candidates on July 27 to appear in eight one-hour debates, an offer accepted by Kennedy the next day and by Nixon on July 31. However, NBC predicated its offer of debate sponsorship on passage of the then-pending legislation to suspend the equal time rule, a difficulty resolved by Congress' subsequent action.⁵ CBS and ABC soon followed NBC's lead by offering evening prime time for a series of debates.⁶

Negotiators for Kennedy, Nixon, and the networks completed an agreement on details of the debates by mid-September, setting precedents and ground rules which were, with some variations, generally applicable through 1992. These have included: a moderator and panel of journalists (usually numbering three or four); alternating questions, occasionally including follow-ups, to the candidates, with limited time for reply; opportunity for opponent rebuttals or commentary; and, in some cases, opening or closing statements by the candidates.

Four one-hour debates were held, on September 26, October 7, 13, and 21, 1960. The Kennedy-Nixon debates were arguably watershed events in American political history, particularly the first encounter, in which the telegenic Kennedy was seen as projecting a more "presidential" image than his GOP opponent, who was considered to have suffered both from poor make-up and lingering effects of a recent illness.⁷ The debates attracted large audiences, ranging from 38 to 54 percent of all television sets in use on each occasion; by one account at least 90 percent of potential viewers watched at least one.⁸ Although the debates are widely credited with contributing to Kennedy's victory, some authors suggest

⁴ Equal Time Suspension. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*. v. 18, Aug. 26, 1960. p. 1488.

⁵ *New York Times*, July 29, 1960. p. 1,5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Lanoue, David J. and Peter R. Schrott. *The Joint Press Conference: The History, Impact, and Prospects of American Presidential Debates*. New York, Greenwood Press, 1991. p. 12, 18.

⁸ Swerdlow, *Presidential Debates*, p. 152, 158; Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 12.

that scholarly opinion is divided as to their effect. One observer, Herbert Asher, is quoted as stating that "the impact (of the debates) may have been sufficient to swing an election as close as the one in 1960," while also noting that "pollsters and scholars alike were nearly unanimous in detecting little or no change in voting behavior associated with the debates."⁹

Although the 1960 debates were widely hailed as the beginning of a new political tradition, three Presidential election campaigns passed before another was held. Several developments contributed to this 16-year hiatus. First, the temporary suspension of the equal time rule expired after the 1960 election and remained in force without substantial modification for 15 years. Although bills were introduced to remedy the situation in all three election years, Congress in each case did not enact legislation to revoke or suspend the equal time rule.¹⁰ Second, front running candidates in 1964, 1968, and 1972 declined to debate their opponents, with the exception of Richard Nixon in 1968, who agreed to appear with Democratic nominee Vice President Hubert Humphrey, but only if American Independent Party candidate George Wallace were included, a condition Humphrey found unacceptable.¹¹

THE "ASPEN" RULING AND 1976 DEBATES

In 1975, the FCC reinterpreted the equal time rule in response to a petition by the Aspen Institute, a public affairs foundation. The ruling (Aspen Institute, 55 F.C.C. 2d 697 (1975)) modified previous practice to permit debates by political candidates without regard to equal time provisions for minor and independent candidates, provided that the program qualified as a "bona fide news event," was initiated by a non-broadcast entity, and was covered live and in its entirety.¹²

Subsequently, the League of Women Voters proposed a series of 1976 primary and general election debates to be held under the auspices of its affiliated Education Fund. On August 19, 1976, an official invitation was extended to both major party candidates, and was accepted the same day by President Gerald Ford in his acceptance speech before the Republican National Convention. Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter approved the proposal one day later, and subsequent negotiations between the League and candidates' representatives led to a series of three Presidential and one Vice Presidential

⁹ Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Alexander, Herbert E., and Joel Margolis. *The Making of the Debates*. In: Bishop, George F., Robert G. Meadow, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, *The Presidential Debates: Media, Electoral, and Policy Perspectives*, ed. New York, Praeger, 1978. p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Firestone, *Legal Issues Surrounding Televised Presidential Debates*, p. 20.

debates.¹³ The 1976 debates broke with the 1960 practice and set new precedents in that they were presented in public locations, such as theaters and auditoriums, rather than in television studios, and were conducted before an audience.¹⁴

However, the three major commercial networks protested a number of arrangements agreed to by the League and the candidates' organizations. These issues included: questions of individual network cameras (banned in favor of pooled coverage); audience reaction shots (also banned in favor of wide-angle shots, but only before and after the debate; and choice of panelists (only those mutually acceptable to the League and candidate organizations). As a result of the dispute, CBS correspondents did not participate in any of the 1976 debates.¹⁵

In common with the 1960 debates, those of 1976 were widely regarded as having affected the outcome of the election (although without conclusive supporting evidence). An apparent Ford misstatement in the second forum (the President rejected the suggestion that Eastern Europe was dominated by the Soviet Union) was widely considered a major blunder that, compounded by intensive media coverage, contributed to his ultimate loss.¹⁶ Authors David Lanoue and Peter Schrott, writing in *The Joint Press Conference*, identify fear of, and attempts to avoid, verbal missteps as perhaps the major legacy of the 1976 debates:

From 1976 on, one feature of post-debate commentary would be to speculate on whether any gaffes had been committed. Further, the debates after 1976 were marked by more extensive coaching and well-packaged answers, motivated by a real fear of spontaneity.¹⁷

Estimated audience for the first debate reached an impressive total of 131 million persons, according to Neilson Organization statistics.¹⁸

¹³ Bishop et al., *The Presidential Debates*, p. 22, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22-24.

¹⁶ Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Swerdlow, *Presidential Debates*, p. 156.

1980 DEBATES

Presidential debates in 1980 were dominated by a controversy over whether Independent candidate John B. Anderson would share the podium with President Carter and his Republican opponent, Ronald Reagan. The League of Women Voters Educational Fund again offered to sponsor debates, inviting both major party candidates as well as Anderson, reasoning that his public support was at or above the 15 percent level in opinion polls that they had specified as a condition for a minor party candidate's inclusion. An initial debate was scheduled for September 21, which Reagan accepted, while President Carter declined, insisting that only he and the Republican candidate should participate. The Reagan-Anderson debate was held as scheduled, but was considered by many observers to be anti-climactic, due to the President's non-participation, and was characterized by much lower audience size than in 1976.¹⁹

As the campaign proceeded, public support for Anderson (as measured in surveys) declined, and the League sponsored a second debate, limited to Carter and Reagan. According to one source, this event attracted as many as 120 million viewers.²⁰ Although there were no serious perceived missteps by either candidate, Reagan was widely seen as having been the chief beneficiary. His advantage was attributed to a relaxed and reassuring style, an apparently successful deflection of assertions that his conservatism was too extreme, and his ability to highlight adverse economic conditions.²¹ Furthermore the one-week time period before election day afforded President Carter insufficient time for "damage control." According to Lanoue and Schrott:

The risks of debating were only magnified by the proximity of the event to the election; any mistakes would still be fresh on the minds of voters as they cast their ballots. After 1980, candidates (particularly those ahead in the polls) would take care to schedule debates well in advance of election day.²²

BROADCASTER SPONSORSHIP

An additional FCC ruling issued in 1983 (Henry Geller, 54 P.& F. Radio Reg. 2d 1246 (1983)) further loosened strictures on debate sponsorship by allowing broadcast entities to sponsor debates, and further permitted delays in

¹⁹ Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 25.

²⁰ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and David S. Birdsell. *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 120.

²¹ Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 27, 28.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 30, 31.

rebroadcasting beyond one day, as long as the debate was rerun in its entirety.²³ Although this decision has yet to affect general election debates, it almost certainly contributed to the proliferation of those held during the pre-nomination campaign in both parties over the past decade. According to one estimate, the total grew from 5 in 1980, to 14 in 1984, and more than 40 in 1988.²⁴ Many of these were sponsored by the national commercial television networks and local broadcasters, although the League of Women Voters and other groups also participated.

1984 DEBATES

Presidential debates in 1984 were the last to be sponsored by the League of Women Voters. They were also distinguished by the reappearance, apparently permanent, of Vice Presidential debates. One study of the debate phenomenon suggests that this series marked the "institutionalization" of general election debates, in that it was the first occasion (unlike the elections of 1964 and 1972) in which an incumbent President holding a substantial lead in the polls nevertheless felt constrained to debate his challenger, although he apparently had little to gain by participating.²⁵

Although Democratic nominee Walter Mondale used his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention to challenge President Reagan to debate, a format of two 90-minute Presidential and one 90-minute Vice Presidential debates was agreed to only after lengthy negotiations between the two candidates' organizations and the League of Women Voters Educational Fund. League President Dorothy Ridings later criticized the trend (arguably reinforced since 1984) in which every aspect of the debate process—including set design, program format, lighting, podium placement, and especially panel selection—had become an occasion for protracted bargaining by the campaign organizations.²⁶

In the first Presidential debate, devoted to discussion of domestic issues, President Reagan was widely perceived, in the words of one commentary, as looking and sounding "tired, even at times confused, and his performance was, at best, lackluster."²⁷ Initial perceptions of a Mondale victory in the debate were reinforced by later survey research findings, and the question of the

²³ Swerdlow, *Presidential Debates*, p. 26.

²⁴ Hellweg, Susan A., Michael Pfau, and Steven R. Brydon. *Televised Presidential Debates: Advocacy in Contemporary America*. New York, Praeger, 1992. p. 7-9.

²⁵ Kraus, Sidney. *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, 1988. p. 53, 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56, 57.

²⁷ Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 33.

President's advanced age was given prominent media attention in the two week interval between the first and second debates.

The Vice Presidential debate, held four days after the first Presidential encounter, pitted Vice President George Bush against Representative Geraldine Ferraro. Although Mondale strategists hoped it would add to the apparent boost gained after the first debate, the contest was perceived largely as a draw, significant primarily in that it was the first general election debate in which a female candidate for elected national office appeared.²⁸

After Mondale's strong showing in the first debate, his strategists hoped an equally convincing performance might put their candidate within striking distance of the President: internal polling done for the Democratic campaign showed Reagan's 14 to 15 percent lead in the popular vote narrowing to nine percent after the first confrontation.²⁹ Reagan campaign managers, believing their candidate to have been over-prepared for the first debate, pursued a more relaxed, confidence-building briefing plan. The President appeared to respond, regaining much of his poise in the second debate, which was widely regarded as a draw, and thus, in the view of many observers, sealing his reelection.³⁰

COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Continuing controversy over debate sponsorship led to studies of the question by two separate groups, one in 1985 by the Commission on National Elections at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, and another in 1986 by a Twentieth Century Fund-sponsored study group at the Harvard University Institute of Politics. Both groups reached similar conclusions: first, that the debates should be made permanent, or institutionalized, and second, that they should be jointly sponsored by the two major political parties.³¹

Both parties embraced the concept, and in early 1987 the chairs of the Democratic and Republican National Committees announced establishment of a Commission on Presidential Debates, a non-partisan, non-profit organization supported by private donations, which would sponsor future general election Presidential debates, as well as undertake a public information program

²⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁹ Moore, Jonathan. *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at '84*. Dover, MA, Auburn House, 1986. p. 216.

³⁰ Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates*, p. 63.

³¹ Hallweg et al., *Televised Presidential Debates*, p. 9.

designed to educate potential voters.³² A bi-partisan Board of Directors was nominated, and then Republican and Democratic party chairmen Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk were named co-chairs of the Commission, positions they continue to hold at the time of the present writing.

The League of Women Voters criticized the new arrangement, asserting through its president that it was a more impartial sponsor, and had gained valuable experience in sponsoring the 1976, 1980 and 1984 debates.³³

Another criticism of the Commission was that it discriminated against minor party candidates by placing debate arrangements in the hands of the major parties. A later Twentieth Century Fund study sought to address this question by establishing criteria under which candidates other than those of the Democratic or Republican parties would be invited to participate in debates. These included:

- candidate placement on the ballot in a number of States sufficient to gain a majority of electoral votes before September 1 of an election year;
- maintenance of 15 percent public support in at least three of six public opinion "trial heats" conducted by national survey research organizations between August 15 and September 1; and
- eligibility to receive Federal funding based on performance in the previous election, or campaign contributions equal to the total amount of Federal funds they would be eligible to receive by achieving five percent of the total popular vote in the upcoming November election.³⁴

1988 DEBATES

The general election debates of 1988 were the first to be held since 1960 in which an incumbent President did not participate. With the nomination open in both major parties, an unprecedentedly large number of debates were also scheduled during the primary season, with estimates ranging from 40 to 60.³⁵

³² Commission on Presidential Debates literature.

³³ Galley, Phil. Democrats and Republicans Form Panel to Hold Presidential Debates. *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1987. p. A26.

³⁴ Anderson, John B. *A Proper Institution: Guaranteeing Televised Presidential Debates*. A Twentieth Century Fund Paper. New York, Priority Press Publications, 1988. p. 42, 43.

³⁵ Hellweg et al. *Televised Presidential Debates*. p. 9; Apple, R.W. Political Debates and Their Impact on the Race. *New York Times*, April 23, 1991, p. 10.

The question of sponsorship was raised again, when both the League of Women Voters' Education Fund and the Commission on Presidential Debates proposed separate series of four general election debates. Nearly all arrangements for the eventual total of three 90-minute programs (two Presidential, one Vice Presidential) were made through protracted negotiations between the campaign organizations of the Democratic nominee, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, and his Republican opponent, Vice President George Bush. Once again, most aspects of the productions (including date, time, location, panel selection, format, sets, lighting, audience control, and others) were essentially prescribed to the proposed sponsors in a Memorandum of Understanding issued by the two campaigns. Sponsorship of the first Presidential and the Vice Presidential debates was offered to the Commission, and that of the second Presidential debate to the League.³⁶

While the Commission accepted the offer of sponsorship, the League refused to participate, citing excessive control exercised by the candidates' campaigns over program form and content. In announcing her organization's withdrawal, League president Nancy Neuman sharply criticized arrangements, saying that they reduced the debates to "campaign trail charades devoid of substance, spontaneity and honest answers to tough questions."³⁷ The Commission subsequently assumed sponsorship of the second Presidential debate.

Opinion on the value and impact of the 1988 debates varied. Veteran television journalist Walter Cronkite characterized them as "phony, part of an unconscionable fraud," while Cable News Network anchor Bernard Shaw (himself a panelist in the second Presidential debate) said 1988 "was a charade, these were not debates."³⁸ Lanoue and Schrott, on the other hand, characterized at least the first Presidential debate as "surprisingly substantive."³⁹ Dukakis was perceived by some observers as having performed better on issues of substance, while Bush a projected a "more appealing and human image."⁴⁰

The most widely reported incidents, or "gaffes", were almost certainly Democratic Vice Presidential nominee Lloyd Bensten's remarks making an unfavorable comparison between his GOP opponent, Dan Quayle, and President John Kennedy, and Dukakis' apparent failure to respond to a highly personal

³⁶ Hellweg et al. *Televised Presidential Debates*, p. 11.

³⁷ Robinson, Walter V. League Quits as Sponsor of Debate in L.A. *Boston Globe*, Oct. 4, 1988. p. 14.

³⁸ Quoted in: Ellis, John. *Nine Sundays: A Proposal for Better Presidential Campaign Coverage*. Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1991. p. 22.

³⁹ Lanoue and Schrott, *The Joint Press Conference*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

question on use of capital punishment. In the final analysis, however, the debates were described as having only limited impact on voters' decisions; one study showed that even such measurable changes in candidate perception and voter choice as did occur tended to dissipate within two weeks.⁴¹ Neilson ratings for the 1988 debates indicated that 58 percent of TV viewers watched the second Presidential debate, while the Commission on Presidential Debates estimated that 160 million Americans watched at least one of the debates.⁴²

One particular development of the 1988 debates was the emergence of the "spin" phenomenon as an important element in interpreting and attempting to characterize debates. "Spin" describes the efforts of campaign officials ("spin doctors") to present their candidate's performance in a debate in the best possible light, while denigrating the opponent's performance in order to maximize favorable coverage for their side. Such efforts, often described as "spin control" or "spin patrol," generally begin immediately following a debate, and are directed primarily at print and electronic media journalists in order to influence their reporting, and hence, the public's impression of the debate. One recent study asserts that:

The 1988 election year was the first real campaign "year of the spin doctor." Although there had been references to this form of attempted influence—either specifically or indirectly—since 1976, a sudden and very large jump in this type of reference, as included in the networks' post-debate analysis programs, took place in 1988.⁴³

The same report notes that partisan efforts:

. . . to influence media verdicts and, through the verdicts, American public opinion . . . have been going on for decades in this country and elsewhere. What is [emphasis in original] unique or new is what the technique is now called . . . and, perhaps, the aggressiveness with which those who try to "put a favorable spin" on the media reporting of a political race or event in that race.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Lanoue, David J. The "Turning Point": Viewers' Reactions to the Second 1988 Presidential Debate. *American Politics Quarterly*, v. 19, Jan. 1991. p. 80-95.

⁴² 58 Percent of Television Viewers Watched Presidential Debate. *New York Times*. Oct. 16, 1988. p. 23; Commission on Presidential Debates data.

⁴³ Lemert, James B., et al. *News Verdicts, the Debates, and Presidential Campaigns*. New York, Praeger, 1992. p. 69.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

PROPOSALS FOR PERMANENT DEBATES

Over the past decade, a number of proposals have been offered which would seek to guarantee the permanence of Presidential debates. Details of the various bills differ, but most would require debate participation by any candidate for President or Vice President who receives public funds from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund.

A wide range of arguments is cited in favor of mandatory debates: Presidential debates afford the voters an opportunity to assess a candidate's personality and proposals, and have been characterized as a form of "Presidential job interview" conducted in the presence of the American people; they are of increasing importance in a society where a vast majority of the population cites television as its primary source of election information; and they provide perhaps the only occasion during a campaign when the attention of a large portion of the American public is focused simultaneously on the election. It is also claimed that they are the only campaign information format which potentially offers sufficient time to explore issues and policies in depth, in a neutral, non-partisan forum. Finally, it is argued that, since the costs of Presidential general election campaigns are sustained through public revenues, it is entirely appropriate to require participation in such a public interest program as a condition for the receipt of campaign funds from the Federal Treasury.

Some arguments which might be raised against permanent, mandatory debates could include the following: Presidential debates are for all intents and purposes already a permanent feature of elections, having been scheduled in every campaign since 1976; the American public has come to expect debates as a regular part of Presidential election campaigns, so much so that any major candidate who declined to participate would risk an intense adverse public reaction; a legal requirement for debates might constitute excessive Federal intrusion in an area which has been historically, and satisfactorily, arranged by private negotiations among sponsoring groups, political parties, campaign organizations, and broadcast entities; and, finally, Federal sponsorship might lead to pressures for the inclusion of numerous minor party and extremist candidates.

Although permanent debates were suggested as early as 1976, Senator Bob Dole apparently introduced the first such bill, S. 3127, 96th Congress. This bill, which would have withheld public funds from Presidential candidates who refused to debate under specified circumstances, was introduced during the general election campaign of 1980, presumably in response to the refusal of President Carter to participate in a League of Women Voters-sponsored debate which included Independent candidate John Anderson. Since that time, permanent debate bills have been regularly introduced in most Congresses.

Two permanent debates bills have been introduced thus far in the 103rd Congress. The first, H.R. 2003 (National Presidential Debates Act of 1993), was

offered by Representative Edward Markey on May 5, 1993. The less complex of the two bills, it would mandate participation in three Presidential and one Vice Presidential general election campaign debates by candidates eligible to receive funds from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund. Failure to participate would render candidates of the party involved ineligible for any further payments, and would require reimbursement to the Treasury of amounts equal to payments previously made.

The second bill, H.R. 1753 (Democracy in Presidential Debates Act of 1993) was introduced by Representative Timothy Penny and others, on April 21. It requires candidates for nomination who are eligible to receive payments from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund to participate in at least one Presidential primary debate, at least 90 minutes long, to be held between January 15 of the Presidential election year and the date scheduled for the first primary election or caucus. General election Presidential candidates eligible to receive funds would be required to participate in two debates of at least 90 minutes held in September and October. Vice Presidential candidates would be required to participate in a single debate of at least 90 minutes, held between the two Presidential candidate appearances. This bill also provides for participation by minor party and independent candidates, conditioning their participation to attainment of a place on the ballot in at least 40 States, and qualification to receive payments from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund.

Congressional campaign finance reform legislation has also been used as a vehicle for establishment of permanent Presidential debates. For example, Section 803 of S. 3 in the 102nd Congress, offered as an amendment to the original bill by Senator Bob Graham, required Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates to participate in debates (four and one, respectively) as a condition for receipt of public funds. This provision was included in the conference version of S. 3 passed by both houses in 1992 and subsequently vetoed by President Bush. Similarly, both S. 3 and H.R. 3 in the 103rd Congress (leadership campaign finance reform bills in both houses) include language requiring the same level of participation for Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates.

1992 DEBATES

Three Presidential and one Vice Presidential general election debates were held in 1992, a year which was distinguished by the campaign of independent candidate Ross Perot, lengthy and contentious negotiations over the process, and the use of various formats for the several debates.

Citing growing criticism of debate content following the 1988 election, ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN offered a debate proposal in late 1991 which would have scrapped the format of questions and answers by a panel of journalists which has characterized most debates since 1960. The networks proposed, instead, a

single-moderator format, without a studio audience, in which the candidates would be able to engage each other directly, while offering free air time for the projected total of four 90-minute debates. Another objective of the networks was to avoid the prolonged negotiations between candidate organizations which have characterized debates at least since 1984 by settling on a format well in advance.⁴⁶ The League of Women Voters embraced the proposal, stating that it would produce an "unscripted debate" and would avoid charges that the question-and-answer format "allowed candidates to grandstand rather than answer hard questions, often before highly partisan audiences that cheered and jeered."⁴⁶ However, the Commission on Presidential Debates rejected the proposal, on the grounds that sponsorship of a news event by corporate entities which report the news was inappropriate.⁴⁷

On June 11, 1992, the Commission issued its own plans for the election, including three Presidential and one Vice Presidential debates, each 90 minutes long. The Commission also opted for the single-moderator format, based on its own study of alternative arrangements.⁴⁸ At about the same time, influenced by the growing likelihood of a major independent candidacy by Ross Perot, it also announced selection criteria under which third-party or independent candidates would be invited to participate in scheduled general election campaign debates. Candidate selection was to be determined by a review of several factors, including: "(1) evidence of national organization; (2) signs of national newsworthiness and competitiveness; and (3) indicators of national enthusiasm or concern, to determine whether a candidate has a realistic chance of election."⁴⁹

After his July nomination by the Democratic National Convention, Bill Clinton's campaign accepted the Commission proposal. However, on September 3, the campaign organization of his Republican opponent, President George Bush, rejected the plan, indicating, first, that they favored reducing the number of Presidential debates to two, and second, that they preferred retention of the panel/questions and answers format.⁵⁰ Clinton aides initially rejected Bush

⁴⁶ Kurtz, Howard, and Dan Balz. Bipartisan Panel Rejects Debate Proposal by Networks. *Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 1991. p. A14.

⁴⁶ Ayres, B. Drummond, Jr. Networks Seek Presidential Debate Overhaul. *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1991. p. A22.

⁴⁷ Kirk, Paul G., Jr., and Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr. Debates and the Networks' Role. *Washington Post*, Oct. 27, 1991. p. C7.

⁴⁸ Commission on Presidential Debates. *Commission on Presidential Debates Announces 1992 Plans, Releases Candidate Selection Criteria*. Press Release dated June 11, 1992.

⁴⁹ Commission on Presidential Debates. *Commission on Presidential Debates' Candidate Selection Criteria for 1992 General Election Debate Participation*. Resolution adopted June 4, 1992.

⁵⁰ Ayers, B. Drummond. Bush Rejects Panel's Plan for 3 Debates. *New York Times*, Sept. 4, 1992. p. A16.

campaign proposals to negotiate a compromise, calling on the President to adhere to the Commission's schedule and format. A period of partisan charge and counter-charge followed during which the Commission was forced to cancel the first debate, which had been scheduled for September 22.⁶¹

On September 30, the Clinton campaign agreed to discuss the debates directly with Bush representatives; following two days of intensive negotiations, a schedule and format were agreed to on October 2. The proposed program, which was quickly approved by the Commission on Presidential Debates, provided for three Presidential and one Vice Presidential meetings, each 90 minutes long, held over a period of nine days, between October 11 and 19.⁶² Both candidates also agreed to invite independent candidate Ross Perot, who had formally entered the race one day earlier.⁶³ In a departure from traditional formats, it was also determined that the first Presidential debate would be conducted by a moderator and panel of journalists, the second by a single moderator with audience questions, and the third by both moderator and panel of journalists, each responsible for half the allotted time. Finally, the Vice Presidential debate would also be conducted by a single moderator, with free-form discussion among the participants.⁶⁴

The debates attracted a sizable audience: an estimated 76 million viewers watched the Vice Presidential debate, while the first, second, and third Presidential contests were watched by 81 million, 90 million, and 99 million viewers, respectively.⁶⁵ There were none of the serious "gaffes" and few of the often seemingly rehearsed one-line retorts which frequently attracted media attention in past debates, although Perot's running mate, retired Admiral James Stockdale, was described in one account as being "no more than a bemused spectator" in the Vice Presidential debate.⁶⁶ Clinton impressed many observers with his focus (emphasizing unfavorable economic conditions), command of issues, and generally relaxed conduct. His performance in the audience participation format used for the second debate was described as particularly

⁶¹ Debate Canceled After Bush Misses Deadline for Response. *Washington Post*, Sept. 17, 1992. p. A16.

⁶² Berke, Richard L. Bush and Clinton Agree on Debates; Plan to Ask Perot. *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1992. p. 1,9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Elving, Ronald D. Clinton's Lead Holds Steady; Bush Fails to Galvanize. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, v. 50, Oct. 17, 1992. p. 3275; The Aftermath After Round Three. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, v. 50, Oct. 24, 1992. p. 3336.

⁶⁶ Broder, David S., and Guy Gugliotta. Quayle and Gore Exchange Broadside. *Washington Post*, Oct. 14, 1992. p. A14.

effective.⁵⁷ President Bush, on the other hand, was described as being disengaged and "passive," at least in the first two debates.⁵⁸ While many observers noted his more spirited performance in the final confrontation, it was described as "too little, too late" to influence the results of the election.⁵⁹ According to one account, it was independent candidate Perot who may have benefitted most from the debates, gaining increased levels of public support throughout the debate period, notwithstanding what the media and public regarded as his sometimes idiosyncratic performance.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it was Governor Clinton who weathered the debates with his comfortable lead in the polls intact, while President Bush failed to improve his position.

CONCLUSION

Presidential campaign debates have been held in connection with every election since 1976. They have been conducted under most conceivable formats and electoral circumstances: classic head-to-head confrontations between major party candidates; elections with strong independent challengers; closely contested elections, and those in which one candidate holds a substantial lead; and both incumbent-dominated contests, and those in which the Presidency is open. The independent, bi-partisan Commission on Presidential Debates has sponsored the last two series (albeit only after extensive negotiations among the campaign organizations) and appears to have become a self-sustaining institution. While controversy continues in the scholarly community over the actual effect of debates on the outcomes of Presidential elections, it is generally conceded that they have consistently attracted large audiences, serving both to acquaint potential voters with the candidates, and focus their attention on the election campaign itself. Whether the debates continue to be organized and conducted by the Commission (or some other public interest group), or whether they are established in public law, it is possible that they have become a regular, expected, and, therefore, a permanent feature of Presidential election campaigns.

⁵⁷ Elving, *Clinton's Lead Holds Steady*. p. 3275.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3274.

⁵⁹ Broder, David S. *Strong Showing by Bush May Change Little*. *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 1992. p. A1.

⁶⁰ *Aftermath of Round Three*, p. 3336. [For example, the ABC News Polling Unit noted an increase in voters intending to vote for Perot from 7 percent to 17 percent between October 11 and October 21.]

APPENDIX

**Nationally Televised General Election Presidential
and Vice Presidential Debates: 1960-1992**

Year	Date	Candidates	Party
<i>Presidential</i>			
1960	September 26	John Kennedy Richard Nixon	D R
	October 7	Kennedy and Nixon	"
	October 13	Kennedy and Nixon	"
	October 21	Kennedy and Nixon	"
1976	September 23	Jimmy Carter Gerald Ford	D R
	October 6	Carter and Ford	"
	October 22	Carter and Ford	"
1980	September 21	Ronald Reagan John Anderson	R Ind.
	October 28	Jimmy Carter Ronald Reagan	D R
1984	October 7	Walter Mondale Ronald Reagan	D R
	October 21	Mondale and Reagan	"
1988	September 25	Michael Dukakis George Bush	D R
	October 13	Dukakis and Bush	"
1992	October 11	Bill Clinton George Bush Ross Perot	D R Ind.
	October 15	Clinton, Bush, and Perot	"
	October 19	Clinton, Bush, and Perot	"

**Nationally Televised General Election Presidential
and Vice Presidential Debates: 1960-1992—Continued**

Year	Date	Candidates	Party
<i>Vice Presidential</i>			
1976	October 15	Walter Mondale Robert Dole	D R
1984	October 11	Geraldine Ferraro George Bush	D R
1988	October 5	Lloyd Bentsen Dan Quayle	D R
1992	October 13	Al Gore Dan Quayle James Stockdale	D R Ind.

Sources: 1964-1984: Swerdlow, Joel L. *Presidential Debates: 1988 and Beyond*. Washington, Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1987. p. 161-164; 1988: It's Been a Long Road Since Atlanta: A Chronology of Campaign Highlights. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*. v. 46, Nov. 5, 1988. p. 3183; 1992: Kurtz, Howard. Campaign Debates: A Contest of Styles With Just a Few Defining Moments. *Washington Post*, Oct. 9, 1992. p. A16.

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The Future of Presidential Debates

Written by Stephen Bates
Senior Fellow

Based on a meeting convened by
Clifford M. Sloan

*Based on a conference held on February 19, 1993
Cosponsored with the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy
at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government*

Contents

- Preface
 - Introduction
 - Institutionalizing Presidential Debates
 - Making Room for Third Parties
 - Structuring Debates
 - Covering Debates
 - Involving Citizens Between Elections
 - Conclusion
 - For Further Reading
 - Conference Participants
-

About the Author

Stephen Bates is a Senior Fellow of The Annenberg Washington Program. A former Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, he has also held positions as a law clerk to Judge James L. Buckley, United States Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit, and as Massachusetts Press Secretary to the George Bush 1980 Presidential Campaign. He is the author of *Battleground: The Religious Right, Its Opponents, and the Struggle for Our Schools* (Poseidon Press/Simon and Schuster, forthcoming); *If No News, Send Rumors: Anecdotes of American Journalism* (St. Martin's Press, 1989; Henry Holt paperback, 1991); *The Media and the Congress* (Publishing Horizons,

1987); and *The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television* (with Edwin Diamond) (MIT Press, 1984; revised editions, 1988 and 1992). Bates has written widely for the popular press on the topics of journalism, political advertising and First Amendment issues. He received his B.A. in Government, *magna cum laude*, from Harvard University, and a J.D., *cum laude*, from Harvard Law School.

About the Conference Convener

In February 1993, Clifford M. Sloan convened a conference cosponsored by The Annenberg Washington Program and the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard University to examine the current status and potential future of presidential debates. Sloan is a partner in the law firm of Mayer, Brown & Platt where his law practice emphasis is Supreme Court and appellate litigation. Sloan has previously served as Assistant to the Solicitor General, Associate Counsel in the Office of Independent Counsel (Iran-Contra), Law Clerk to Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, and Executive Assistant to Congressman Sidney R. Yates (D-IL). In 1986, he directed the Presidential Debates Project of the Twentieth Century Fund and Harvard University's Institute of Politics, and in 1987, he co-authored *For Great Debates* (with Newton N. Minow) (Twentieth Century Fund, 1987). Sloan is an alumnus of Harvard University and Harvard Law School.

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Introduction

"There will be no debates," Vice President Richard Nixon commanded his campaign staff in May 1960. "There can be no conversation about debates. I won't tolerate it." Two months later, without warning, Nixon announced that he *would* debate Senator John F. Kennedy. Nixon press secretary Herbert Klein later speculated that the vice president "did not want his manhood sullied by appearing as if he were afraid to debate."

Presidential debates have always been dictated by such surprising considerations. Largely at the behest of front-runners who perceived debates as unnecessary risks, no debates occurred in 1952, 1956, 1964, 1968, or 1972. The presidential candidates in every election since then have debated each other, but only after a good deal of posturing and petulance. In 1976, for instance, Governor Jimmy Carter's TV adviser declared that, in order to equalize the two candidates' heights, President Gerald Ford would have to stand in a hole in the floor; for their part, the Ford negotiators insisted that the presidential seal be affixed to the president's lectern. These extravagant demands were ultimately abandoned.

In hopes of making debates a permanent fixture of presidential campaigns, the nonprofit Commission on Presidential Debates was formed in 1987. Chaired jointly by former Democratic National Committee chairman Paul G. Kirk, Jr., and former Republican National Committee chairman Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., the Commission sponsored the presidential debates of 1988 and 1992.

By nearly all measures, the 1992 debates were an enormous success. They employed more formats, featured more candidates, reached more voters, and influenced more voting decisions than ever before.

Impressive as the debates themselves were, though, the process leading up to them seemed as chaotic and chancy as ever. The Bush campaign rejected the Commission's debate plan, and for a time President Bush was perceived to be angling to avoid debates entirely. Then, a month before the election, Bush and Clinton representatives negotiated a new debate plan, which the Commission accepted.

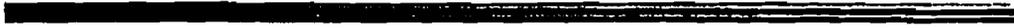
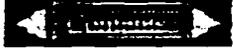
A campaign without debates would have been particularly lamentable in 1992. *Newsweek* aptly termed it "The Year of the Voter." All year long, voters forcefully directed candidates, handlers, and journalists to concentrate on issues and plans rather than image and horse race. Voters penetrated the political process via the news media (Larry King's call-in programs, ABC's televised focus groups) and via the campaigns (Jerry Brown's 800 number, televised conversations between voters and candidates). It was no accident that in the most viewed and talked-about presidential debate of 1992, the voters asked the questions.

In order to distill the lessons of 1992, The Annenberg Washington Program and the Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard sponsored a conference on the future of presidential debates. The discussion focused on five questions. How can we assure that the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees will debate each other? Under what circumstances should independent candidates also participate? How should debates be structured? Beyond debates, how can the media

<http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/debate/debate02.htm>

help voters become better informed and more attentive? Finally, after the ballots are cast, what can the media and others do to keep voters involved?

These questions merit comprehensive analysis between now and 1996. We're pleased to have helped start the conversation.



Institutionalizing Presidential Debates

In an NBC interview in 1962, Richard Nixon declared that "debates between the presidential candidates are a fixture, and in all the elections in the future we are going to have debates." In truth, however, no debates occurred in the next three campaigns, and Nixon himself had a hand in forestalling debates in two of the three, 1968 and 1972. "It's poor tactics when you're running so far ahead," the plain-spoken Spiro Agnew told reporters in 1968.

Candidates did debate in 1976 and in every presidential election since, but only after haggling over timing, format, questioners, camera angles, risers, notes, stools, props, and a host of other issues. The League of Women Voters, which sponsored the 1980 debates, said that the Carter and Reagan campaigns negotiated "to the minutest detail" and "threatened to walk away from debating at many turns if they did not get what they wanted."

This ritualized "debate over debates" unfortunately dominates news coverage, noted Clifford M. Sloan, coauthor of the Twentieth Century Fund report *For Great Debates*. "At the very time when the public is tuning into the campaign and the candidates," he said, "the media coverage is consumed with reports about the positioning and bickering and jousting."

But others at the conference on presidential debates responded that this jousting is inescapable, even worthwhile. Presidential Debates Commission cochair Paul G. Kirk, Jr., said that the voters "learned a lot" from the candidates' posturing in 1992. *Newsweek* senior editor Jonathan Alter said that no matter how extensive the preplanning may be, disputes will inevitably arise over debate structure and format; the press, with its insatiable appetite for campaign news, will play up these disputes. "If there isn't a good debate over debates," he said, "the press will essentially create one." "It's unavoidable," agreed Ed Turner, executive vice president of CNN, "and the bright side of it is, it reminds people to tune in."

Sloan also contended that the brinkmanship raises "the very real threat that there will be no debates." Even though the candidates in the last five elections have ultimately reached accord on debate plans, negotiations may not always succeed. Sooner or later, intransigence, ill will, or a fundamental dispute could preclude debates.

Growing out of two studies, a possible solution to this problem emerged in the mid-1980s: the creation of an independent organization to sponsor presidential debates. With seed money from the Twentieth Century Fund, the bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates was formed in 1987. Its cochairs are former Republican National Committee chairman Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., and former Democratic National Committee chairman Paul Kirk. "The thought was," Sloan said, "that the bipartisan commission would be able to hammer out the details and logistics of the debate well in advance of the heat of the campaign, and that the candidates would commit themselves to the arrangements."

But the Commission's effect on the process hasn't proved quite so soothing. For 1988, the Commission proposed three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate. The Bush campaign summarily rejected the plan and proceeded to negotiate directly with the Dukakis

<http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/debate/debate03.htm>

campaign. They agreed on two presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate, which the Commission sponsored.

Planning for the 1992 debates followed the same pattern. The Commission proposed three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate, each with a single moderator. The Clinton campaign accepted the plan, but the Bush campaign rejected it. "We did not like the proposal," said Bobby R. Burchfield, general counsel of the Bush campaign. "Historically, the presidential campaigns had negotiated with each other to set the terms of the debates. That's what we were after."

Representatives of the two campaigns ultimately met to negotiate, with no Commission representatives present. Of the principal issues – when, where, and how the debates would be held – *when* proved to be the major sticking point. The Clinton campaign wanted early debates, whereas the Bush campaign wanted debates close to the election. "Those were the subject of about thirty-six hours of jousting," Burchfield remembered. "Once we got the schedule nailed down, everything else began to fall into place very quickly." The thirty-six page final agreement called for four debates in a nine-day period, commencing in less than two weeks. The debates would feature four different formats, and they would include independent candidate H. Ross Perot.

The Bush and Clinton campaigns then invited the Commission to sponsor the agreed-upon debates. Initially the Commission was unsure about whether, on such short notice, it would be able to orchestrate one of the planned debates, a town hall format with citizen questioners. The Commission also had doubts about whether Perot, whose support was down to about 7 percent in the polls, qualified for inclusion. Ultimately, though, the Commission agreed to hew to the candidates' plan and sponsor the debates.

This successful outcome was hardly foreordained. The candidates' last-minute negotiations could have deadlocked over timing, Perot's participation, or other issues. Even after the campaigns had reached accord, "these debates almost didn't get on the air because the decisions were made so late," said Robert McFarland, deputy to the president of NBC News. Because of an existing contractual obligation to broadcast a baseball game, in fact, CBS was unable to carry the first debate.

The haphazard nature of the 1992 process thus raises the question of whether the status quo is sufficient. Should something more be done to institutionalize debates?

Congressman Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) believes so. Markey has introduced legislation to require candidates to debate as a condition of receiving federal campaign funds. Under this proposal, a campaign could get the \$55 million in federal funds for the general election only by agreeing to take part in five debates (four presidential and one vice-presidential). In Markey's view, participating in debates "is the least the candidates can do" in exchange for federal funds.

Former independent candidate John Anderson endorsed the Markey bill, though he said he wished it provided for the inclusion of independent candidates in the mandatory debates. He agreed with Markey that "the taxpayers of this country have a right to expect that candidates will be willing to engage in public debate" in exchange for federal funding.

Others, however, found fault with the bill on several grounds. Forcing someone to speak, even if only as a condition of receiving a government benefit, raises serious First Amendment questions. In light of the accelerating changes in technology and programming, legislation might shackle candidates to a structure that will quickly be outmoded. "If such legislation is deemed to be appropriate," said

Marvin Kalb, director of the Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard, "can language be found to compel participation only for 1996, and then come back with parallel legislation in '97 if it all goes well?" In addition, the statute might prove unenforceable as a practical matter, given the Federal Election Commission's (FEC) slow pace.

In addition, the legislation may be unnecessary. "Debates are already institutionalized," said Bev Lindsey of the Clinton campaign. The Bush campaign's Burchfield agreed, saying that "the American people now have come to expect and demand debates." When he was perceived to be ducking debates, President Bush was dogged by Clinton supporters wearing chicken costumes; the effect, Frank Fahrenkopf said, was "disastrous" for the Bush campaign.

Instead of mandating debates, some people favor retooling the Commission on Presidential Debates. "A bipartisan commission is inadequate when a Ross Perot is running," said Kalb. "It is not a bi- or tripartisan commission that is needed, but a neutral commission composed of representatives of both major parties, network executives, scholarly experts, and representatives of other full-blown presidential campaigns." Ross Clayton Mulford, the Perot campaign's general counsel, also favored a "nonpartisan or independent" commission. It should include representatives of even "the small and fringe-party candidates," he said, because the major parties may "have a vested interest in preventing the rise of third parties." John Anderson proposed a different approach: a nonpartisan Corporation for Presidential Debates, modeled on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with a board composed of distinguished citizens.

But others consider such changes pointless. "With respect to the composition of the Commission, it really makes no difference, though it makes a very convenient whipping boy," said Paul Kirk, cochair of the Commission. "It's not who serves; it's how they serve and how they conduct their business."

Another proposal is to shift control of the debates to the networks, which sponsored the 1960 debates. In September 1991, the networks offered to sponsor the 1992 debates. Then the Commission stepped forward with its plan, which became the focus of discussions. "While we worked together and worked together well," said Joe Peyronnin, vice president and assistant to the president of CBS News, "I'm disappointed that the candidates were able to manipulate and control these important events."

But Richard C. Wald, senior vice president of ABC News, said that the networks shouldn't constrain the presidential candidates: "It is not our job to tell the candidates what to do."

Yet another approach is to try to strengthen the Commission's hand. "Would it help if the Democratic and Republican parties renewed their commitment to presidential debates and expressed their support for the Commission on Presidential Debates?" asked Clifford Sloan. "Would it help if the parties included in their platforms planks requiring their candidates to participate in presidential debates?"

Not very much, suggested Bev Lindsey of the Clinton campaign. Institutionalized though debates are, she said, the campaigns and the candidates still "want to be intimately involved" in planning them.

THE MAKING OF THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Bev Lindsey

Debate Coordinator, Clinton/Gore Campaign

The debate format that turned out to be the most popular was the town hall meeting, which was not in the Commission's proposal. The Commission staff was not pleased when we presented the plan to them. It was a format that they had not produced before, and no one was sure about lights, sound, how it would all work. But we were fairly adamant.

To their credit, it was pulled off without a hitch. If we hadn't had the Commission behind us, with all the technological and infrastructure issues dealt with ahead of time, I'm not sure we would have been able to pull it off.

Ross Clayton Mulford

General Counsel, United We Stand America (Perot)

We joined the race on Thursday, October 1. The Commission was meeting that Friday and Saturday to decide whether we should be in the debates. We made repeated calls to [Commission executive director] Janet Brown, which she, probably intelligently, stopped taking.

We then turned our attention to the two campaigns. By Monday morning we received a fax draft of the agreement. It specified that both we and the Commission would be invited on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. So I issued a press release and filed a letter accepting the invitation, inquiring as to whether the Commission had also accepted, and suggesting that we would find another sponsor if need be.

It was absolutely appropriate for us to be in the debates. I think the popularity of the debates was in no small part due to Mr. Perot's presence.

Paul G. Kirk, Jr.

Cochair, Commission on Presidential Debates

The Commission has an independent, arm's-length advisory committee to decide on the criteria for inviting candidates to participate in presidential debates. I wasn't in the room when this committee met, but I can imagine people saying, "Ross Perot has more money than Bill Clinton and George Bush combined. He was leading them both in the polls in his first incarnation. Now he's back and he says he's going to spend \$5 million for two half-hours before the debates. He's at 7 percent in the polls, but no doubt there is a Perot phenomenon out there."

MANDATING DEBATES

Edward J. Markey

U.S. House of Representatives (D-Mass.)

The debates are truly a national event. Like the Super Bowl and the World Series, they give Americans a sense of a shared experience. And they build a sense of enthusiasm and anticipation about the election, drawing people to the polls.

Unfortunately, it has not been smooth sailing. There were no debates between 1964 and 1972, and each year since 1980, the debates have been threatened by campaign posturing. This year the Bush campaign spent weeks avoiding debates, only to embrace them at the last minute.

Senator Bob Graham of Florida and I have a solution to this quad-rennial wrangle. Within the next several days we will reintroduce our bill that requires campaigns that take federal funds to engage in four presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate. Last year voters shelled out \$110 million in general-election funds. It seems to me that five debates is the least the candidates can do in return.

The voters want these debates, and the reluctance of the major parties to embrace them is one of the reasons that too many voters have lost faith in the political process.

Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr.

Cochair, Commission on Presidential Debates

I've looked at Congressman Markey's bill, and I'm against it for two reasons.

If we want to keep politics out of the negotiations for presidential debates, we certainly don't want Congress setting, by statute, the provisions for debates. The original bill in the last Congress actually stated how long the debates were going to be, the subject matter, and so forth.

Secondly, and more importantly, candidates have a First Amendment right not to debate. They have to bear the consequences of that. If you don't want to debate, that's fine -- but you'd better be prepared to tell the American people why not, and they'll pass judgment.

Bobby R. Burchfield

General Counsel, Bush/Quayle Campaign

The intentions are good, but Congressman Markey's legislation raises a number of very difficult problems.

First, who determines what is a reasonable package of presidential debates? Unless the federal government is going to set up or statutorily sanction a commission to supervise these debates, numerous entities will submit proposals.

Second, if a statutory entity is created, it would assume the responsibility for setting the locations, times, formats, panelists, and moderators of the debates. The presidential candidates themselves have historically held this authority, and I believe that most of them would be reluctant to relinquish it.

Finally, under the bill, the Federal Election Commission determines whether a candidate has fulfilled his pledge to debate. Those of you who have dealt with the FEC know that speed is not something it is known for. Moreover, bear in mind that the candidates are rapidly spending the money. There is simply no way that you can get it back once the candidates have it in their hands.



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Congressman Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) believes so. Markey has introduced legislation to require candidates to debate as a condition of receiving federal campaign funds. Under this proposal, a campaign could get the \$55 million in federal funds for the general election only by agreeing to take part in five debates (four presidential and one vice-presidential). In Markey's view, participating in debates "is the least the candidates can do" in exchange for federal funds.

Former independent candidate John Anderson endorsed the Markey bill, though he said he wished it provided for the inclusion of independent candidates in the mandatory debates. He agreed with Markey that "the taxpayers of this country have a right to expect that candidates will be willing to engage in public debate" in exchange for federal funding.

Others, however, found fault with the bill on several grounds. Forcing someone to speak, even if only as a condition of receiving a government benefit, raises serious First Amendment questions. In light of the accelerating changes in technology and programming, legislation might shackle candidates to a structure that will quickly be outmoded. "If such legislation is deemed to be appropriate," said

Marvin Kalb, director of the Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard, "can language be found to compel participation only for 1996, and then come back with parallel legislation in '97 if it all goes well?" In addition, the statute might prove unenforceable as a practical matter, given the Federal Election Commission's (FEC) slow pace.

In addition, the legislation may be unnecessary. "Debates are already institutionalized," said Bev Lindsey of the Clinton campaign. The Bush campaign's Burchfield agreed, saying that "the American people now have come to expect and demand debates." When he was perceived to be ducking debates, President Bush was dogged by Clinton supporters wearing chicken costumes; the effect, Frank Fahrenkopf said, was "disastrous" for the Bush campaign.

Instead of mandating debates, some people favor retooling the Commission on Presidential Debates. "A bipartisan commission is inadequate when a Ross Perot is running," said Kalb. "It is not a bi- or tripartisan commission that is needed, but a neutral commission composed of representatives of both major parties, network executives, scholarly experts, and representatives of other full-blown presidential campaigns." Ross Clayton Mulford, the Perot campaign's general counsel, also favored a "nonpartisan or independent" commission. It should include representatives of even "the small and fringe-party candidates," he said, because the major parties may "have a vested interest in preventing the rise of third parties." John Anderson proposed a different approach: a nonpartisan Corporation for Presidential Debates, modeled on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with a board composed of distinguished citizens.

But others consider such changes pointless. "With respect to the composition of the Commission, it really makes no difference, though it makes a very convenient whipping boy," said Paul Kirk, cochair of the Commission. "It's not who serves; it's how they serve and how they conduct their business."

Another proposal is to shift control of the debates to the networks, which sponsored the 1960 debates. In September 1991, the networks offered to sponsor the 1992 debates. Then the Commission stepped forward with its plan, which became the focus of discussions. "While we worked together and worked together well," said Joe Peyronnin, vice president and assistant to the president of CBS News, "I'm disappointed that the candidates were able to manipulate and control these important events."

But Richard C. Wald, senior vice president of ABC News, said that the networks shouldn't constrain the presidential candidates: "It is not our job to tell the candidates what to do."

Yet another approach is to try to strengthen the Commission's hand. "Would it help if the Democratic and Republican parties renewed their commitment to presidential debates and expressed their support for the Commission on Presidential Debates?" asked Clifford Sloan. "Would it help if the parties included in their platforms planks requiring their candidates to participate in presidential debates?"

Not very much, suggested Bev Lindsey of the Clinton campaign. Institutionalized though debates are, she said, the campaigns and the candidates still "want to be intimately involved" in planning them.

THE MAKING OF THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Bev Lindsey

Debate Coordinator, Clinton/Gore Campaign

The debate format that turned out to be the most popular was the town hall meeting, which was not in the Commission's proposal. The Commission staff was not pleased when we presented the plan to them. It was a format that they had not produced before, and no one was sure about lights, sound, how it would all work. But we were fairly adamant.

To their credit, it was pulled off without a hitch. If we hadn't had the Commission behind us, with all the technological and infrastructure issues dealt with ahead of time, I'm not sure we would have been able to pull it off.

Ross Clayton Mulford

General Counsel, United We Stand America (Perot)

We joined the race on Thursday, October 1. The Commission was meeting that Friday and Saturday to decide whether we should be in the debates. We made repeated calls to [Commission executive director] Janet Brown, which she, probably intelligently, stopped taking.

We then turned our attention to the two campaigns. By Monday morning we received a fax draft of the agreement. It specified that both we and the Commission would be invited on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. So I issued a press release and filed a letter accepting the invitation, inquiring as to whether the Commission had also accepted, and suggesting that we would find another sponsor if need be.

It was absolutely appropriate for us to be in the debates. I think the popularity of the debates was in no small part due to Mr. Perot's presence.

Paul G. Kirk, Jr.

Cochair, Commission on Presidential Debates

The Commission has an independent, arm's-length advisory committee to decide on the criteria for inviting candidates to participate in presidential debates. I wasn't in the room when this committee met, but I can imagine people saying, "Ross Perot has more money than Bill Clinton and George Bush combined. He was leading them both in the polls in his first incarnation. Now he's back and he says he's going to spend \$5 million for two half-hours before the debates. He's at 7 percent in the polls, but no doubt there is a Perot phenomenon out there."

MANDATING DEBATES

Edward J. Markey

U.S. House of Representatives (D-Mass.)

The debates are truly a national event. Like the Super Bowl and the World Series, they give Americans a sense of a shared experience. And they build a sense of enthusiasm and anticipation about the election, drawing people to the polls.

Unfortunately, it has not been smooth sailing. There were no debates between 1964 and 1972, and each year since 1980, the debates have been threatened by campaign posturing. This year the Bush campaign spent weeks avoiding debates, only to embrace them at the last minute.

Senator Bob Graham of Florida and I have a solution to this quad-rennial wrangle. Within the next several days we will reintroduce our bill that requires campaigns that take federal funds to engage in four presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate. Last year voters shelled out \$110 million in general-election funds. It seems to me that five debates is the least the candidates can do in return.

The voters want these debates, and the reluctance of the major parties to embrace them is one of the reasons that too many voters have lost faith in the political process.

Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr.

Cochair, Commission on Presidential Debates

I've looked at Congressman Markey's bill, and I'm against it for two reasons.

If we want to keep politics out of the negotiations for presidential debates, we certainly don't want Congress setting, by statute, the provisions for debates. The original bill in the last Congress actually stated how long the debates were going to be, the subject matter, and so forth.

Secondly, and more importantly, candidates have a First Amendment right not to debate. They have to bear the consequences of that. If you don't want to debate, that's fine -- but you'd better be prepared to tell the American people why not, and they'll pass judgment.

Bobby R. Burchfield

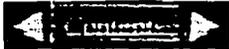
General Counsel, Bush/Quayle Campaign

The intentions are good, but Congressman Markey's legislation raises a number of very difficult problems.

First, who determines what is a reasonable package of presidential debates? Unless the federal government is going to set up or statutorily sanction a commission to supervise these debates, numerous entities will submit proposals.

Second, if a statutory entity is created, it would assume the responsibility for setting the locations, times, formats, panelists, and moderators of the debates. The presidential candidates themselves have historically held this authority, and I believe that most of them would be reluctant to relinquish it.

Finally, under the bill, the Federal Election Commission determines whether a candidate has fulfilled his pledge to debate. Those of you who have dealt with the FEC know that speed is not something it is known for. Moreover, bear in mind that the candidates are rapidly spending the money. There is simply no way that you can get it back once the candidates have it in their hands.



Making Room for Third Parties

In 1960, none of the minor candidates on the presidential ballot sought to participate in the network-sponsored debates. In subsequent debate years, however, independent candidates have repeatedly sued in court or petitioned the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to gain entry to the debates, always unsuccessfully. In one campaign, in addition, a candidate justified his refusal to debate by blaming the third-party candidate: Richard Nixon asserted in 1968 that a debate featuring George Wallace would imperil the nation's two-party system.

In 1980, the League of Women Voters decided to include any independent candidate who had at least 15 percent support in national polls. Illinois Congressman John Anderson initially met this requirement, and the League invited him to a September 21 debate. But President Carter, asserting that Anderson was "primarily a creation of the press," refused to participate, so Anderson and Reagan debated alone. Thereafter, Anderson's support ebbed below the 15 percent mark. A week before the election, Reagan and Carter debated without him.

In June 1992, at a time when independent Ross Perot was leading in the polls, the Commission on Presidential Debates adopted new candidate selection criteria for the 1992 debates. The Commission said that it would allow independent candidates to participate only if they "have a realistic chance of winning the general election," as demonstrated by "(1) evidence of national organization, (2) signs of national newsworthiness and competitiveness, and (3) indicators of national enthusiasm or concern."

Perot's support dwindled over the summer, and he left the race. In October, he reentered. The Commission, with the help of an advisory committee chaired by Harvard political scientist Richard E. Neustadt, had to decide whether to include him in the debates.

Polls showed Perot's support at about 7 percent and dropping. "I was very concerned about our ability to get into the debates under the criteria that the Commission was using," Perot counsel Mulford remembered.

The Commission told the Bush and Clinton campaigns that it intended to resolve the Perot question by applying its preset criteria. "If they say Perot in, Perot in," said cochair Paul Kirk. "If they say Perot out, Perot out. And if you don't like it, either campaign, then you'll have to find another sponsor." Evidently willing to find another sponsor if necessary, the Bush and Clinton campaigns invited Perot to participate without waiting for the Commission to decide. Managers of each campaign believed that Perot's presence would help their own candidate.

Then, despite Perot's low poll standing, the Commission's advisory committee recommended including him in the debates. The Commission adopted the recommendation and sponsored the debates. For the first time, both major-party presidential candidates debated with a third candidate.

Despite Perot's inclusion in the 1992 debates, some people believe that the process remains biased against independent candidates. Andrew Jay Schwartzman of the Media Access Project said, "I wonder if the seeming ease with which the Perot candidacy was accommodated this season may be illusory. He had a tremendous amount of money and a unique set of political circumstances that

<http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/debate/debate04.htm>

compelled inclusion."

The two parties shouldn't be gatekeepers, admitting some independent candidates and excluding others, said Marvin Kalb of the Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard. Fahrenkopf responded that the national party committees wield "absolutely no influence whatsoever" over the Commission, as a matter of law as well as prudence.

Some of the factors that the Commission relied on were also criticized. Bill Rosenberg of Drexel University said that the relevant polling question may be "Do you want to hear this candidate's point of view?" rather than "Are you planning to vote for this candidate?" Perot counsel Mulford said that he doesn't believe that the ability to finance a campaign should qualify a candidate for inclusion in debates, though "we were glad they were using that as an indication" in 1992. To some critics, as Ellen Hume of the Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard pointed out, the Commission's criteria place "far too much power in the hands of the entrenched establishment -- the two parties, the national news media, and the pollsters."

One solution might be to include independent candidates in some joint appearances. John Anderson suggested that a Corporation on Presidential Debates could sponsor discussions devoted to particular issues, in which single-issue candidates would also participate. "You have to broaden this beyond simply the format of presidential debates," Anderson said.

As for debates, Anderson observed that some candidates simply must be excluded. "I looked once, and 275 people had registered with the Federal Election Commission their intention to be a candidate for president," he said. "We can't have 275 people crowding the debate platform." But, he added, the 1992 debates demonstrated that "there's nothing disruptive" about a three-person debate.

Michael Beschloss, a historian and Annenberg Washington Program Senior Fellow, urged the Commission to "err on the side of making it easy" for independent candidates to participate in debates. Commission cochair Paul Kirk responded that standards mustn't be too lenient. "The mission of the Commission on Presidential Debates is not to provide candidates not yet known with a springboard to leap into the national spotlight in the last month," he said.

In the years to come, Mulford predicted, the Commission may be forced to face the issue more frequently. "You are going to see an increase in the number of people making direct communications to voters," he said. "You may have a fracturing of the voting population into smaller support pockets for different people."

Michael R. Beschloss
Senior Fellow, Annenberg Washington Program

Third parties have been a crucial factor in a number of elections. Because of third-party candidates, 40 percent of the presidents elected since 1840 lacked a popular-vote majority, which affected their presidencies. In 1856 the Republicans got one-third of the popular vote and eleven states; four years later, they elected Abraham Lincoln. When Theodore Roosevelt ran in 1912 as the Bull Moose candidate, he got 88 electoral votes and changed the outcome of the election.

If you keep third-party candidates out of debates, you are depressing and in certain cases removing the contribution that they have made throughout history. They tend to check the effectiveness of the main parties. They also tend to bring issues onto the national agenda that the major-party candidates sometimes avoid. Finally, competition is healthy in all things. Third-party candidates in presidential debates will have the effect, ultimately, not of weakening the two-party system, but of strengthening it.

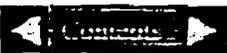
John Anderson

Independent presidential candidate, 1980

I do not believe that the criteria for inclusion of third-party or independent candidates should be left to the two parties. Instead, we ought to have an analogue to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The Corporation for Presidential Debates would involve a distinguished board of citizens across the country, people beyond political ambition. They would establish definite criteria.

It would be legitimate to require that a candidate be on the ballot in enough states so that he could theoretically win a majority in the electoral college. Ballot access laws are still tough. Gene McCarthy started the battle in 1976, and in 1980 we fought all the way to the Supreme Court for the right to be on 50 state ballots. I never sent Ross Perot a bill for the legal expenses I incurred in 1980, but I was tempted.

In addition to ballot access, I would suggest between a 5 and 10 percent showing in national polls on Labor Day. There might also be consideration given to whether they had at least a modicum of political organization in various states that, again, would add up to a majority in the electoral college. And there might be consideration given to their having a threshold of financial support.



Structuring Debates

During the planning of the first presidential debates in 1960, there was talk of having nonjournalists do some of the questioning. Labor leaders and civil-rights activists sought to be included. The Nixon campaign suggested taking questions from voters, either by phone or by remote cameras set up around the country. But the networks refused. In the 1960 debates, as well as in all subsequent ones through 1988, panels of journalists questioned the candidates.

For 1992, the Commission on Presidential Debates proposed an innovation: eliminating the panel of reporters, and instead having a single moderator for each debate. But the Bush campaign rejected the proposal and proceeded to negotiate an agreement with the Clinton campaign. Reportedly, the Republicans favored panels of journalists, on the theory that they would ask Clinton more questions about the draft; and the Democrats favored audience questioners in a town hall style, a format that Clinton had excelled at during the primaries. The campaigns compromised on four debates with four different formats: a panel of journalists, a single moderator, a combination of panel and single moderator, and a town meeting.

One wrinkle arose in choosing the reporters to participate as questioners. Each campaign had a veto right over proposed media participants, which prompted several prominent journalists and news outlets to announce that, if invited, they would decline to participate. Candidates had played a role in choosing the questioners in every previous debate except 1960, and some journalists had refused to take part in 1984 and 1988 – some protesting the campaigns' involvement in selection, and others believing that the reporter's role is to cover campaign events, not to participate in them. The boycott "is now catching on," said *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter. "I think large numbers of reporters and their news organizations will, as a matter of policy, not be able to participate."

Of the four debates of 1992, the debate in Richmond was the most talked-about and the most heavily viewed. In that town hall debate, moderator Carole Simpson of ABC News took questions from an audience of voters.

Many people, Simpson said, have told her that the Richmond debate was "one of the most important, defining moments" in the campaign for them. In her view, voters are eager to see other voters talking with the candidates. "They want that connectedness, and I hope that the town meeting format will be institutionalized."

Others, however, suggested that the town hall format isn't ideal. Jonathan Alter said that it doesn't force the candidates to explain how they will govern. By 1996, predicted Jennifer Lawson, an executive vice president of PBS, the town meeting may be "so overused that we will want to evolve toward something entirely different." CNN's Ed Turner agreed that "the town hall will become a bit tiresome."

Some speakers contended that different formats serve different but equally important objectives. "We still need professional journalists with lots of expertise in the candidates' histories, records, and flip-flops," Carole Simpson said. "I favor a combination of town hall and panel," said CNN's Turner. "Town hall, because people like to watch people, and a panel of journalists, because there must be

<http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/debate/debate05.htm>

follow-up -- these people have to be pinned down."

The voters "liked the variety of formats" in 1992, according to Diana Carlin, assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas and a member of the advisory board of the Commission on Presidential Debates. In focus groups held in seventeen cities, Carlin said, voters rated the town hall format highly, "because the questions were being asked by real, live voters." Those questions, she added, reflected voters' concerns to a much greater degree than did the journalists' questions at other debates. At the same time, however, focus group respondents valued follow-up questions that "nail the candidates down on specifics."

The respondents voiced other suggestions, Carlin said. They preferred single moderators to panels. They recommended that each debate address a smaller range of topics in greater depth. They wanted the debates to continue over a longer period in the campaign. "They also wanted some direct cross-examination between or among the candidates, chances for them to ask one another questions." But they were displeased by the blustery exchanges at the vice-presidential debate. "In fact, they even suggested that the moderator be able to turn the microphones off and on to make sure that people were polite."

University of Virginia political scientist Michael Cornfield offered a more far-reaching suggestion. He advised abolishing the vice-presidential debate, because "it serves no purpose other than to give the writers on 'Saturday Night Live' material," and putting in its place a debate between the leading candidates for Speaker of the House and Senate Majority Leader. Limiting debates to presidential candidates "perpetuates the myth that presidents run the government," Cornfield said.

Carole Simpson

Senior Correspondent, ABC News

Moderator of the October 15, 1992 debate

I have been stopped almost every place I go by people who want to talk about the debate. Airline pilots, salesclerks, waiters and waitresses, taxi drivers, men working jackhammers, car wash attendants, even convicts -- I get a lot of prison mail.

I have heard many people say that the man with the ponytail who called on the candidates to end the mudslinging expressed their sentiments exactly. Like the Richmond audience, they wanted to hear about the issues.

Scores of people have mentioned the young black woman who asked how the national debt had personally affected the candidates. You will remember that the question was not phrased as well as it could have been, and Bush said, "I don't get it." I tried to help him by suggesting that I thought she meant the economy and the recession. He went on to talk about his grandchildren and a black church with pregnant teenagers. I felt sorry for him. It was a question that I thought he could have hit out of the park, and he just did not connect. A lot of people, especially young ones, said to me that right then and there, that decided the election for them.

I remember the criticism of the debate. I was lambasted for acting like a schoolmarm. I

was accused of manipulating the debate. The questions from the audience were called vacuous, obvious, soft.

Well, excuse me! This was the people's debate. Those were the people's questions. Isn't that what the election is all about, the people and their decision on who they want to lead them? I was distressed by my colleagues' snobbery, but in the court of public opinion the second presidential debate was the clear winner.

Jonathan Alter

Senior Editor, Newsweek

Carole did a wonderful job in the Richmond debate, but it has been overrated as a format. You'll also have a situation, if Clinton runs for reelection, where the town meeting format is his fireside chat. They think this format best suits Bill Clinton, and so they will push for as many town meeting debates as they can. The question will be raised whether that gives the incumbent an unfair advantage.

I prefer the Hal Bruno and Jim Lehrer debates in terms of eliciting the most useful information about how a candidate would govern. To me, that is still the most under-covered and underanalyzed dimension of presidential campaign reportage.

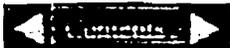
The key question now is how could Clinton have proposed an investment strategy that would also reduce the deficit and not raise taxes on the middle class, how he would square that circle. The only time Clinton had to grapple with that issue was in that last debate, under questioning from Jim Lehrer.

Diana Carlin

Assistant Professor of Communication Studies, University of Kansas

The Richmond format was rated very highly by members of our focus groups, not so much because you had a town hall meeting, but because the questions were being asked by real, live voters. There was a sentiment that the media has its opportunities day in and day out to ask questions, and that often those questions deal with things that are not high on the public agenda.

Research has shown that many of the questions asked in the debates since 1960 don't register with what opinion polls say are on people's minds. But the Richmond debate, to a question, was consistent with what focus group members had told us they would ask if they could be there.



Covering Debates

The "strange" and "weird" political year, as George Bush called it, also proved to be a quirky media year. "Who would have predicted, even in 1988," Congressman Markey said, "that Larry King, Phil Donahue, and Tabitha Soren of MTV would wield nearly as much influence in presidential politics as Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, and Tom Brokaw?" Each voter could customize his campaign information, Markey added: "The recipe might include a little MTV, perhaps a talk show or two, some CNN, and maybe a dash of network news."

Along with giving voters more options, the press paid more attention to voters in its campaign coverage. James M. Bernstein, a journalism professor at Indiana University, studied debate-related coverage and found "a greater focus on the importance to voters" in 1992. While the two campaigns were negotiating debate arrangements, news coverage stressed that the wrangling was forcing voters to wait. In post-debate analysis, Bernstein said, ABC devoted as much air time to a focus group of undecided voters as it devoted to its own correspondents.

Even so, the audience still wants expert analysis, according to Jennifer Lawson of PBS. Her network's post-debate analysis "got an incredibly large audience," she said. "That suggests to us that there's this continuing hunger, not only for the debates, but also for programs that help people think about what happened in a thoughtful way."

The attention paid to voters had another effect on coverage of debates, according to Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek*. "Spin is dead," he declared. Rather than listening to the campaign spin-controllers, reporters now listen to the electorate via instant polls. "The press is very wary of drawing firm conclusions in the immediate aftermath of a debate until they see how the people are responding."

Looking ahead to 1996, Joe Peyronnin said that CBS will try to offer a variety of information and formats. The morning program may use town meetings to discuss issues, and, as in 1992, air lengthy interviews with the candidates. The evening news will provide more in-depth reporting and background than in years past. The magazine programs will more frequently address campaign topics.

As another way of involving the audience, Peyronnin said that CBS hopes to do more with interactive technology, which allows viewers to express their opinions via telephone. ABC's Wald, however, questioned the merit of such expressions of opinion. The calls may represent an interested minority, he said, and not a majority. The approach may also imply that opinion is firmly set, whereas in fact "people reconsider constantly."

Other network executives are also looking ahead to 1996. Ed Turner of CNN hopes to achieve "a more civilized treatment of the primaries." PBS wants to look more closely at "how the media plays a key role in this whole process now," according to Jennifer Lawson. Susan Swain said that C-SPAN will "do more and we're going to do it earlier." In fact, she added, C-SPAN will probably start broadcasting from New Hampshire soon, "because we've heard from the governor of the state that there are presidential candidates already plying the trails."

On one issue that occasioned much handwringing in 1988 and 1992 – the brevity of soundbites on the evening news – the executives foresaw little change. The networks may air entire speeches or extended excerpts, CNN's Turner said, but not in the evening newscasts. "The nine-second thing doesn't trouble me," he said. "What troubles me is, are we as journalists getting the essence of the story, be it nine seconds or ninety-nine seconds?" ABC's Wald agreed. He noted that his network offers extended analysis on "American Agenda" and "Nightline," "but the criticisms coagulate around the evening news programs, which are what they are – they aren't going to change very much."

Marvin Kalb championed the Shorenstein Barone Center's "Nine Sundays" proposal, which envisions two presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate, five issue discussions between individual candidates and panels of reporters, and, on the final Sunday before the election, closing speeches by the candidates. At least in 1992, responded Peyronnin of CBS, "Nine Sundays" was unnecessary. "The candidates were *everywhere*," he said. "I mean, we couldn't get them off the air."

Finally, speakers agreed that future campaigns will be affected in part by technological and programming changes that can't yet be fully foreseen. "Technology is moving so quickly that these techniques are apt to change radically," Kalb said. Wald noted that computer bulletin boards and other specialized media are growing rapidly. "They will not be large four years from now, but will be large eight years from now," he said. "They will allow ad-hoc discussion groups that could turn out to be reasonably important, in terms of those people who actually vote."

James M. Bernstein

Assistant Professor, School of Journalism, Indiana University

Our early analysis of media coverage indicates that the news media recognized the importance of debates to voters in 1992. In contrast, post-debate analysis in previous years has focused on the importance of the debates to the candidates.

The change, we think, is a good sign. One of the main reasons for having televised presidential debates is because of their value to voters. Our data and other data show this. We believe that the more the news media recognize voters as a participant in the debates, the greater legitimacy the debates will have.

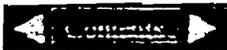
Susan Swain

Senior Vice President, C-SPAN

We really did cover all of the third-party candidates. I recall a fairly painful session in New Hampshire at the alternative presidential candidates' headquarters. They were all on the ballot, and they got five minutes of time on C-SPAN to explain why. Some were coherent, some not quite so.

After the debates, we decided to do our own third-party candidates' debate. We assembled three of the third-party candidates for ninety minutes, and gave them the

questions off the debate videotape. Although the viewership for that was small, those folks did get an opportunity to participate in the format and make their views known.



Involving Citizens Between Elections

Lawrence K. Grossman, former president of NBC News, believes that the voters' political interest needs to be sustained and channeled during the years between elections. "Communication is no longer just one way, as it always has been, from the government to the people," he said. "It is now increasingly going from the people back to the government. It is a two-way stream, and it becomes more important than ever that public opinion be sophisticated, well informed, and knowledgeable about the key issues." Noting that "it took commissions and reports and pressures" to create the Commission on Presidential Debates, he urged that think tanks, political parties, and other entities undertake a similar effort to find ways to inform and involve the public between elections.

Edward M. Fouhy, executive producer of the Commission on Presidential Debates, reported that such efforts are already under way. The Jefferson Center in Minneapolis has convened citizen juries to analyze issues. The *Wichita Eagle* and other Knight-Ridder newspapers have provided forums for citizens to discuss issues. The Kettering Foundation has continued to sponsor citizens' forums. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is looking for ways to get involved. "There is far more bubbling up, out there beyond the Beltway, than people here in Washington realize," Fouhy said.

But two cautionary notes were raised. Wald of ABC said that the electorate's attentiveness may not last, and so the media should "continue to cover the news" as well as look for innovative approaches. CNN's Turner voiced "a philosophical musing" about whether enhancing voter participation and interest is truly part of the press's mission.

Lawrence K. Grossman

Former President, NBC News

The public is becoming a fourth branch of government. Nothing gets done in Washington without first testing public opinion. While we have developed some very strong structures and institutions to deal with our elections, none of those structures and institutions exist with any real effectiveness in the years between elections. It is time that we begin to address that problem with as much seriousness as we have been devoting to issues of presidential debates. If we do not do something about educating public opinion between elections, we are going to have a very troubled democratic society.

Edward M. Fouhy

Executive Producer, Commission on Presidential Debates

From a media standpoint, the most interesting approach to citizen involvement in politics is what is happening in the Knight-Ridder newspaper group. They have changed

the way that they cover politics and the way they look at public policy issues. They have asked their readers to tell them what interests them and how they see an issue developing.

They have also taken it a step further by providing forums. The editor who described this to me said that for the first one, they just invited citizens to a hotel ballroom. "Everybody stood around, and they assumed we were going to give the meeting some structure. Well, we were not. We were simply providing the forum." Eventually citizens' groups began to form, and they began to tackle issues having to do with education. It is an interesting new form of journalism, which bears watching.

Richard C. Wald
Senior Vice President, ABC News

There is a general feeling in the public that what will happen now is important. But maybe we are living through a peculiar period of history that will not recur. There is not necessarily a continuing public interest in the public weal.

Therefore, it is necessary to do two things. The first and the simplest is to take advantage of the moment. I believe that these institutional possibilities are of value. We should try as best we can to carry the public debate on a regular basis. But we should not lose sight of the fact that we have to continue to cover the news, to try to be interesting, to be flexible in how we do that, to look for features and other things that keep people involved.

Ed Turner
Executive Vice President, CNN

As citizens we would like to be able to sustain this interest in politics. It is great for the country; it is good for all of us. But as journalists, should we be in the business of creating these vehicles that lead to voter participation and interest? Or should our role be more disinterested and dispassionate?

As an executive of a company, I care about the community in which we function. But as an old skeptical news guy -- your mother says she loves you, but check it out.

I feel ill at ease in the various roles I find myself in. I look for no answers, but I bring it up because, to me, it is troublesome.

Newton N. Minow
Director, The Annenberg Washington Program

We have got a lot of college roommates here today. Sandy Vanocur was my college

roommate. Cliff Sloan's college roommate was Jonathan Alter. And Larry Grossman's college roommate was Dick Wald. (His other two college roommates, Roone Arledge and Max Frankel, could not make it.) This is in fact a roommate conference.



Conference Participants

Presidential Debates and National Issues February 19, 1993

Covener:

Clifford M. Sloan
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Mayer, Brown & Platt

Speakers:

Jonathan Alter
Senior Editor and News Media Critic
Newsweek

The Honorable John B. Anderson

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School of Journalism
Indiana University

Michael R. Beschloss
Senior Fellow
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Bobby R. Burchfield
Partner
Covington & Burling

Diana Carlin
Assistant Professor of Communication Studies
University of Kansas

Frank Fahrenkopf, Jr.
Partner
Hogan & Hartson

Edward M. Fouhy
Executive Producer
Concord Communications Group

Lawrence K. Grossman
Former President
<http://www.annenberg.nwu.edu/pubs/debate/debate10.htm>

Conclusion

Moments from presidential debates lodge in our collective memory: Nixon's darting eyes and glistening upper lip, Ford's confusion over Eastern Europe, Carter's invocation of his daughter's distress over nuclear proliferation, Dukakis's robotic response to a question hypothesizing his wife's rape and murder, and, now, Bush's clock-watching ennui.

No doubt scores of other images would more accurately encapsulate the presidential campaigns. What makes these relatively trivial moments momentous is that we have experienced them together. Producer Ed Fouhy likened the 1992 debates to a miniseries, "where in order to participate in the public dialogue in the office, the shop, the school, the workplace the next day, you had to have seen what was on the air the night before." With cable and VCRs siphoning off much of the network news audience, as Congressman Markey noted, such common experiences are increasingly rare.

By giving us a nearly universal political experience, debates have thus become a vehicle for our public deliberation. We should try to safeguard and strengthen them, for we need all the public deliberation we can muster.

But we shouldn't lose sight of how far we've come. According to the conventional wisdom of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the 1960 debates were a one-time fluke. Debating had cost Nixon the election, it was thought; no other front-runner would ever make the same mistake. Candidates "may be killing the genre," Robert MacNeil of the BBC (now of PBS) observed. Former CBS News president Sig Mickelson thought it "conceivable" that presidential aspirants might someday debate, but he wasn't optimistic.

Confounding expectations, candidates did debate in 1976 and in every election since. Now the innovation has begun to harden into a tradition. In 1996 and thereafter, a candidate who blocks debates -- or a candidate whom the public perceives to be blocking debates -- will pay a considerable price.

Debates today are entrenched more deeply than ever before, perhaps more deeply than we had any right to expect. In an era when our political system seems to change only by degenerating, this new tradition gives us a measure of hope.



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Harvard University

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Sullivan & Worcester

Jennifer Lawson

Executive Vice President
National Programming and Promotion Services
PBS

Bev Lindsey

Debate Coordinator
Clinton/Gore Campaign

The Honorable Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.)

U.S. House of Representatives

Robert McFarland

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NBC News

Newton N. Minow

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Joe Peyronnin

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Carole Simpson

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ABC News

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Senior Vice President
C-SPAN

Ed Turner
Executive Vice President
CNN News

Sander Vanocur
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Old Owl Communications

Richard C. Wald
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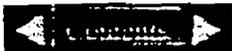
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H. R. 4310

105th CONGRESS 2d Session H. R. 4310

To amend the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to permit a corporation or labor organization to expend or donate funds for staging public debates between presidential candidates only if the organization staging the debate invites each candidate who is eligible for matching payments from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund and qualified for the ballot in a number of States such that the candidate is eligible to receive the minimum number of electoral votes necessary for election.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, July 22, 1998, Mr. TRAFICANT introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on House Oversight

A BILL

To amend the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to permit a corporation or labor organization to expend or donate funds for staging public debates between presidential candidates only if the organization staging the debate invites each candidate who is eligible for matching payments from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund and qualified for the ballot in a number of States such that the candidate is eligible to receive the minimum number of electoral votes necessary for election.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. REQUIREMENTS FOR ORGANIZATIONS STAGING PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES.

(a) CANDIDATES REQUIRED TO BE INVITED- Section 316 of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 (2 U.S.C. 441b) is amended by adding at the end the following new subsection:

(c) Notwithstanding any other provision of this section, a corporation or labor organization may directly or indirectly expend or donate funds for staging a public debate between candidates for election for President, but only if the person staging the debate invites each candidate who is eligible for matching payments under chapter 95 or 96 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 and qualified for the ballot in a number of States such that the candidate is eligible to receive not fewer than the minimum number of electoral votes necessary for election.

(b) EFFECTIVE DATE- The amendment made by subsection (a) shall apply with respect to elections occurring after the date of the enactment of this Act.