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## Kennedy/Nixon Debates

Four televised debates in the 1960 presidential campaign pitting Democratic challenger John F. Kennedy against Republican vice-president Richard M. Nixon are widely considered a landmark in the history of American political campaigning. Although candidates vying for a party's nomination had debated occasionally in the years following World War II, the 1960 debates marked the first time in American history that major-party candidates for president had debated against each other during a general election campaign. The next presidential debate would not occur until 1976, after which debates would become a regular feature of the fall presidential campaign.

The lapse in presidential debating between 1960 and 1976 may have stemmed in part from a myth that arose almost immediately after the first Kennedy/Nixon debate, in which a sickly and perspiring Nixon faced off against a tanned and composed Kennedy. Never before had a debate between two candidates for national office been transmitted live, to a national audience, and through the medium of television. It is widely believed that those who listened to the debate on radio thought that Nixon had won, while those who watched the debate on television thought that Kennedy had won. Such a difference would presumably demonstrate the power of visual imagery over the spoken word.

Evidence in support of this belief is mainly limited to sketchy reports about a market survey conducted by Sindlinger & Company in which 49% of those who listened to the debates on radio said Nixon had won compared to 21% naming Kennedy, while 30% of those who watched the debates on television said Kennedy had won compared to 29% naming Nixon. Contrary to popular belief, the Sindlinger evidence suggests not that Kennedy won on television but that the candidates tied on television while Nixon won on radio. However, no details about the sample have ever been reported, and it is unclear whether the survey results can be generalized to a larger population. Moreover, since 87% of American households had a television in 1960, most people were able to watch the debates. The fraction of Americans lacking access to television in 1960 was concentrated in rural areas and particularly in southern and western states, places that were unlikely to hold significant proportions of Catholic voters. Radio

listeners in 1960 were therefore predisposed to vote Republican, casting further doubt on whether the Sindlinger survey results speak to the effects of television or merely of the urban/rural split in Nixon's support.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and David S. Birdsell. *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Krause, Sidney. "Winners of the First 1960 Televised Presidential Debate between Kennedy and Nixon." *Journal of Communication*. 46 no. 4 (August 1996): 78-96.

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