

## *Chapter Eight*

### THE AUDIENCE

*T*he one undisputed fact about presidential debates is their popularity. From the outset the public has shown a willingness, even an eagerness, to sit up and pay attention to these programs. The 70 million Americans who watched the first Kennedy-Nixon broadcast inaugurated a tradition of high viewership that continues today.<sup>1</sup> In the face of declining voter turnout at the polls, audiences for debates between presidential candidates have remained enormous.

The single meeting between President Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan in 1980 drew more than 100 million people, making this the most-watched presidential debate—and one of the most-watched television shows—of all time. The second highest-rated debate, the final match between Clinton, Bush, and Perot in 1992, attracted at least 90 million. More typically debate viewership ranges in size from 60 to 80 million for appearances between presidential candidates, 30 to 50 million for vice presidential nominees.<sup>2</sup>

By any standard the ratings are extraordinary. To understand the significance of these numbers, it is useful to compare debates to other productions on the list of top-ranked TV programs. Traditionally the two highest-rated shows of any year are the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards. Super Bowl audiences regularly surpass the 100-million mark, and Oscar telecasts pull in 70 to 80 million, roughly the same number who see a presidential debate.<sup>3</sup>

Debate viewership correlates to another type of programming on the most-watched list: special episodes of TV series and miniseries. In this category, the final broadcast of *M\*A\*S\*H\** (1983) holds the ratings record of 125 million people, followed by 99 million for the two-hour conclusion of *Roots* (1977), and 83 million for the “Who Shot J.R.?” installment of *Dallas* (1980).<sup>4</sup> More recently the farewell episode of NBC’s *Seinfeld* (1998) reached 76 million people, slightly fewer than the 80 million who saw the finale of *Cheers* (1993).<sup>5</sup>

This roster of television’s highest-rated shows spans a wide range of programming, and viewers may be attracted for any number of reasons. But particularly among the live telecasts, common bonds exist: big stars, high stakes, competition, spontaneity, and hype. To one degree or another, presidential debates borrow these ingredients from the sports spectacles and entertainment extravaganzas and refashion them into a political program that is sui generis. In this unique hybrid of show biz and civics, audiences find a TV genre that effectively mixes entertainment with information.

To what can we attribute the staggering popularity of presidential debates? Why, in an age of apathy and cynicism toward politics, do viewers continue to tune in? What are the benefits and limitations of these programs? And what influence, if any, do they have on voter decision making? Let us explore the relationship of debates to the people who watch them.

#### THE DRAMATIC APPEAL OF TV DEBATES

Presidential debates represent a highly personal transaction between candidates and voters—or, to view it another way, between stars and an audience. A debate is human drama at its rawest: the obvious drama between the participants onstage but also the more subtle and complex drama that unfolds between presidential contenders and the citizens passing judgment on them. *New York Times* columnist William Safire has called presidential

debates “political-emotional events . . . great moments in American life when the nation comes together to share an experience neither frightening nor artificial.”<sup>6</sup>

It is the visceral nature of these programs that sets them apart from other highly watched television shows. Debates, says Walter Mondale, “go to this mysterious, primal question of who’s ready to be president, who’s presidential, who’s got stature. That is not a technical question; it’s a deep, emotional issue.” Mondale believes that debates appeal to the public because they exist in a “kind of environment that people remember: combat. It’s not giving a speech. This was real war, and people find it credible.”<sup>7</sup>

Live televised debates teem with dramatic conflict: interpersonal conflict between candidates; intrapersonal conflict within a debater’s psyche; the conflicts between expectation and performance, preparation and spontaneity. These juxtapositions make irresistible TV, for conflict is the engine that propels all narrative, be it political, journalistic, dramatic, or athletic. Television, with its hunger for personalities and its compulsion to reduce abstractions to particularities, is especially well suited to the mano-a-mano clash of presidential debates.

“Straight exposition in any form is always the most difficult way to engage and hold the attention of anyone,” wrote CBS’s Frank Stanton after the Kennedy-Nixon debates. “Conflict, on the other hand, in ideas as in action, is intriguing and engrossing to great numbers of people. Drama has always got more attention than essays.”<sup>8</sup> As Stanton’s comment suggests, debates entice audiences because they are formatted as duels. No other televised political encounter presents such a strong structural incentive to watch.

Conflict that is live and unedited further compels viewership, for, by definition, live events are fragile events. In this sense, presidential debates parallel other high-power “event programming” like the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards or the Miss America Pageant: All are shows whose ending cannot be scripted in advance. In each case, audiences watch in the knowledge that vast stretches of boredom await; still, right up until the final second, some unforeseen plot twist could come rocketing off the screen to justify the investment of time.

As live television, presidential debates are a good example of the contradiction being contained within itself: These are simultaneously the most unpredictable and most ritualized of events. No matter what protective measures the campaigns take, a televised debate cannot be completely domesticated. At a time when the race for the White House has become ever

more sanitized and risk-averse, presidential debates represent a rare walk on the wild side.

Before the 1992 joint appearances, *New York Times* TV critic Walter Goodman wrote, “In a season of set pieces, a television debate could offer one of the few hopes of unprogrammed revelation.”<sup>9</sup> If we accept the analogy of presidential debates as job interviews, the question of the “unprogrammed revelation” becomes all the more significant. As in any job interview, what is most interesting is not the applicant’s carefully practiced facade but the reality lurking behind the mask.

Beginning with the first Kennedy-Nixon broadcast in 1960, debates have had a way of delivering inadvertent messages to the audience, providing viewers with insights both large and small. As *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins observed after the 1976 forums,

No amount of TV makeup can change the way a man’s eyes move, or the way his lips are drawn under surges of animus or temper. When the camera burrows into a man’s face, the fact that some wrinkles may be covered up by pancake makeup is not so important as the visibility of the emotions that come to the surface. The strength of the TV debates derives less from what is hidden than from what is impossible to conceal.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Nixon could not conceal the fact that he was uncomfortable in his own skin. Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford could not conceal their inflexibility when faced with an unexpected turn of events. Ronald Reagan could not conceal his befuddlement in the Louisville debate with Walter Mondale. George Bush could not conceal his patronizing attitude toward Geraldine Ferraro. Michael Dukakis could not conceal his lack of empathy. Dan Quayle could not conceal an inferior intellect. The list goes on. In each situation the inadvertent message shines through, contributing to our understanding of the debaters as human beings.

Do such unplanned episodes give voters legitimate reasons to accept or reject a particular candidate as president? Generally not, though the most sobering instance—Reagan’s addled performance in the opening match of 1984—presents a possible exception. That debate, remarkable for the degree to which it diverged from the preordained script, alerted the public to an issue the Washington press corps had neglected to report. If only momentarily, the significance of this data caused voters to question Reagan’s fitness for the job.

In retrospect, one wonders if the message of the first 1984 debate ought not to have been more closely heeded, by both the media and the public. Charles P. Pierce, a journalist who began writing about Alzheimer's disease when it struck his father, is one of many observers who see evidence in Reagan's performance of the illness that would not be officially acknowledged until 1994. Early Alzheimer's patients, Pierce said, "can waver between clarity and startling blankness," remembering events from the distant past, but not what happened yesterday. "That night in Louisville, Reagan passed in and out of himself, like a broadcast signal filtered through mountains," Pierce wrote in an essay for the *Boston Globe* fifteen years after the debate. "He was lucky none of the panelists asked him where he was."<sup>11</sup>

If the images emanating from the screen in 1984 were trying to tell the audience that its leader was in an early stage of mental decline, then TV debates were doing their job, even if the news did not fully sink in. Although it is important not to overconclude from presidential debates, inadvertent signals deserve to be listened to, particularly in a campaign environment dominated by manufactured messages and masked realities. At their best, debates reflect what Walter Lippmann called television's capacity to serve as a "truth machine";<sup>12</sup> viewers who pay close attention are bound to spot the chinks in a candidate's armor.

Reagan's performance in the first 1984 appearance with Mondale is history's most stunning example of debates as purveyors of unintended truths. But a less-pronounced television moment also stands out from that same program. At the end of closing statements, as soon as the moderator adjourned, Joan Mondale and her children swarmed onstage to offer their husband and father some obviously affectionate support. The shot also illustrated that not a single one of the Reagan children had bothered to show up.

In this instance, live television vividly communicated a subtle but significant difference between Mondale and Reagan, one that overrode weeks of meticulous planning. The visual message at the end of that first debate gave contrasting glimpses into the private lives of the two candidates, and the observant voter gained a nugget of information about Reagan that his handlers would just as soon have kept under wraps. Four days later, in the Bush-Ferraro debate, campaign officials made sure that the family of George Bush was on hand to strike an appropriately domestic tableau. When Reagan and Mondale returned for their follow-up encounter, the president's son and daughter-in-law performed a similar function, Ron Junior locking his father in a conspicuous postdebate hug.

The best-known inadvertent message in recent years came during the Richmond town hall meeting of 1992, when George Bush got caught stealing a glance at his wristwatch. To many viewers Bush appeared bored, eager for the ordeal to be over. Jeff Greenfield, in ABC's postdebate analysis, said the president looked "as though he had some place more important to go."<sup>13</sup> On the next day's newscasts, shots of Bush peeking at his watch were "replayed like debate sound bites," in the words of CBS reporter Mark Phillips, whose own story made use of the images.<sup>14</sup> Republican handlers attempted to contain the damage by explaining that Bush had been checking to see if his opponents were running past their allotted time. But viewers and the media had perceived something else.

Moments like this bust through the veneer of campaign control much as Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal the Wizard of Oz. In a live debate, no matter how the deck has been stacked, little arrows of verisimilitude manage to shoot out of the screen and into the living rooms of America. Lawrence E. Spivak, the creator and for many years host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, came to honor TV's ability to act as a magnifying glass. "Television has an awesome facility for showing up sincerity as well as insincerity," Spivak said. "So if a man is honest and knows his stuff, he'll emerge with his proper stature. By the same token, so will a phony."<sup>15</sup> Apply this scrutiny to candidates over the length of a ninety-minute debate, and audiences cannot help but acquire valuable information.

Another, less high-minded explanation for the high ratings of presidential debates merits passing mention. Viewers may tune in for voyeuristic reasons; there is, after all, a certain sadistic pleasure to be taken from watching fellow human beings, politicians in particular, operating under the gun. Journalist Valerie Helmbreck, who has regularly covered the Miss America pageant, makes a connection between beauty pageants and debates. "What both things are about," she says, "is seeing how poised people can look in a ridiculous situation."<sup>16</sup> Helmbreck's analogy stands to reason: The sheer audacity of debates, their high-wire daring, virtually defies the public not to tune in.

#### BENEFITS OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

An underappreciated attribute of televised debates is their insulation from the financial machinery that drives most contemporary electoral politics. Debates are the only event on the presidential campaign schedule untainted

by money. They exist outside the whirl of fund-raising and paid political announcements that characterizes the day-to-day pursuit of the White House. No infusion of cash can upgrade a candidate's performance; no deep-pocket donation can buy a more favorable set of ground rules. By any index, presidential debates are financially incorruptible.

In this sense they pose a striking contrast to campaign commercials. With political advertising a candidate is able to raise his profile only by spending more; debates are a meritocracy in which each participant has an equal opportunity to reach the audience and present a case. Messages in campaign ads must be stated in less than thirty seconds and are selected by the political pros; debates allow for a more thorough discourse on topics chosen by voters and the press. Most important, disembodied advertisements encourage negative campaigning, while face-to-face debates raise accountability among office seekers. A candidate making a claim against his opponent in a presidential debate must do so personally, as the entire nation looks on. Inevitably the dynamic is more tempered than the nasty tone that prevails in political commercials.

For the networks, too, presidential debates represent an uncommon departure from the usual bottom-line mentality—"television's best chance to make up for its many failed opportunities," in the view of critic Walter Goodman.<sup>17</sup> Unlike other "event programming"—athletic contests, entertainment specials, and awards shows—debates are not given over to advertising. Far from generating revenue, they cut into profits, especially for the pool network that must absorb the expense of putting the telecast on the air.

Consciously or not, these distinctions enhance the standing of presidential debates with the public. Alone among television spectacles, debates carry an aura of civic virtue. Without the participation of the citizenry these events are meaningless, which distinguishes them from football games, where professional athletes determine the outcome, or the Oscars, which are voted on exclusively by members of the motion picture industry. In a presidential debate the folks at home decide who takes home the prize. As an Arizona man said in a focus group study, "I think debates are one of the good old American ways to do it."<sup>18</sup>

Communications scholar Robert G. Meadow has written that debates "offer the viewers a chance to observe 'history,' be it the event itself as history or the possibility that a candidate will make a verbal error, stumble, or otherwise appear less than presidential."<sup>19</sup> To pass up such an occasion is to deprive oneself of both entertainment and duty. Debates provide a sense of

connectedness, granting individual viewers a voice in the collective discourse. In contemporary America, to miss a presidential debate is a violation of the societal norm.

In a discussion on PBS's *News Hour* during the 1996 campaign, political scientist Thomas Patterson spoke of the meaning of presidential debates to the American public. By getting people interested in the election, he said, debates extend their influence well beyond the ninety minutes in which they take place. According to Patterson,

I think you could even argue that the '92 debates saved the campaign. In September Americans were very soured on the campaign, and Perot's reentry into the race perked the campaign up a bit—and then the four debates in October. By the end of October people were into the campaign and we had a 5 percent increase in voter turnout. I think in terms of connecting the American public to the campaign, the debates are probably the central event.<sup>20</sup>

For most Americans debates are also informative. Political scientist Doris Graber says that presidential debates serve as a “last-minute cram session for preparing the voting public,”<sup>21</sup> a point reinforced by other researchers. Whereas journalists may scrutinize debates for headlines, vast numbers of citizens are getting their first exposure to the candidates' stands on the issues. “The ability of viewers to comment sensibly on the candidates and their stands on issues increases with debates,” wrote communication scholars Jamieson and Birdsell. The professors describe the educational impact of debates as “surprisingly wide,” cutting across differences of class, race, income, and educational level.<sup>22</sup>

When a debate series is exceptionally audience-friendly, like the Bush-Clinton-Perot programs of 1992, learning seems to increase. In a survey by the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press, 70 percent of respondents said that the 1992 debates had been helpful in deciding who to vote for. Four years earlier, in a similar poll taken the weekend of the election, only 48 percent rated the debates as helpful. Furthermore, said Center director Andy Kohut, “While the public credits the debates as being helpful in making a choice among candidates, the polling also suggests that the debates served to focus public attention on a number of important national issues.”<sup>23</sup>

Debates provide the electorate with another benefit: they preview how a



candidate is likely to communicate with the nation on television. The morning of the first Clinton-Dole debate in 1996, ABC's Cokie Roberts pointed out the importance of TV skills in a would-be chief executive: "This man might be called upon to ask us to send our children to war. He certainly will ask you to send our dollars to Washington. He will do it through the medium of television and we have to be able to believe him there and respond to him there."<sup>24</sup> In other words, at the same time they elect a chief executive, Americans are also electing a chief television personality. For the next four to eight years one of the individuals occupying the debate stage will lead the national colloquy. Although a debate may not foreshadow precisely how a president will talk to the people, it is among the best guides they have.

The public seems to appreciate this chance to examine candidates with the usual filters removed. At least for the duration of the live event, viewers can apply their own criteria and reach their own decisions about the individuals seeking office. The protective layers in which presidential contenders so carefully wrap themselves fall away, if only fleetingly. Handlers and journalists step aside, and the conversation becomes what it ought to be: a dialogue between candidates and the voters.

According to Diana Carlin, a University of Kansas professor who has conducted extensive research on debate audiences, joint appearances between presidential nominees offer several key advantages to viewers. First, debates present an opportunity for voters to measure the candidates side by side. Second, because debaters answer the same set of questions, comparisons on positions can be easily drawn. Third, viewers can assess the candidates' statements in an overall context, not as a disparate collection of media-selected sound bites.<sup>25</sup> On all these points, the body politic exhibits its understanding of presidential debates as programming that requires the audience's active engagement.

"One thing the debates do is put the candidates on an equal plane," a Texas woman told one of Carlin's 1992 focus groups. "They are right there. Both of them together at the same time, same situation, with the same questions."<sup>26</sup> In the absence of face-to-face contact between candidates and voters, TV debates serve as a substitute mechanism for rendering judgments. They allow the audience to evaluate not just statements but also non-verbal signals—the facial expressions and body language that lawyers call "demeanor evidence."

As communication professor Goodwin Berquist has observed: "What Americans feel confident in doing, what each of us does day-in and day-out,

in both face-to-face and televised encounters, is to size up the quality of a stranger. . . . The miracle of television makes it possible for each of us to draw our own conclusions in the privacy of our living rooms.”<sup>27</sup>

#### LIMITATIONS OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Do presidential debates make a valuable contribution to voter enlightenment, or do they reduce the campaign to a political beauty contest? From 1960 on, observers have criticized TV debates for putting image before issues, style ahead of substance. The genre has been dismissed as contrived, counterfeit, even countereducational.

The objections coalesce around several points. After the Kennedy-Nixon telecasts historians derided debates on conceptual grounds, defining them as fundamentally flawed both in structure and objective. Henry Steele Commager, in a widely circulated magazine piece that ran just before the 1960 election, argued that America’s greatest presidents—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson—would all have lost TV debates. Commager condemned the programs for prizing “the glib, the evasive, the dogmatic, the melodramatic” over “the sincere, the judicious, the sober, the honest in political discussion.”

Like other critics, Commager feared that the institutional strictures of television made political debates not just ineffective but downright disinformational. The process, he wrote, “encourages the American public to believe that there are no questions, no issues before us that are so difficult that they cannot be disposed of in two or three minutes of off-the-cuff comment.” Television itself was not to blame for this failing, Commager wrote. “It would be imbecility not to take full advantage of television in this and future campaigns. The trouble is that we are not taking advantage of it at all, but permitting it to take advantage of us.”<sup>28</sup>

In his 1962 classic, *The Image*, historian Daniel Boorstin stepped up the reproach, calling the Kennedy-Nixon debates “remarkably successful in reducing great national issues to trivial dimensions.” Boorstin cited presidential debates as a “clinical example” of his new coinage, the “pseudo-event”:

Pseudo-events thus lead to emphasis on pseudo-qualifications. Again the self-fulfilling prophecy. If we test presidential candidates by their

talents on TV quiz performances, we will, of course, choose presidents for precisely these qualifications. In a democracy, reality tends to conform to the pseudo-event. Nature imitates art.<sup>29</sup>

To some extent, the damning of presidential debates by both Commager and Boorstin reflects the fears of an era now passed. Television in 1960 was far less a medium of information than a medium of entertainment; much of the early trepidation stems from the very real concern that the values of commercial TV would infect those of electoral politics. This is, of course, exactly what has happened, and presidential debates had a hand in facilitating the shift.

Harvey Wheeler, another critic of the 1960 debates, worried that John Kennedy's physical attractiveness—his resemblance to “a composite picture of all the good stereotypes television has created”—may have unduly influenced audience reaction. Wheeler cautioned that a potentially dangerous dynamic could develop in presidential debates, with television viewers swayed by “invisible visual values” that preempted their conscious desires. “It seems likely that in the future one of the tests of a candidate's ‘availability’ for political nomination will be his correspondence with the then current image of the good guy,” Wheeler wrote.<sup>30</sup>

After four decades Wheeler's prophecy has not come to pass; nonetheless the warning merits consideration. By substituting televisual talent for facial attractiveness, we can argue that debate audiences may indeed be responding to a set of “invisible values,” imposed by the institution of television and bearing more on stylistic fluency than intellect. Don Hewitt of CBS, who produced and directed history's first debate, began almost immediately to question the value of the matches, wondering if too much emphasis had been placed on performing ability. “When it was over, I remember thinking there's something wrong here,” Hewitt recalled. “We may have made the right choice, but it worried me that it might have been for the wrong reasons. We were electing a matinee idol.”<sup>31</sup>

Critics of presidential debates have long bemoaned TV's weakness for glittering personalities. Not surprisingly Richard Nixon added his voice to this chorus, writing, after the Ford-Carter debates in 1976, “I doubt that they can ever serve a responsible role in defining the issues of a presidential campaign. Because of the nature of the medium, there will inevitably be a greater premium on showmanship than on statesmanship.”<sup>32</sup> Nixon might have agreed with the assessment of Sidney Kraus, one of the first communi-

cation scholars to study presidential debates seriously, who concluded that “Americans are fans who want to be entertained.”<sup>33</sup>

Undoubtedly candidates who play well on TV hold an advantage in the high-performance world of live televised debates. Kennedy proved this, as did Reagan and Clinton. In each case, superior performing skills strongly accrued to the individual’s benefit. But telegenic gifts in themselves may not be enough to satisfy a debate audience.

An interesting case study in this regard is Ross Perot, who in 1992 demonstrated the pros and cons of coming across as a colorful character. Perot’s initial appearance in the three-way debates with Clinton and Bush brought something revolutionary to presidential debates: an endearing, and genuine, sense of humor. But audience surveys found that even as viewers responded favorably to the comic relief, they also dismissed Perot as shallow. It is possible, in other words, for a debater to be entertaining and unpersuasive at the same time.

Still, one wonders how a charismatic candidate without Perot’s negative baggage might fare in a presidential debate. Could a more polished practitioner of the television arts, someone who better understood the principles of pacing and novelty and drama, use these skills to win a debate on superficial criteria? In a close election, could the scales tip in favor of the candidate who puts on the more convincing show? Might a candidate who is trailing in the polls misappropriate the innate instability of a live debate to advance his cause?

Among the skeptics who have raised doubts about debates is veteran Washington journalist Elizabeth Drew. During the campaign of 1992, Drew wrote:

Debates are of mixed value to the process of picking a president. While they do give the country a sustained look at the candidates, debates—and the media’s interpretations of them afterward—tend to reward wrong, or irrelevant, qualifications. A gaffe can decide the presidency. The talents called forth—being quick on one’s feet, memorizing the better responses, hiring the better writer of one-liners—have little to do with what we need in a president. The media tend to turn the things into sports events—stressing who won or who threw the most potent punch (which is often the best one-liner). The debates are measured by their entertainment value.<sup>34</sup>

Drew calls debates a “false test” for the presidency,<sup>35</sup> an opinion widely shared by critics. As academic researcher Stephen Mills noted, “Debating requires brevity, consistency, extensive briefing, and constant rebuttal of the opponent. Governing requires more time, perhaps some inconsistency, improvisation, and compromise with opponents.” Mills is one of a number of analysts to point out the mistaken emphasis that debates place on *individual* performance, a structure at odds with the collegial functioning of the executive branch. “Governing requires skillful management of a team of advisers,” he wrote. “Debating, in contrast, focuses on the presidential candidates in isolation.”<sup>36</sup>

The argument that debates have limited relevance to the presidency has not been lost on the political professionals. After Ronald Reagan’s debacle in the first debate of 1984, Republican strategist Lee Atwater devised a preemptive plan in case Reagan went on to a second flop. In an internal memo known as “The Great American Fog Machine,” Atwater proposed a series of alibis to be repeated to the media in the event of another Reagan disaster: “TV debates are artificially contrived ‘pressure cookers’ which do not coincide with the actual pressures that confront a president”; “there is something fundamentally degrading about the entire process”; “most if not all civilized nations managed to select their leaders without subjecting them to this bizarre ritual”;<sup>37</sup> and so on.

Because the age joke put Reagan back on track in the second debate, Atwater’s strategy never saw the light of day. As long as the “bizarre ritual” of presidential debates did not harm the candidate, it would be allowed to endure.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF DEBATES ON VOTING

“Debates are to elections what treaties are to wars,” says political scientist and Democratic debate adviser Samuel Popkin. “They ratify what has already been accomplished on the battlefield.”<sup>38</sup> After forty years of analysis experts agree that joint candidate appearances move perceptions more than votes. Evidence from countless academic studies and political surveys indicates that, despite their high profile, presidential debates are but one of many factors considered at the ballot box. To further muddy the question, it is virtually impossible to isolate debates from other influences on voters’ decisions.

The mythos of presidential debates would have us believe that Kennedy won the 1960 election because he looked better on TV than Nixon; that Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe cost him the White House in 1976; that Reagan's "there you go again" was the coup de grace that finished the Carter presidency. As with most legends, these assertions reflect at least a kernel of truth. But contrary examples make the opposite case.

In 1984 an exceptionally bad debate did not stop Ronald Reagan's electoral landslide, while an exceptionally good one did not help Walter Mondale. If debates were determinative, Reagan's wobbly performance in Louisville ought to have inflicted more damage. Vice presidential debates appear to have even less of an effect. According to Dukakis campaign manager Susan Estrich, Lloyd Bentsen's victory over Dan Quayle, as conclusive a triumph as general election debates have ever known, bestowed only a slight, temporary bump in the polls. "Quayle's performance that night was nothing you would want to show in his library," Estrich said, "but it didn't hurt George Bush very much."<sup>39</sup>

Debate scholars Lanoue and Schrott have observed that the scheduling of presidential debates relatively late in the campaign means that most members of the viewing audience come to the programs predisposed in their preferences:

Clearly a majority of those watching any given presidential debate have already decided how they are going to vote in November. It is quite possible, therefore, that they tune in to political debates for the drama of the live confrontation between two celebrities rather than for education or guidance.<sup>40</sup>

It speaks well of the audience's common sense that although debates have been highly watched, they have not been excessively influential. Voters regard live TV debates as only one device for evaluating candidates—and an imperfect one at that. After nearly forty years' experience watching presidential debates, Americans seem to have reached a fairly sophisticated understanding of what the programs can and cannot do.

With each new series of presidential debates, the electorate's frame of reference expands. Increasingly viewers recognize the coaching, the planted one-liners, the jockeying for position, and the expectations-setting that color the televised encounters. Audiences for the Kennedy-Nixon broadcasts approached the "Great Debates" with few preconceptions; today's pub-

lic watches with a more solid understanding of the tactical considerations at play.

Researcher Diana Carlin has found recent audiences to be “incredibly” aware of the artifice of debates, and equally quick to dismiss it. “We often misjudge what the general public does and doesn’t understand, or why they are or aren’t interested, and we often attribute motives that are very different from reality,” Carlin said. “They’re on to the sound bites, they’re on to when candidates are avoiding, they’re on to strategies.”<sup>41</sup>

Amid so many mixed signals, one solid conclusion can be drawn about debate viewers: They are as unpredictable as the programs themselves. To the chagrin of political strategists, conventional wisdom formed in one debate season cannot accurately foretell what will happen in the next. It used to be believed that the first debate of a series generated the highest ratings, but the 1992 programs proved that theory wrong. Image was once thought to carry more weight with viewers than issues, but contradictory research has indicated otherwise. Audience effects are difficult to establish with any certainty because public reaction is not fixed; at best, the lessons lack definition.

“Perhaps we have not yet witnessed enough presidential debates to determine which are the rules and which are the exceptions,” wrote Lanoue and Schrott in the wake of the 1988 election, and, after two additional debate series, the statement remains valid. “Perhaps viewers’ reactions to each individual encounter are more idiosyncratic than we would like to think.”<sup>42</sup> If so, the audience may once again be demonstrating its wisdom. For an idiosyncratic response keeps candidates on their toes—and vests the power of presidential debates with the people.