

# The Great Debate: Kennedy, Nixon, and Television in the 1960 Race for the Presidency

by *Liette Gidlow*

Imagine the setting. Since soon after the close of World War II, the United States had been engaged in a heated Cold War with the Communist Soviet Union. Within the previous four years, Soviet tanks and troops had crushed a democratic revolt in Hungary and threatened to run the Allies out of West Berlin, drawing tighter the Iron Curtain that closed off Eastern Europe from the West. The USSR had stunned the world with the successful launch of Sputnik, the first space-orbiting satellite, and raised fears that the Soviets would quickly achieve military superiority in space. Earlier that year, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had reached a fever pitch when an American pilot was shot down and captured while spying on Soviet military installations.



*Televised debate between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, 1960. (National Park Service)*

In the race for the presidency that November, one candidate was young, had served little more than a single undistinguished term in the US Senate, and could offer no experience to speak of in foreign affairs. The other candidate, a two-term vice president, had made a successful political career out of battling Communists at home and abroad, relentlessly pursuing former State Department official Alger Hiss, and even going toe-to-toe with the Soviet premier himself, prevailing over Nikita Khrushchev in the “Kitchen Debate” by arguing for the superiority of the American way of life. At a time when the missile gap was one of the most pressing issues of the election, political commentators compared the two candidates and joked about the “stature gap” between them. If you were betting on who would win the high-stakes presidential election to become the leader of the free world that fall, which candidate would you have put your money on?

Well, the year was 1960, and the victorious candidate was not the experienced one, but the youthful one. Part of the reason that John F. Kennedy captured the presidency was the way he performed in a series of televised debates against his Republican opponent, Richard M. Nixon. The Kennedy-Nixon debates stand out as a remarkable moment in the nation’s political history, not only because they propelled an unlikely candidate to victory, but also because they ushered in an era in which television dominated the electoral process. Recalling the nineteenth-century tradition of “front porch” campaigns in which groups of citizens traveled to a presidential candidate’s home to meet him and question him about the issues, Charles Kuralt of CBS News declared that Kennedy’s skill with the medium helped to make television the nation’s new “front porch.”

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As for the Kennedy-Nixon debates, there had never been anything quite like them. The first nationally televised presidential debates, they attracted an audience of an unprecedented size. Some seventy-seven million Americans, over sixty percent of the adult population, watched the first exchange. The four

prime-time debates were broadcast in September and October and presented in a format that has since become familiar, with opening and closing statements offered by each candidate and questions posed by a panel of journalists.

The debates made Kennedy look like a winner. His practice of looking at the camera when answering the questions—and not at the journalists who asked them, as Nixon did—made viewers see him as someone who was talking directly to them and who gave them straight answers. Kennedy's performance showed not only that he was a knowledgeable and credible elected official, but also that he just plain looked better. The often repeated story—which is in fact true—is that polls taken after the first debate showed that most people who listened to it on the radio felt that Nixon had won, while most who watched it on television declared Kennedy the victor. A polished public speaker, Kennedy appeared young, athletic, handsome, and poised. Nixon, wearing a gray suit that blended with the television backdrop, pale and thin after a recent hospitalization for the flu, sporting a five-o'clock shadow, and refusing to wear make-up, appeared tired, pallid, and sweaty. He freshened up his appearance for the next three debates, but years later he remembered the lesson well. When he opened his next presidential bid in 1968, it's no wonder he declared himself "tanned, rested, and ready."

More important than Kennedy's appearance, however, was the way that he used television to frame issues and blunt criticism. Well aware of the public's worries about a "stature gap," at the beginning of the fall campaign season Kennedy used President Eisenhower's own words to address voter concerns. Eisenhower and Nixon had had a frosty relationship almost from the start; soon after naming Nixon as his running mate in 1952, the President nearly booted him off the ticket when charges of a Nixon campaign slush fund came to light. Only Nixon's highly strategic "Checkers" speech saved his job. Eisenhower did not even endorse Nixon until late in the 1960 campaign. Turning the two Republicans' strained relationship to their advantage, Kennedy advisors skillfully worked an excerpt from one of Eisenhower's press conferences into a campaign advertisement. Asked at the press conference what contributions Vice President Nixon had made to his eight-year administration, Eisenhower replied that, given a week, he might think of something. The replay of that quip, and the reporters' raucous laughter afterward, deflated the significance of Nixon's vaunted experience. When in the side-by-side comparison later afforded by the debates Kennedy showed that he was well informed and well spoken, he succeeded in putting the issue to rest altogether.

Ultimately, Kennedy won a squeaker of an election by a margin of just one-tenth of one percent. His skilled use of television, however, has had lasting effects. In the late twentieth century, television displaced radio and newspapers to become by far the most important medium of political communication. Television became the primary source of political information for most voters, and the need to advertise on television drove the candidates to devote enormous energy to fundraising. Candidates since 1960 have had to meet at least a threshold level of skill with the medium, and the most skilled television orators, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, became the most popular and most powerful presidents.

Television remains a crucial part of the electoral process, but its preeminence is being challenged for the first time by a new medium, the Internet. While presidential candidates have used the Internet in one form or another since 1992, in 2004 it was used in new ways and with new power as, for example, when Democratic primary contender Howard Dean discovered its potential for raising large sums of campaign money by soliciting small amounts from many donors. While television has hardly receded from the political scene, the Kennedy experience offers a powerful indicator of the future of politics: In the next generation, as in the last, the candidates who best succeed in adapting to the new medium are likely to be the most successful.

**Liette Gidlow** is associate professor of history at Wayne State University and the author of *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s–1920s*.

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