

The First 1960 Presidential Debate: Television's Lasting Impact on Elections

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Abstract:

While television was first developed in 1927, it wasn't after the end of World War II in 1945 that television became a prominent source of news and entertainment for American households. As the medium gained recognition, its impact on the audience grew. During the first televised presidential debate in 1960 between Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, Kennedy looked confident on camera with makeup and a navy suit, while Nixon fell ill a few days before and was seen sweating on camera while wearing a grey suit that camouflaged with the background of the set. While Nixon was leading the national polls prior to the first televised presidential debate, Kennedy became the slight favorite in the general election the following day. The first 1960 televised debate set the precedent of television having great political influence, allowing a politician's "image" to be considered a crucial factor for the presidency in addition to a candidate's political viewpoints or policies.

With more than 70 million Americans watching live from the comfort of their own homes, the first televised presidential debate between Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy took place on September 26, 1960. When both candidates arrived at the CBS television studio in Chicago, Illinois that night, Kennedy was wearing a navy suit whereas Nixon was wearing grey – little did Nixon know this was only the beginning of a series of differences that would ultimately cost him the presidency. There was nothing coincidental about Kennedy's suit choice or any other aspect of how he appeared on television that day; Kennedy worked on choosing his suit, hair, and makeup along with his aides up to the night of the debate.

Wearing a well-ironed navy suit and putting on a touch of make-up right before the live broadcasting to accentuate the glow he deliberately produced by tanning in the sun, Kennedy looked healthy and confident by the time cameras started to broadcast the debate nationwide. Nixon, on the other hand, came straight from the campaign trail and was recovering from a bad flu and a knee injury. His grey suit and pale face from having been hospitalized for a staphylococcus infection not only created a stark visual contrast with his opponent but also blended his face into the background.

It was no surprise that those who watched the debate determined Kennedy was the clear winner.

Four million Americans made up their minds for president during the first televised debate, of which three million decided to vote for Kennedy. While most Americans who listened to the debate on the radio pronounced Nixon to be the winner or declared that the debate was a tie between the two candidates, Kennedy won over the 70 million television viewers by a broad margin. The utilization of television in John F. Kennedy's campaign during the first 1960 presidential debate added another layer to political campaigning in that the candidates' visibility in mass media allowed a politician's "image" to be considered a crucial factor for the presidency in addition to a candidate's political viewpoints or policies. This utilization not only altered the definition of what was "presidential" but allowed future presidential debates to evolve as a function of television and media portrayal.

While television was developed in 1927, more than a decade before World War II, radio was the dominant medium of communication until the 1950s; radio's ability to provide an abundance of war information instantaneously proved useful during and after World War II. Additionally, radio was more economical than any other medium in that a one-time investment at a relatively low-cost could secure a family's news source for decades. Over 90% of American households owned radio during the war as the cheap machine could help entertain, inform, and encourage citizens to join the war effort. Radio was also used in the political field with the 1948

Dewey-Stassen debate, the first audio-recorded primary presidential debate featuring New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey and Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen, which was witnessed by a small studio audience and heard by a nationwide audience of 40 million. Even after World War II, when television became a commonplace household appliance, the medium was strictly used for entertainment rather than disseminating a broad range of content and information like it is today. The formats of new programs, including newscasts, situational comedies, variety shows, and dramas were largely synonymous with those of the radio; early news programs mostly involved filling the screen with "talking heads," newscasters simply reading the news, as they might have for the radio broadcasts. Despite the invention of a medium that was deemed revolutionary for its addition of visual elements on screen, radio and television had similar functionalities.

Even during World War II, however, there were those who foresaw television's influence post-war. Historian Robert D. Heintz mentioned in his private publication on April 16, 1943, that "television will add sight to the sound of radio – it adds motion pictures to the radio voice, and certainly that is a far more vital contribution to radio than the addition of sound was to motion pictures." Heintz also predicted television's influence on politics post-World-War-II, acknowledging the "importance in politics of a good radio voice – or so-called radio personality," yet prophesying the possibility that "in the future

[American] candidates for office will need to have a picture personality as well as a radio personality.” While television was not yet recognized by the public for its impact, its differences from radio’s sole use of audio were noted decades before television was accepted as a medium.

Heinl’s prophecy came true shortly after he released his publication. As World War II came to an end in 1945, the need for technology rapidly increased as businesses started to return to normal. By the late 1940s, engineers had determined how to produce televisions cheaply enough that the majority of Americans could purchase them for less than \$200. Thus began the immediate surge in television production. In 1946, only a few stations were on the air, and only 44,000 American homes had a television set. Yet three years later in 1949, almost all major cities had at least one television station and by the end of the year, 172,000 American households had purchased television. Slowly, variety and comedy shows, as well as news reports left the airwaves to be broadcasted on television. Furthermore, advertisers used television to increase product consumption, as they began gaining awareness of television’s massive reach, expanding the way television was utilized by companies and businesses.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was the first United States president to introduce television as a medium for political campaigning, when he constructed 30-second television advertisements to emphasize his personality during the 1952 presidential election.

As a military-general-turned-presidential-candidate, Eisenhower’s goal in his campaign was to translate his military fame to political gain –teaming with advertiser Rosser Reeves and motion picture producers, Eisenhower created a series of television advertisements called “Eisenhower Answers America!”, the first few political commercials to be broadcasted in the United States. Eisenhower’s successful presidential bids presented the effectiveness of a candidate-centered campaign that translated his publicity and fame into political advantage. After the 1952 presidential election, Jack Gould, a television critic for *The New York Times*, wrote that “a TV-aware electorate is not going to be voting for a man merely on the basis of his reputation, or his thoughts as recorded in the printed word, or his disembodied voice as it comes out of a loudspeaker. Television makes the candidate of today a human being at one’s elbow, who is going to be judged on the same terms as a man greets any new acquaintance.” Thus television was no longer a medium to solely watch variety shows or keep in the living room for leisurely purposes – it was transitioning to a medium by which politicians could be judged for how they were presented on screen, ultimately impacting the voter’s decision on who to elect.

Another ambitious, younger politician noticed the impact of television: Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy, who was eyeing a spot for a Democratic Party candidacy in the upcoming 1960 presidential election. In the November 14, 1959

issue of *TV Guide*, Kennedy published his own article, “A Force That Has Changed the Political Scene,” discussing the effects of television in politics. In the article, he states that “the wonders of science and technology have revolutionized the modern American political campaign. Giant electronic brains project results on the basis of carefully conducted polls.” Furthermore, Kennedy adds that “TV has altered drastically the nature of our political campaigns, conventions, constituents, candidates, and costs.” Immediately recognizing the possibility of television as a medium that could broaden the impact a political campaign could have on the citizens, Kennedy applied his unique insight of the new medium during his run for presidency over the following year.

Kennedy utilized television throughout his campaign, aiming to impede assumptions that were detrimental to his candidacy while also creating a mystique he would maintain until the election. Following Eisenhower’s use of advertisement for his political campaign, Kennedy produced nearly 200 commercials in 1960 in order to showcase his genuine, poised speaking abilities – he and his aides made great use of excerpts from rallies, speeches, and debates, reinforcing his experience. Other commercials were used more for self-endorsement. In one advertisement, Jacqueline Lee Kennedy spoke Spanish for her husband John. The advertisement was part of a strategy for the Kennedy campaign to connect with Latino voters and win over the minds of Texans, where Mexican-Americans were seen as a growing

group, as the state could ultimately overturn the election with its 38 electoral votes. Soon after, Kennedy broadcasted another advertisement with Harry Belafonte, an African-American singer, which helped rally the support of African-American voters who, the campaign feared, might turn away from Kennedy because of his Catholic faith. Furthermore, on June 16, 1960, Kennedy appeared on “Tonight Starring Jack Paar,” captivating the audience with his visage and levity. Until Kennedy, no political candidate dared to guest on any late-night programs, as, according to Frank Rich, a New York Times journalist, “by the standards of 1960, it was considered a bit shocking” for a presidential candidate to appear on an entertainment program. Kennedy, venturing into a new medium, did not solely limit his use of television to advertisements like Eisenhower but extended his utilization to television programs, creating another stepping stone for political candidates in using television as a medium for their campaign.

On the other hand, Richard Nixon made trivial use of television throughout his presidential campaign, through which he gained minimal knowledge of the medium. During his presidential campaign, Nixon formed his own ad hoc group of advertisers so that he would have direct control over the advertisements that were being created. However, this effort did little to appeal to the audience. For his advertisements, Nixon recorded himself in a formal office setting and spoke directly at the camera, while reciting long,

prepared answers to questions posed on an offscreen speaker. Hence those that viewed his advertisements on television stated that he looked “constrained... trying to get his points across in such a short period of time.” Nixon’s campaign advertisements, compared to Kennedy’s, were more formal and traditional in content, while Kennedy used his supporters such as his wife or celebrities in order to entice the audience into watching his comparatively more savvy and relatable advertisements. Both candidates had the same opportunity to use television to their advantage; however, while Kennedy utilized television’s ability to help relate to his constituents, Nixon’s attempts fell flat as his campaign progressed.

Kennedy’s use of television continued when he challenged Richard Nixon to a televised presidential debate. The first debate between Nixon and Kennedy was the first time in American history that the presidential candidates were given the opportunity to speak “face-to-face” to 70 million Americans who were watching the debate in their homes. The debate was arranged by 38-year-old producer Don Hewitt, who offered both candidates a pre-production meeting the day before to discuss camera angles and lighting. Only Kennedy took up Hewitt’s offer – it was at that meeting that Kennedy decided to wear a blue shirt and suit, after seeing the dark grey background he would be standing in front of during the debate, whereas the studio’s grey background was not a detail Nixon was aware of or felt the need to put

any significance on after he arrived on set. Hence Nixon’s decision to wear a grey suit reduced the visual impact upon the audience watching the debate through a black-and-white television. Though both Kennedy and Nixon refused offers from CBS makeup professionals, Kennedy brought his own team right before the debate to make final touch-ups on his tanned face that was already gleaming from his hours spent in the sun. Kennedy’s campaign aides had also put him in a hotel the weekend before, accompanying him in many hours of honing responses to anticipated debate questions. Ted Sorenson, Kennedy’s speech writer and aide, recalls Kennedy in the hotel hours before the debate with “lights on, sound asleep, [and] covered in notecards,” emphasizing the efforts Kennedy made in preparing for the televised debate. As a result of all this preparation, Kennedy looked and felt confident, which came across on television and was conveyed to the audience.

Despite having experience with the medium, Nixon failed to present his familiarity with television during the first televised debate. Not only did he tirelessly run his other campaign schedules such as interviews and press conferences, Nixon had also made the campaign promise to visit every state, putting more focus on his campaign trail and admittedly “[making] the mistake of not [being prepared] for [the debate].” According to Nixon’s campaign manager Bob Finch, Nixon refused to film himself practicing potential questions that could be asked

during the debate, and rather used an “isolated approach” of not taking much assistance from his staff as well. Additionally, Nixon was also hospitalized for his knee injury until the day before the debate and showed up to the studio with a 102-degree fever and a sore leg. While he unfortunately re-injured his knee as he entered the CBS station, Nixon refused to cancel the broadcasting saying that dropping out at the last minute would make him “look like a chicken.” Nixon’s lack of preparation for the debate was clear to the television audience – Nixon seemed “strained and nervous. The studio lights, in fact, picked up gleams of perspiration on forehead and chin,” wrote the *Aberdeen Daily News* in their issue the day after the debate. At his aide’s urging, Nixon put on a coat of Lazy Shave, a cheap drug store makeup, in order to hide his “five o’clock shadow,” but as he started sweating under the studio lights, the powder soon came off and left sweat trails, making him seem like he applied, as many newspapers called it, “pancake makeup.” Nixon also did not put emphasis on connecting with the audience: during the debate, he looked off to the side to address various reporters, which came across as shifting his gaze to avoid eye contact with the public. Contrary to Nixon, Kennedy stared directly at the camera as he answered each question, rather than addressing the cameramen and reports. In his interview decades after the debate, Hewitt mentioned that “Kennedy took the [debate] far more seriously than Nixon. The vice president treated the debate as just another

campaign appearance.” The gap in effort the two candidates put into the televised debate further shows that while Nixon had the experience of appearing on television, his experience did not reflect his understanding of television as a medium that could have a substantial impact on the audience.

The apparent visual contrast between the two candidates grabbed the attention of many newspapers across America, as they scrambled to report on the presidential debate and both candidates’ images created during the debate. *The New York Times* was quick to criticize Nixon “wearing pancake makeup to cover his dark beard, [smiling] more frequently as he made his points and [dabbing] frequently at the perspiration that beaded out on his chin.” The following day, *Chicago Daily News* also ran the headline “Was Nixon Sabotaged By TV Makeup Artists?”, highlighting the impact Nixon’s “pancake makeup,” “perspiration,” and “grey suit” had on the audience and media. In contrast, the media portrayal of Kennedy was generally positive as many newspapers published headlines comparing Kennedy’s new image to Nixon’s. *The New York Times* also complimented Kennedy’s appearance on screen, stating that while “Nixon looked taut, Kennedy appeared excessively fresh-faced, school-boyish.” Kennedy had succeeded in using his youthful image into advantage – his youthfulness was no longer a drawback to his candidacy, but rather what helped create the “lively” and

“confident” image which Nixon lacked. “Kennedy had been the boy under assault and attack by the Vice President as immature, young, inexperienced,” wrote journalist Theodore H. White three days after the debate. “Now, obviously, in flesh and behavior he was the Vice President’s equal.” Due to his confident look and aggressive, direct assertions during the debate, Kennedy eradicated any negative preconceptions that were initially detrimental to his candidacy – his on-camera performance made Kennedy look like a leader, and doubts about Kennedy’s youth and experience were forgotten.

Despite their stark differences in appearance and degree of preparation for the on-screen debate, many declared that Nixon had better arguments in supporting his vision for presidency. In the debate, Kennedy and Nixon ultimately had a similar agenda: emphasizing national security and addressing the threat of communism and the need to strengthen the U.S. military. Even *The New York Times*, a newspaper that had criticized Nixon’s appearance and image during the debate, asserted that “on sound points of argument, Nixon probably took the slightest honors.” However, the verdict on the winner of the debate was fundamentally based on how the candidate presented his statement and how he appeared on camera. Right after the first debate, Henry Cabot Lodge, Nixon’s running mate, along with a majority of Americans who saw the debate on television stated in his interview with the press “that son-of-a-bitch just lost us the election,” while

Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s cohort, thought Kennedy had lost after initially tuning into the debate through the radio. Howard K. Smith, the debate’s moderator, affirms the split between those who listened on the radio and those who saw the debate on television: As Smith was sitting behind the candidates during the debate, he couldn’t see their faces. By only listening to the points of argument, Smith initially gave a slight edge to Nixon – after watching a replay of the debate, however, Smith mentioned in an interview that “Kennedy swept it,” and that “he just looked so enchanting.” As the two candidates’ stances were deemed similar in content with Nixon only slightly leading the arguments, even a single minor factor could contribute to either candidate’s win in the debate – unlike previous presidential debates where candidates could win by proclaiming their well-thought-out policies, the factor that shifted the verdict for this debate was the televised image of the candidates.

While the public claimed that Kennedy had bested Nixon during the debate, the impact that television would have on the voters was still unclear. “Neither candidate said anything he hasn’t often said before, and probably said with more color, force, and vigor,” Cynthia Lowry wrote in her editorial in the *Aberdeen Daily News*. “But also never before have two candidates stood together before millions of voters to state their cases. It was a memorable hour of television. The question now is what effect will it have on the viewer-voter?” Although Americans had reached a

consensus that television could impact voters' decisions, it was hard to determine how much the election would be affected as a result. Regardless of the impact television would have on the election, Kennedy saw a substantial increase in support. During his visit to Ohio the day after the televised debate, Kennedy's crowd was much larger than previous crowds had been. The *Dallas Morning News* claimed that during the visit, Kennedy "predicted for the first time that he will win the great industrial state and its 25 electoral votes in November," alluding to the fact that Kennedy had gained a stronger support for presidency after the debate. Additionally, whereas Nixon was leading by six percent in national polls before the first presidential debate, the polls on September 27, the day after the debate, showed that Kennedy had become the slight favorite in the general election, leading the vote by three percent. While the first debate was not a landslide, Kennedy's presidential potential surged and allowed him to gain a fair number of supporters and take the slight lead in the last two months of campaigning.

Noticing the impact the first televised debate had on voter's choices, Nixon, like Kennedy in his first debate, paid closer attention to his appearance onscreen thereafter. In the following three presidential debates, Nixon looked much healthier – he regained all his lost weight, wore television makeup, and this time, he wore a black suit. As a result, Nixon won the following two debates, and resulted in a "draw" for the final

debate between the two candidates. Yet as the last three debates were watched by 20 million fewer people than the first televised debate, the impact wasn't enough to sway the audiences' votes. According to *The Charlotte Observer* in their article published after the fourth televised debate, the focus of the last three debates "wasn't on presenting a better argument to the audience" – Kennedy and Nixon continued to have a similar "stance on issues." Rather, the two candidates were "both too concerned with personable likeableness to get into 'gutter politics,'" and focused on gaining the advocacy of citizens through constructing their "likeable" images. After taking a hit in the number of his supporters following the first debate, Nixon had modified his strategy – as he paid closer attention to his portrayal on television, he also started putting more emphasis on how he looked rather than focusing solely on the arguments.

The impact of the first televised debate followed through to the November election, when voters elected the 35th President of the United States, and beyond, influencing the campaigns of future presidential candidates. In the general election in November, Kennedy won the popular vote 49.7 percent to 49.5 percent – by a difference of 112,881 votes – resulting in the closest election in American history. Even 50 years later, the extent of how much the first televised debate impacted the election is still disputed, but the 1960 election marks a turning point which led subsequent campaigns to begin paying "strict attention to

matters of lighting and technique.” Politicians were careful to avoid Nixon’s pitfalls in televised debates and were cautious in appearing on television with their opposing presidential candidates. Political candidates were now aware of the impact television could have on the audience’s voting decisions and began stressing style as well as substance in their campaign. Words and actions no longer only appeared in newspaper accounts but were also repeated over and over in Americans’ living rooms.

After the 1960 televised debates, candidates were more wary of the other politicians they would be spotted on screen with, leading certain candidates to turn down debates if they believed that the debates would harm their images. In the following three campaigns – the presidential elections of 1964, 1968, and 1972– presidential candidates refused to be challenged to a televised debate. Even Nixon, who ran for presidency again twice after 1960 and became the 37th President, rejected the offer to debate Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972 as he was now aware of the impact the televised debate would bring, and was careful in approaching television as part of his campaign. It was only in 1976 that presidential candidate Gerald Ford decided to be the first sitting president to take part in a televised debate. Televised presidential debates became a fixture in 1980 after Ronald Regan used his debate performance to defeat Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter and challenged Walter Mondale for

another televised debate in 1984, confident on his re-election. To the candidates, a damage in their image on screen could now be as detrimental to their popularity as their weak arguments: the fact that it took 20 years for televised debates to become a campaign fixture shows the reluctance of the candidates to appear on television, as the impact of the debates could go past the screen and damage the image that was created of them throughout the campaign.

Television critics still study the impact Kennedy and Nixon’s first presidential debate had on general political discourse and election outcomes. “After that debate, it was not just what you said in a campaign that was important, but how you looked saying it,” writes Bruce DuMont, a prominent radio show host and president of the Museum of Broadcast Communications. “The 1960 debates [were] the turning point from retail politics – glad handing and meeting everyone face to face – to the politics of mass media.” After the first televised debate, public perceptions of visual signifiers in the media would continue—and have continued—to influence American perceptions of national leaders and national identity. Because Kennedy appeared, in that moment, more confident and comfortable in front of the camera than Richard Nixon, he was able to visually connect with Americans in a way that Nixon could not. The first 1960 televised debate set the precedent of television having great political influence, disseminating an instant and successful public image in addition to a candidate’s political

viewpoints or policies.

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