

Evaluating a Presidential Debate

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The teacher should instruct students to read **Handout 1**, Presidential Debates Overview, a short essay on campaign debates, and then watch one of the several presidential debates that are conducted in the months leading up to the election to evaluate the candidates. Depending on the time of year, students could also use the Internet to find video records of previous debates. The teacher should advise the students to pay close attention to what the candidates say and note their observations on the grid in **Handout 2**.

Candidates will be evaluated in areas such as answering the questions asked, honesty, leadership qualities, domestic policy positions, foreign policy positions, and willingness to take a clear position on issues. Students should rate each candidate from 1 to 10 (10 being the best) in each area and total their numbers at the end of the debate to determine whom they would vote for if the election were the next day. Students should come to class the next day prepared to defend their position. This activity could be repeated for several debates so students can trace their changing opinions.

1 Presidential Debates, Overview

Campaign debates are an integral aspect of the U.S. election process. Over the past two generations, debates have grown in importance as new media have developed and politicians have discovered that Americans pay close attention to image rather than content when judging candidates for office.

Debates were central to the political and intellectual life of the early United States. Because the media was in its infancy, debates served as a tool for education, a method to polish political and professional skills, and the means to demonstrate a candidate's intellectual power. The invention of radio escalated the number and importance of debates as politicians realized the power of the medium to reach millions of listeners nationwide.

With the advent of television, however, campaign debates assumed an even larger place in the political process. It became apparent during the Nixon-Kennedy debate in 1960 that visual presentation was the key to dominating the forum, particularly as those watching the debate on television viewed the young, attractive John F. Kennedy as the winner, while those listening to the debate on the radio maintained that Richard Nixon had prevailed.

Recent debates have featured all of the candidates running for the nomination of their particular party. This has created a new dynamic in which some candidates throw their support to others in the hope of future political pay-offs. Others focus on single issues central to their constituencies and criticize more popular candidates for their voting records. Presidential debates in the 1990s saw an increase in negative attacks and bickering, although such tactics were not instrumental in altering the political appeal of the candidates.

Debates continue to serve a central role in the U.S. political process. Although the form of debates has remained largely intact, they will continue to undergo modification as new political nominees discover new ways to appeal to American voters.

Handout 2

| 1-10 Scale 10=BEST | OBAMA | MCCAIN | | SCORE |
|-------------------------|-------|--------|--|-------|
| LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE | | | | |
| HELPING THE ECONOMY | | | | |
| WAR IN IRAQ | | | | |
| CREDIBILITY | | | | |
| VICE PRESIDENT | | | | |
| IDEAS FOR EDUCATION | | | | |
| NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING | | | | |
| VOTING RECORD IN SENATE | | | | |
| PREPARED FOR DEBATE | | | | |
| REBUTTAL POINTS | | | | |
| OVERALL IMPRESSIONS | | | | |

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