

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON
DAVID S. BIRDSELL

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES



THE CHALLENGE OF
CREATING AN
INFORMED ELECTORATE

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Kathleen Hall Jamieson

David S. Birdsell

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*To Margaret Surratt and
Dale and Myrtle Birdsell*

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Austin, Texas
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March 1988

K. H. J.
D. S. B.

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Presidential Debates

Introduction

The Vietnam war was not an issue in the 1964 presidential campaign. Four years later, public opposition to his handling of that war prompted Lyndon Johnson's decision to withdraw from the presidential race. In 1976 few in the audience could identify Ayatollah Khomeini; yet in 1980, his holding of U.S. hostages cast a shadow over the campaign.

Elections invite voters to become fortune-tellers. We must guess how a candidate would act in circumstances we may not even be able to imagine. An Arab oil cartel is formed or disintegrates. A Soviet leader is ousted or dies; Brezhnev gives way to Gorbachev. A Berlin Wall is built. Soviet missiles are moved to Cuba.

How can we know whom to entrust with the nation's highest elected office? Answers are elusive. If a long, distinguished legislative career is a useful guide, then how could we have forecast the successes of Lincoln or Eisenhower? Military prowess has yielded such dissimilar presidents as Taylor, William Henry Harrison, and Andrew Jackson. What about Wilson would have predicted his failures and successes?

When presidents were chosen by the elite few, intimate knowledge could guide electors. Trust in George Washington was confirmed in this way. But as the electorate grew, such knowledge became inaccessible to most. As parties emerged to select nominees, certification by one sort of peer replaced another. The rise of the broadcast media cut the umbilical cord that tied candidates to party platforms. The job of determining the qualifications of those who aspired to the presidency fell to the press and public. For evidence, they had words and images—aggregations of lines on paper or dots on a television screen.

What these images and words promised was not necessarily what they delivered. The presumed "peace candidate" in 1964 delivered an expanded land war in Asia. The candidate who in 1968 touted a secret plan to stop that war had not found a way to honorably end it by 1972.

When voters report, as they have since the early 1970s, that their voting decisions are more influenced by the character of the candidate than by stands on issues or party affiliation, they are revealing, in part, the extent to which party and promises are insufficient to allay the fears engendered by unforecast policies and unanticipated presidential behaviors: two presidents of opposite parties who lied to the American people; a succession who promised and failed to deliver full employment and a balanced budget without tax increases.

This book focuses on presidential debates to determine "What can we know and how can we know it?"

In a televised world filled with pre-timed, candidate-packaged messages, a world surfeiting in speech writers, media masters, and press aides, the electorate otherwise is hard pressed to know that what it sees is what it will get as president.

So skillful have candidates and their consultants become at choreographing themselves for news, that news can no longer assume the complete burden of disclosing the person who would be president. Biased toward dramatic, digressive, visual messages and pre-occupied not with the substance of speeches but with their effect and strategic intent, broadcast news is more likely to focus on the race than on the decisive similarities and differences between the candidates. So do ads. As a result, a phalanx of consultants and advisers can hide a candidate behind carefully scripted and staged speeches and professionally produced ads.

Those who reduce the substance of campaigns to spot ads and situate these snippets within programming, tacitly acknowledge that the audience for ads is an inadvertent one. Audiences are unaccustomed to pondering the meaning and evidence harbored in ads for deodorants, discount records, denture creams, and toilet bowl cleaners. Framing political ads with "L.A. Law" and laxatives equates the presidency with escapist melodrama and disposable products and also invites viewers to see the claims of the candidates as unworthy of attention in their own right.

The audience that views debates has not been tricked into attention by its desire to learn the Venus Butterfly. By virtue of being ad-

free, sustained encounters, debates assert the seriousness of the judgment they and the candidates court.

Not only do debates invite a focused attention uncharacteristic of ads but they also create a climate in which even those otherwise disposed to shun political messaging are expected to be able to converse about political data. "For days after the 1960 debates," recalled columnist David Broder before the 1980 debates, "there was intensive private conversation about the debates."¹ After the first debate of 1976, for example, eight of ten people reported that they had discussed the exchange.² The social pressure to take a sustained view of both candidates creates a climate more conducive to political learning than any other which the typical voter will seek or chance upon.

In a campaign season chock full of spot ads and news snippets viewers turn to debates to provide sustained analysis of issues and close comparisons of candidates. "Debate" has become a buzzword for "serious politics." Yet, after pulling out of the Democratic primary race in February 1988, former Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt bemoaned what he called the candidates' failure to address the most important issues. "We haven't really joined a debate. You know, you listen to the candidates and you think, they're all just talking."³ Within the month, other candidates had joined in the chorus. "Some way must be found to get past the slogans," said Gary Hart in the Houston debate held in late February 1988. "We're trapped in these go-second sound bites trying to say things that make a difference," added Jesse Jackson. But, countered debate moderator Linda Ellerbee, the format of this debate was put together by members of the campaign staffs of the candidates. "Your people agreed that this was the fairest way to do it." Whenever longer treatments of issues are proposed, added veteran television analyst Walter Cronkite, the opponents are the network executives and the campaign consultants.⁴

These charges occurred in a primary campaign featuring more candidate debates than any other in the history of presidential politics. If the candidates did not "really" join in debate, it was certainly not for lack of nationally televised events described as debates. By February 17, the date of Babbitt's withdrawal, the Democrats had met one another in such encounters at least twenty-two times, and one more was scheduled for the following evening. The programs were moderated by a representative of either the media or a national interest group; at least four of the candidates were

present. By the conventions, the omnipresence of the debates had elicited parodies and jokes by candidates.

Many analysts suggest that the central problem is that these "joint press conferences" are not really debates at all.⁵ Much can be said for this point of view. In the most common of the current formats, moderators and/or press panelists come between those who might otherwise argue directly among themselves. Sustained consideration of important issues is at best difficult when the topics shift rapidly, the emphases are determined by noncontestants, and the time is short. On the other hand, what we now know as candidate debates do provide politicians with a national forum in which to take their cases to the people. Presidential hopefuls gain some opportunity to spar if only by poking at one another in stolen asides. Debates in some senses and individual performances in others, these moderated confrontations defy simple classification.

Quite another question is whether these events—however labeled—are in the best interests of a nation faced with choosing a leader. Do they test knowledge and vision? Do they sort good ideas from bad? Do they reveal important character traits and habits of mind? In short, do they provide voters with what they need to know to choose a president?

Because they are national events, hyped by the campaigns and heralded by the media, and because, until the advent of cable, competing programming was minimal, debates were the fulcrum of the presidential campaigns in which they occurred. By 1976, over 98% of the homes in America owned televisions, so debates were accessible. Aired during a time when most are accustomed to viewing television, the prime-time general election debates are difficult to ignore. When debates are announced, movement in the polls slows; in anticipation, the electorate suspends its willingness to be swayed by ads and news. Here is the opportunity to see the candidates side by side, unfiltered and unedited.

The nation's experience with televised presidential debates dates from the 1960 election when John Kennedy faced Richard Nixon. The four sessions held in that year were not only the first televised presidential debates, but the first face-to-face debates of any sort between the nominees of the major parties.

If the idea of presidential candidate debates was new, the concept of political debating, even debating in presidential campaigns, was not. The great deliberative assemblies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were in part debate societies constituted to

enable the elected representatives of the people to meet one another to plead their cases for the best interests of the nation. Though contemptuous of electioneering, some individuals contesting for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives felt the need to debate on the campaign trail as early as 1788. Since the House was elected by direct popular vote, such appeals made sense. Early in the country's history two of its founders and future presidents—James Madison and James Monroe—engaged in debate for a congressional seat from Virginia. Some of these debates became legendary. In 1838, John T. Stuart and Stephen A. Douglas held joint debates in all the county seats of their Illinois congressional district. Each was a recognized champion of his party. Stuart was elected to Congress by a mere eight votes.

Occasionally debate was prompted not by a forthcoming election but a pending national issue. In 1854, Lincoln, who had held a single term in the House, took on incumbent Senator Stephen Douglas over the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Douglas spoke for the bill at the 1854 Illinois State Agricultural Fair; Judge Trumbell of Alton, a famous anti-Nebraskan Democrat, failed to arrive on time to deliver his scheduled reply; Lincoln, the most prominent of Illinois' anti-Nebraskan Whigs, countered Douglas' speech that evening. Earlier that year, Lincoln had rebutted Calhoun—another pro-Nebraska Democrat.

Because U.S. senators were not elected by popular vote but by the legislature, the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 were controversial. "The present political canvass in Illinois is a singular one, and, I think, without a parallel in the history of electioneering campaigns in this country," wrote a correspondent for the *New York Evening Post* on October 21, 1858. "I say it is without parallel, for I do not believe that another instance can be shown where two individuals have entered into a personal contest before the public for a seat in the United States Senate—an office not directly in the gift of the people, but their representatives." "The members of the coming Legislature of Illinois will be just as free to exercise their own will in the choice of a Senator, as if neither Mr. Douglas nor Mr. Lincoln had perigrinated the State from lake to river, wrangling over what they are pleased to consider great national issues," sniffed the *Cincinnati Commercial* on September 23 of the same year. "The whole country is disgusted with the scene now exhibited in the State of Illinois," opined the *Washington, D.C., Union* (September 2, 1858). "The paramount object" of legislative selection

"was to place the selection of a senator beyond the reach of the maddening issues of the hour to which the members of the lower house were exposed. But the spirit of the constitution is now being violated in Illinois." Two who had debated in House campaigns broke the taboo on such contests between senatorial opponents. History repeated itself in 1960. The first two major party nominees to debate each other had gained their House or Senate seats by besting incumbents in debate.

Although presidential candidates were thought to be above campaigning for themselves, surrogates for the candidates debated vigorously throughout the 1800s. In 1856, for example, Abraham Lincoln took to the stump in support of presidential contender John C. Frémont. But decorum dictated that presidential candidates themselves not debate. So William Jennings Bryan did not engage McKinley when his campaign brought him to McKinley's home town of Canton, Ohio. Nor did William Howard Taft and TR clash in person when they passed through the same town in the bitter campaign of 1912.

The debates that did occur were closely followed by voters who bought thousands of copies of the more famous speeches and read newspapers packed with detailed accounts of local contests. Political debating took place in a culture that valued debate as a means of educating leaders and elevating the character of the citizenry.

None of this means the system was flawless. Some partisans left after hearing the speech of their favorite. "Today we listened to a 3½ hour's speech from the Hon Abram Lincoln, in reply to that of Judge Douglas of yesterday," wrote a reporter for the *Chicago Democratic Press* on October 6, 1854. "He made a full and convincing reply and showed up squatter sovereignty in all its unblushing pretensions. We came away as Judge Douglas commenced to reply to Mr. Lincoln." Partisan newspapers accused each other of distorting the words of their candidate. "[I]t seems, from the difference between the two versions of Lincoln's speech, that the Republicans have a candidate for the Senate of whose bad rhetoric and horrible jargon they are ashamed, upon which, before they would publish it, they called a council of 'literary' men, to discuss, re-construct and re-write," observed the *Chicago Tribune* on August 25, 1858. "[T]hey dare not allow Lincoln to go into print in his own dress; and abuse us, the *Times*, for reporting him literally." Then as now the charge "all style and no substance" was heard.

Douglas' speeches "are plainly addressed to an excited crowd at some railway station, and seem uttered in unconsciousness that the whole American People are virtually deeply interested though not intensely excited auditors," noted the *New York Tribune* on November 9. "They are volcanic and scathing but lack the repose of conscious strength, the calmness of conscious right. They lack forecast and are utterly devoid of faith." Nor was news coverage necessarily substantive. "On the way to the railway track the procession of the Judge was met by Abe, who in a kind of nervous-excited manner tumbled out of his carriage, his legs appearing sadly in the way or out of place," reported the *Missouri Republican* (August 1, 1858). "Lincoln is looking quite worn out, his face looks even more haggard than when he said it was lean, lank and gaunt."

Then as now sports and battle metaphors abounded. "Illinois is regarded as the battle-ground of the year" wrote the *New York Semi-Weekly Post* (August 18, 1858). "The real battle has begun, by broadsides too, from the heaviest artillery," observed the *Louisville Democrat* (September 5, 1858). "We hope that Mr. Lincoln will continue to follow up Senator Douglas with a sharp stick, even if it does make his organ howl with rage," exclaimed the *Illinois State Journal* (July 23, 1858).

In his speech at Havana, Illinois, on August 13 (*Chicago Tribune*, August 25, 1858), Lincoln joked about the inappropriateness of the fight metaphor:

I am informed [said he] that my distinguished friend yesterday became a little excited—nervous, perhaps—[laughter]—and said something about *fighting*, as though referring to a pugilistic encounter between him and myself. . . . I am informed, further, that somebody in *his* audience, rather more excited or nervous than himself, took off his coat, and offered to take the job off Judge Douglas's hands, and fight Lincoln himself. . . . Well, I merely desire to say that I shall fight neither Judge Douglas nor his second [great laughter]. I shall not do this for two reasons, which I will now explain. In the first place, a fight would *prove* nothing which is in issue in this contest. It might establish that Judge Douglas is a more muscular man than myself, or it might demonstrate that I am a more muscular man than Judge Douglas. But this question is not referred to in the Cincinnati platform, nor in either of the Springfield platforms [great laughter]. . . . My second reason for not having a personal encounter with the Judge is, that I don't believe he wants it himself. [laughter] He and I are about the best friends in the world, and

when we get together he would no more think of fighting me than of fighting his wife.

The extended history of political debate in America provides a record against which to assess the qualities of contemporary televised debates. In this book, we offer a review of past practices in an effort to discover how present debates serve the body politic and how they might be changed to be more helpful. Political debates have been important for more than two hundred years and respond to the history of that experience. By examining the role of debate in different historical and cultural circumstances, we can gain a clearer idea of the implications of format, the role of advocates, and the inherent qualities of debate as a form.

From the welter of competing formats, several characteristics emerge to define debate. Rhetorical scholar J. Jeffrey Auer identified five in his review of the 1960 presidential debates. Traditionally, debates have involved "(1) a confrontation, (2) in equal and adequate time, (3) of matched contestants, (4) on a stated proposition, (5) to gain an audience decision."⁶ To Auer's list we would add a sixth: debates are rule governed.

These six characteristics enable debate to embody basic democratic assumptions and commit political leaders to them while calling forth a response from the audience that is consistent with them. Our country's belief in free speech is given substance in the words of the candidates, the panelists, the sponsors of the event, the news commentators, and the citizens whose opinions are reflected in polls. The notion that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed is implied by the presence of a national audience. Where the constitutional debates were held in secret and their proceedings veiled in mystery, the country gradually came to accept that in a democracy debate should take place in the open, before the people. The records of those early constitutional debates were released. Senate and House proceedings were transcribed and published.

The belief that our system entails democratic choice is evident in the presence of two or more candidates whose task is to demonstrate that one would better represent the country than the others. Throughout the debates, the candidates will agree that the problems facing the country are solvable, that its institutions are functional, and that the people rule. The simultaneous presence of two candidates invites a focus on the office of president as well as those

who aspire to hold it and a concentration on presidential relations with Congress as an institution regardless of the particular persons who represent the citizenry in the House and Senate.

Although the ideal of debate has rarely been realized in practice, it was useful for those who had just founded a new country. Debate flourished in the early days of this country because the country had to reestablish order after overthrowing one set of institutions for another. The new institutions needed to demonstrate that they were more legitimate than those they had replaced. Where the colonists had remonstrated and pleaded without response from George III, here would be a system responsive to the voices of the aggrieved.

The rhetoric of “we, the people” and “governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed” was powerful stuff. The founders—a landed, educated elite—set in motion a system that would bind the conduct of subsequent generations of elites and would eventually empower the broader population to take part in government. Power would not transfer by bloodline but election. Power would be checked by other power. At the heart of “checks and balances” was a confidence in the ability of the best ideas to triumph if strongly presented by forceful advocates in a fair forum. Accordingly, the veto message of a president would be read into the record of Congress. Congress would then *reconsider* the legislation it had offered for signature.

The founders held George III accountable for his actions. The notion of presidential accountability to the people also emerged gradually. As we will argue, the form in which it emerged—the presidential press conference/debate—may not be well suited to accomplish this important objective. Since we will compare alternative forms of political communication to the classical concept of debate, let us briefly describe each of its characteristics.

A Confrontation

Debate gains its vitality from direct challenge. Advocates who disagree meet one another face to face to argue their differences. Misrepresentation invites immediate response. Unprepared debaters risk embarrassment and audience rejection. The great debates of history such as Madison–Lansing, Webster–Hayne, and Lincoln–Douglas pitted one against the other in the same place at the same time.