

## *Conclusion*

### THE FUTURE OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

*I*n a study of the 1960 and 1976 debates, political communication researchers Marilyn Jackson-Beeck and Robert G. Meadow identified the “triple agenda” of presidential debates: the conflicting constituencies of campaigns, journalists, and the public that these programs are called on to serve. “It is possible for all three parties to the debates to be concerned with entirely different issues,” the professors wrote, “while engaging in what would seem to be trialogue.” Jackson-Beeck and Meadow concluded that in this three-way division of interests, it was candidates who derived the greatest benefit.<sup>1</sup>

Today, after a nearly forty-year tradition of presidential debates, candidates still hold the upper hand. By controlling every important aspect of debates, the political pros exercise their muscle in ways that run contrary to the ideals of participatory democracy. “Whose campaign is it?” asked David Broder at a 1990 symposium on presidential debates. “We have accepted, I think, far too passively the notion that it is up to the candidates and their advisers to deter-

mine what takes place and what's talked about and how it's talked about in a presidential campaign. This campaign belongs to the public."<sup>2</sup>

From Kennedy-Nixon to Clinton-Dole, political handlers have staked out debates as their exclusive territory—and have protected their interests accordingly. This has been a defining characteristic, perhaps *the* defining characteristic, of the staging of televised presidential debates. But as the institution matures, changes are at hand. With debates gaining status as a public entitlement, and with media technologies promising greater audience interactivity, the power equation of the triple agenda may be due for a realignment.

Let us close our analysis of presidential debates by looking at each of the three constituencies and examining how the role of these debates is evolving as they enter their fifth decade.

#### THE CANDIDATES

After so many years in the driver's seat, is it unrealistic to expect the politicos to loosen their grip on the wheel? On some level they may have no alternative. Already the critical question of candidate participation in presidential debates appears to have slipped from the jurisdiction of the campaigns. A strong case can be made that voters and journalists consider themselves "owed" joint appearances, that taking part is no longer a candidate's option. Although debates may not be 100 percent institutionalized, demand by the public and the media seems likely to ensure their longevity.

Another hopeful sign, one underreported in the press, came in June 1992 when the Clinton campaign broke precedent and accepted the debate commission's proposal for that year's candidate forums several months in advance. No previous presidential contender had ever seen fit to entrust debate arrangements to a third party ahead of schedule. "We thought [the recommendation] was fair and rational," chief Democratic negotiator Mickey Kantor explained, "and we didn't want to quibble over details or go into a lengthy negotiation. We didn't think that was in the public interest or in our interest politically."<sup>3</sup>

Had the proposal been agreed to by both sides, 1992 would have been the first election to lack a predebate debate; at last the essential planning decisions would have been removed from the candidates' hands. But because President Bush's team refused to cooperate, that year's debate arrangements

played out with the usual down-to-the-wire gamesmanship and posturing. As Republicans learned, toying with the debates carried a substantial political cost. If the “Chicken George” phenomenon makes future candidates think twice about shirking a co-appearance, then Bush will have performed a backhanded service to the institution.

Unfortunately the promise of 1992 did not carry over into the next round of debates. The 1996 debates brought a return to business as usual, with the Clinton and Dole camps conducting their own negotiations, largely divorced from the debate commission’s recommendations. The Democrats, who had so eagerly signed the 1992 agreement, now saw no reason to jinx their huge lead by acceding to any outside agent’s terms. This move may have made tactical sense, but it poorly served presidential debates. Advance endorsement by a pro-debate incumbent like Bill Clinton might have helped persuade subsequent candidates, especially those in the lead, to follow suit.

For the race of 2000 the Commission on Presidential Debates unveiled its fall debate package at the beginning of the year, several weeks before the opening primaries of the season. Sites, dates, and formats were announced in January, and nominees will be asked to sign on well ahead of the fall campaign. As before, the commission’s hope is to kill off once and for all the debilitating practice of predebate negotiations. The organization is banking on several factors: an untarnished track record of sponsorship that includes all ten presidential and vice presidential debates since 1988; the lack of an incumbent president in the race; and increased media pressure on the candidates to end their let’s-make-a-deal shenanigans.

We have seen that, on occasion, campaigns can show a willingness to be flexible, not just in empowering outside sponsors but in accepting format innovations. With an assist from Bill Clinton, presidential debates in the 1990s began to experiment with structures that have made the programs more interesting as television. Now that audiences have experienced the town hall and single-moderator formats, it seems difficult to conceive that debates could return to the rigid press conference setup of the past or that candidates would want them to.

It is interesting to note that the looser structures used in the last two series have moved presidential debates closer to the original concept proposed by network planners back in 1960. Until negotiators for Kennedy and Nixon balked, the broadcasters lobbied for a so-called direct confrontation, or “Oxford” debate, in which participants would question one another directly

with minimal input from a moderator. This remains the holy grail of debate formats, the one regularly promoted by sponsors, scholars, and journalists, and just as regularly swept off the bargaining table by cautious candidates.

It may be too much to hope that campaigns will voluntarily cede their longstanding control over key issues regarding the structure, scheduling, and production of presidential debates. But incrementally, hard-line attitudes can be softened, and recent developments suggest that handlers are capable of giving ground when the time is right. Even more important, as debates become further rooted as a public expectation, politicians may have no choice but to accept rules not of their own making.

#### THE PRESS

Are the media losing influence in leading the national conversation about presidential debates? In a general sense, probably not; if anything, the collective power of the various news outlets, electronic and otherwise, appears to be intensifying. But within the chorus, individual voices may be waning. As audiences fragment beyond the traditional over-the-air networks and national publications, the media giants find themselves competing for thinner slices of the public's attention.

Regrettably the growing hubbub that surrounds presidential debates has failed to produce a higher grade of journalism. Both before and after the fact, debate news centers almost exclusively on the horse race: Who got the edge on whom and why? Obviously strategy and performance are valid topics of inquiry for reporters covering presidential debates. But when these issues draw disproportionate attention, the opportunity to educate the public on more substantive points gets crowded out.

Consider, for example, how journalists cover the predebate haggling that determines the shape of the programs. As former Democratic Party chairman Paul Kirk says, "The first round of the debate is who the press thinks won the negotiations."<sup>4</sup> Kirk's comment properly pinpoints the problem: Reporters frame debate negotiations as a high-stakes poker game among Washington insiders, an end unto themselves. From the audience's point of view, the talks represent something altogether different: a set of preproduction decisions that will define how the debates play out as television events. Journalistic coverage of negotiations, so preoccupied with the political angle, tends to overlook the viewers' perspective.

Improving press coverage of debates will require reporters to rethink their overly collusive relationship with the campaigns. Although we cannot expect a return to the media innocence of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate, a sensible middle ground can be found between the circumspection of 1960 and the incestuous clamor of more recent debate journalism. Reporting that functions as an internal dialogue among members of the Washington press corps may satisfy the principal players, but it ill serves the millions who tune in for electoral enlightenment.

Both before and after the fact, debate coverage should be of practical value to the audience. Anthony Corrado, a political communication specialist who has extensively studied these programs, offers several suggestions for improvements in the predebate period. Although Corrado's recommendations refer specifically to the time slot immediately preceding the telecast, they might also apply to advance reporting in general. Corrado proposes that news anchors open the debate with information about the candidates' positions; provide a general summary of the campaign to date; then outline the major issues in the race. "This approach," he says, "would give the audience a better and more informative context for viewing the debates, and would offer voters more than the current fare of pundits and reporters talking about what 'we might expect to see' in the debate or what each candidate has to do to win."<sup>5</sup>

Building on these suggestions, coverage after the debate might expand beyond the usual tactical discussions and win-loss declarations. "At the minimum," wrote Jamieson and Birdsell, "the possibility that both candidates have won should be considered."<sup>6</sup> As a number of observers have pointed out, the proper analogy for journalistic evaluation of debates ought not to be a heavy-weight boxing match, with one party getting knocked cold and the other left standing. More logically a presidential debate resembles a job interview in which the applicants' pluses and minuses are weighed against each another. Using this standard, reporters could assess the substance of the participants' responses, in addition to critiquing along presentational lines—who looked more like a leader, who made a mistake, who got off the best one-liner.

News coverage that fails to serve the public interest runs the risk of being ignored on the grounds of irrelevance. Today's debate watchers have more control than ever over how and where they view the program. For most of the history of debates, the only option was to experience the candidates within a mediated context, as part of regular network coverage. Now viewers can pick and choose.

C-Span, for example, offers a “video verite” version of the debates that lets audiences dispense with journalists altogether. While the broadcast networks fill the pre- and postdebate screen with pundits and spinners, C-Span cameras and microphones transmit raw pictures and sound from the hall, putting viewers in the position of flies on the wall. The C-Span audience gets to sample the live warm-up, observe the candidates as they come onstage, study their faces as the countdown gets under way. When the debate ends, C-Span stays with its location coverage, showing the candidates as they interact with each other, with the questioners, and with spectators in the theater. On a number of levels, this makes for more compelling television than the predictable chatter of well-paid talking heads.

Some viewers have chosen to supplant postdebate media reactions with discussions of their own. In 1992 and 1996 a commission-sponsored project called DebateWatch brought together thousands of citizens around the country to screen and then talk about the programs. Many of these groups, in turn, generated local and national press coverage.

The latest media twist is the Internet, which in 1996 gave citizens another avenue into presidential debates. The populist nature of interactive computer technology coincides neatly with the propensity of debates to stimulate conversation. According to Mark Kuhn, who ran the DebateWatch '96 on-line discussion groups, “The Internet has taken power away from media analysts and pundits and told people they, too, can look and analyze for themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Although this electronic experiment got off to a modest start, with only about fifty on-line participants in each of the 1996 discussions, future presidential debates hold out the potential for widespread citizen engagement.

As media structures change, it is probable that the gatekeeping function of the press will continue to be challenged by alternative, grass-roots approaches, in debates as in other news events. To too great a degree, journalists have regarded presidential debates as a private preserve held in partnership with the campaigns. If the press is to maintain its centrality in this story, the reporting will need to connect less to the political establishment and more to the people.

#### THE PUBLIC

Throughout the history of presidential debates voters have played a paradoxical role in the proceedings. On the one hand, they are the *raison d'être*,

and the final arbiters, of debates. On the other, they have been woefully underrepresented in the programs' planning and execution, and either ignored or patronized in much of the postevent reaction.

An encouraging departure from this dynamic occurred in 1992, when the combination of experimental formats, multiple candidates, and a compressed timetable repackaged presidential debates into an eminently watchable miniseries. For the first time, the broadcasts became something other than politicians standing at lecterns giving serial responses to a panel of reporters. Most radically, the groundbreaking "people's debate" in Richmond placed citizens directly into the mix and proved that, when average Americans ask the questions, the focus moves away from the character assaults so beloved by journalists.

The introduction of the town hall format marks a turning point in the power structure of presidential debates. Still, the challenge for voters is to gain even greater influence. As long as these events remain the privileged turf of campaign and media elites, citizens will be relegated to the stands as onlookers. That debates are television programs should not doom the audience to the passivity that is customary in the viewing transaction; after all, these are not just any TV shows.

"One of the things that kept coming out of our 1992 focus groups," said audience researcher Diana Carlin, "is the statement that the public should own the debates. The media has chances to ask these candidates questions for years. Now there has to be a way for public input. What they're saying is, it has to be our agenda." This assertiveness bodes well for televised debates; as voters take a more proprietary interest, politicians and journalists will come under increasing pressure to include the audience in all phases of the process.

It is only fair that the wishes of the people be heeded, given the loyalty viewers have consistently accorded this programming genre. Beginning with that first night in Chicago, the public has responded enthusiastically to the authenticity and drama that presidential debates convey. From Kennedy-Nixon to Clinton-Dole, audiences have awarded these programs the highest of accolades: vast viewership. Because debates happen so rarely, their exalted status as "must-see TV" seems likely to hold firm for many years to come.

For all their faults—manipulation by the campaigns, oversaturation by the media, institutional strictures—televised presidential debates are the best vehicle voters have to personally judge candidates for the White House.

After forty years' experience, the electorate has learned to decode the incongruities of live TV debates, watching with a combination of skepticism, amusement, and respect. We are ready to be educated but not to be sold a bill of goods; we are eager to be entertained but willing to honor the seriousness of the occasion.

What was true of the first Kennedy-Nixon encounter remains true for audiences today. Within their limitations, presidential debates work. They work because they speak to the nation in a language that is every American's second tongue: the language of television.