

ABC News memo 9/26/08

Do Debates Matter?

The presidential debates are scheduled to start tomorrow, inevitably portrayed as potentially decisive. Is it so? Do debates change things?

Directly and measurably, generally not. But indirectly or more subtly, likely so. And there are plenty of reasons to think that this year's campaign could be especially sensitive to the candidates' debate performances.

Debates have been held in nine presidential contests since 1960. We find just one after which the lead changed hands by a clearly significant margin: In 1980, when Ronald Reagan uttered his "are you better off" line. He gained 7 points in a post-debate poll.

But there are other cases in which debates (or post-debate evaluations) may have had a more subtle, less measurable effect on the dynamics of the race. They are, after all, an essential window on the candidates' styles and grasp of the issues alike. After Richard Nixon's pasty-faced performance in the 1960 debates, John Kennedy went from 46 percent support to 49 percent; Nixon, from 47 to 45. Those changes are not large enough to be significant given polling tolerances. Nonetheless, the numerical "lead" switched, and collective memory maintains that the debates spelled Nixon's narrow defeat (either that, or Richard Daley).

Nor did polls show significant movement immediately after the 1976 debate in which Gerald Ford said Poland was free (and news reports pounced on the misstatement); Jimmy Carter gained a single point, Ford lost 3. Again, though, the gaffe may have had the more subtle effect of halting what had been a slide in Carter's lead.

Then 73-year-old Reagan's teasing jibe in 1984 about 56-year-old Walter Mondale's "youth and inexperience" didn't change the numbers, but perhaps helped put aside questions about Reagan's age. And in 2000, Al Gore's technocratic debate performance saw him go in at +2 and leave at -3, although again within sampling error.

Our polls in 2004, 1996 and 1988 showed no significant movement, nor a change of numerical "leads," around the debates. In 1992 there was more movement, though never enough to change Bill Clinton's advantage. (There's also the question of missed opportunities in debates, as in Mike Dukakis' bloodless answer to what he'd do if his wife were raped and murdered.)

This year, the elements for impact seem ripe. Rather than a hold-your-nose, low-turnout election, this one's a barn-burner, with two popular candidates and a highly engaged electorate. Attention to the race is the highest we've ever measured; 91 percent of registered voters are following it closely, 55 percent "very" closely. That suggests big audiences for the debates, as there were for the nominating conventions.

We've been seeing significant poll-to-poll movement among key swing voter groups, notably independents; they're less rooted in partisanship, and they see appealing features – as well as weaknesses – in both candidates. That makes it hard to decide. The debates well may help.

The potential importance of the debates this year is enhanced by the candidates' personal attributes. John McCain's age is a serious issue; a record-high 48 percent of registered voters say it's an important factor in their choice, and those voters currently favor Barack Obama by a wide margin. Obama, for his part, faces ongoing questions about the depth of his experience, his readiness for office and his suitability as commander-in-chief of the military. The candidates' grasp and acuity will be on stage at the debates as nowhere else. And that holds for the vice presidential debate as well.

CHANGE – In instant reactions, at least, past polling has found that debates mainly reinforce preconceived notions rather than change them; most of each candidates' supporters say it's their guy who won, and precious few say their minds were changed.

Still, while debates rarely prompt immediate, measurable change, post-debate evaluations can. In 1992, right after the first debate, 24 percent of viewers said Ross Perot had won. By the very next night, amid positive reviews of Perot's performance, that perception had grown to 37 percent among people who either had watched it, or heard or read about it. And Perot's support did advance, from 6 percent before the debates to 17 percent after them.

Measurements of immediate post-debate reactions are suspect for a number of reasons. Some are callback polls, made late at night to previously recruited respondents and subject to serious sampling and weighting limitations. Some ask who "won," others who "did the better job"; some accept "tie" as an answer and some don't. Instant reactions, also, bypass the role of considered judgment; sometimes people actually need a little while to think about things.

Worst, someone somewhere is sure to run an online pseudo-poll, in which people can click in their "vote" for the winner. In 2000 Jim Nicholson, then-chairman of the RNC, sent around a mass e-mail telling supporters to go to online click-ins at CNN.com and ABCNews.com, "log on tonight: Vote after the debate and make your voice heard!" Voila: The ABCNews.com click-in had Bush "winning" the debate. Aaagh.

RUNDOWN – Here's a rundown of the measurable debate effect (or lack thereof) in each election since 1960. There were no debates in 1964, 1968 or 1972.

1960 – Gallup had Nixon +1, but that was 12 days before the first debate; it had Kennedy +3 after it. Twelve days is a long time and 4 points is a small number. Gallup didn't poll between the remaining three debates, but showed Kennedy +4 after the last one.

Gallup:				
	Kennedy	Nixon		
Pre-debate poll 9/14/60	46	47	Nixon +1	
1st Debate 9/26/60				
Post-debate poll 10/2/60	49	46	Kennedy +3	
2nd Debate 10/7/60				
3rd Debate 10/13/60				
4th Debate 10/21/60				
Post-debate poll 10/23/60	49	45	Kennedy +4	

1976 – News reports jumped on Ford's misstatement of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in the second debate. Carter's lead had been diminishing, and that did stop after this debate. But the measured change after the second debate was tiny - Carter gained 1 point, Ford lost 3.

Gallup:				
	Carter	Ford		
"Late August"	51	36	Carter +15	
1st Debate 9/23/76				
Post-debate poll 9/27/76	51	40	Carter +11	
Pre-debate poll 10/4/76	47	45	Carter +2	
2nd Debate 10/6/76				
Post-debate poll 10/11/76	48	42	Carter +6	
Pre-debate poll 10/18/76	47	41	Carter +6	
3rd debate 10/22/76				
Post-debate poll 10/25/76	49	44	Carter +5	

1980 – This one looks to have mattered: Gallup's pre-debate poll had Carter +8; post-debate, Reagan +3. (John Anderson did not participate.)

	Gallup:			
	Carter	Reagan	Anderson	
Pre-debate poll 10/26/80	47	39	9	Carter +8
Debate 10/28/80				
Post-debate poll 11/3/80	43	46	7	Reagan +3

1984 – Mondale crept up, but Reagan stayed ahead by double digits nonetheless.

	ABC and ABC/Post:			
	Mondale	Reagan		
Pre-debate poll 10/2/84	35	52		Reagan +17
1st Debate 10/7/84				
Post-debate poll 10/9/84	39	54		Reagan +15
Pre-debate poll 10/16/84	41	53		Reagan +12
2nd Debate 10/21/84				
Post-debate poll 10/23/84	41	54		Reagan +13

1988 – We don't have an ABC poll done right before the first debate; in a Gallup poll it was George H. W. Bush +8. Our poll after the second debate showed no meaningful movement.

	ABC and ABC/Post:			
	Dukakis	Bush		
1st Debate 9/25/88				
Pre-debate poll 10/11/88	45	51		Bush +6
2nd Debate 10/13/88				
Post-debate poll 10/18/88	45	52		Bush +7

1992 – Perot moved up 5 points in ABC News polling after the first debate and 4 points after the third debate. Before the debates he had 6 percent support; after the last debate he was up to 17 percent. Clinton moved up by 5 points after the second debate, Bush down by 6, then Clinton down by 6 after the third. But Clinton led throughout.

	ABC News:			
	Clinton	Bush	Perot	
Pre-debate poll 10/10/92	49	35	6	Clinton +14
1st Debate 10/11/92				
Post-debate poll 10/13/92	45	35	11	Clinton +10
Pre-debate poll 10/14/92	44	37	11	Clinton +7
2nd Debate 10/15/92				
Post-debate poll 10/17/92	49	31	12	Clinton +18
Pre-debate poll 10/18/92	49	30	13	Clinton +19
3rd Debate 10/19/92				
Post-debate poll 10/21/92	43	32	17	Clinton +11

1996 – The race looked perhaps slightly tighter after the second debate, but Clinton maintained a double-digit lead throughout.

	ABC News:			
	Clinton	Dole	Perot	
Pre-debate poll 9/29/96	52	37	5	Clinton +15
1st Debate 10/6/96				
Post-debate poll 10/8/96	54	38	5	Clinton +16
Pre-debate poll 10/15/96	55	38	4	Clinton +17
2nd Debate 10/16/96				
Post-debate poll 10/18/96	52	41	5	Clinton +11

2000 – Gore went in +2 and came out -3 – a change of lead, but within sampling error. And a week after the last debate it was back to a dead heat, 47-47 percent.

	ABC and ABC/Post:			
	Gore	Bush	Nader	
Pre-debate poll 10/1/00	48	46	3	Gore +2
1st Debate 10/3/00				
Post-debate poll 10/9/00	45	48	3	Bush +3
2nd Debate 10/11/00				
Post-debate poll 10/15/00	44	48	4	Bush +4
3rd Debate 10/17/00				
Post-debate poll 10/20/00	45	48	3	Bush +3

2004 – There were some wiggles in the debate period – a 6-point lead for George W. Bush before the first debate was a dead heat before the third – but when all was said and done the race after the debates looked a lot like the race before them.

	ABC and ABC/Post:			
	Kerry	Bush	Nader	
Pre-debate poll 9/26/04	45	51	1	Bush +6
1st Debate 9/30/04				
Post-debate poll 10/3/04	46	51	1	Bush +5
Pre-debate poll 10/7/04	47	50	*	Bush +3
2nd Debate 10/8/04				
Post-debate poll 10/11/04	46	50	1	Bush +4
Pre-debate poll 10/12/04	48	48	1	=
3rd Debate 10/13/04				
Post-debate poll 10/16/04	46	50	2	Bush +4

End note:

2008 – The main shift in vote preference came before the first debate, as Obama seized the reins of economic discontent after the failure of Lehman Brothers in mid-September. McCain's +2 in early September, just after the GOP convention, proved to be his best. The race shifted to Obama +9 in an ABC/Post poll completed Sept. 22, four days before the first debate. Obama never trailed again.

	ABC/Post (LVs)			
	Obama	McCain		
Post-GOP convention 9/7/08	47	49		McCain +2
Lehman Brothers fails 9/15				

Pre-debate poll 9/22/08	52	43	Obama +9
McCain "suspends" campaign 9/24			
1st Debate 9/26/08			
Post-debate poll 9/29/08	50	46	Obama +4
2nd Debate 10/7/08			
Between-debate poll 10/11/08	53	43	Obama +10
3rd Debate 10/15/08			
Post-debate poll 10/19/08	53	44	Obama +9

While the three debates did not significantly change the standings, ABC/Post measures indicated that Obama did win them: after each debate more people said they'd come away with a better opinion of him (19, 33 and 36 percent) than said that about McCain (14, 12 and 20 percent).

ABC/Post: As a result of the presidential debates, do you have a better opinion of [NAME], a worse opinion of him, or haven't the debates changed your opinion of [NAME] one way or the other?

a. Obama

		Better	Worse	Has not changed	No opin.
10/19/08	LV	36	12	51	1
10/11/08*	LV	33	8	58	1
9/29/08*	RV	19	7	68	7

b. McCain

10/19/08	LV	20	26	53	2
10/11/08*	LV	12	28	59	1
9/29/08*	RV	14	11	68	7

As in the past, the debates may have had subtler effects on the campaign dynamic. The relatively young and inexperienced Obama needed to bolster the sense he was ready for the presidency, and did so; the view that he had "the kind of experience necessary to be president" exceeded 50 percent for the first time after the first debate (52 percent Sept. 29, compared to 48 percent Sept. 7), then, after the second debate, held from 54 to 56 percent for the rest of the campaign.

Likewise after the first debate 55 percent saw Obama as a "safe" choice for president, up from 50 percent in our previous measure on this question in mid-June, and again he held at that new level, 54 to 56 percent, through to Election Day. He also saw slight improvement after the first debate in trust to handle the economy, which again persisted through Election Day.

McCain, for his part, failed to reassure voters about his age. In our post-convention poll Sept. 7, 56 percent said they'd be comfortable with his taking office at age 72. That slipped to 52 percent in our next measure, Sept. 29, after the first debate, and by Oct. 11 it was 50 percent.

Even before the first debate, as the financial crisis mushroomed, McCain lost his edge in trust to handle an unexpected major crisis (a 7-point drop, to 47 percent, from Sept. 7 to Sept. 22). This wobbled (50-44 percent McCain-Obama after the first debate, 52-43 percent Obama-McCain after the second), after which Obama held at least even with McCain on the question the rest of the way.

Finally, as Obama improved from mid-summer in ratings as a "safe" rather than a "risky" choice, McCain worsened, with views of him as risky rising from 41 percent in June to 48 percent after

the first debate and 50 percent after the second, then holding at 46 to 49 percent in subsequent tests up to Election Day.

On this, though, as on these other underlying measures, it's not clear what if any direct role was played by the debates, compared with other campaign dynamics. And again it's worth underscoring that the big change came not during or just after the three presidential debates, but shortly before them, as the economy tipped into the abyss and Obama moved ahead to stay.