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Debates Are Good TV, But Seldom Impact an Election

Many voters have already made up their mind by the time the first debate is held in October.

By [Kevin C. Shelly](#) [Email the author](#) | 6:00am

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[The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey](#) learned on Monday, Oct. 31 that it [wasn't among the four colleges](#) selected to host a presidential or vice presidential debate during the 2012 election.

A lot had been said about the subject in the months since the college announced it had submitted a bid to host a debate in March, but what was lost in all the hoopla was the impact debates can have on an election.

Presidential debates are good TV.

Yet they seldom matter when it comes to deciding an election.

That they are good TV is no surprise: Presidential debates as they exist today were tailored for television.

The first televised presidential debate happened in 1960. Debates did not resume until 1976, though they have been an every four year broadcast fixture since.

The initial night of a presidential debate broadcast -- a series of three debates starting in late September and running into October are the recent norm, plus a single vice presidential debate is usually held -- routinely draws a huge viewership, superseded only by the Super Bowl.

That makes presidential debates one of the few remaining events Americans simultaneously watch in an age of multiple media choices.

That means presidential debates undoubtedly increase voters' knowledge.

Debates also provide insights into candidates' policies, knowledgeability, mental agility, style and personality.

Despite all that, televised presidential debates usually do not matter when it comes to deciding an election -- unless the race is extremely tight.

That's when debates can matter enormously, influencing the choices of the very small percentage of voters who are still undecided just weeks before the November election.

Positively influencing a relatively small number of undecided voters through a strong debate performance -- or more commonly negatively influencing a voter's decision through a candidate's self-inflicted gaffe -- plays a role in the outcome of presidential elections in only rare instances.

On the other hand, vice presidential debates have never affected the outcome of a presidential election.

That's the distilled consensus of three experts interviewed by Patch.

"Most elections are decided by July 1, not on October 1," explained emeritus professor of political science at the Eagleton Institute of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, Gerald M. Pomper.

By that, Pomper means the circumstances voters assess when selecting a candidate are usually in place by mid-summer and the majority of voters have selected -- and stay with -- a candidate going into the November election.

Which means the timing of presidential debates limits their consequence.

Only a small percentage of independent, undecided or low-information voters are still in play by the time of the fall debate cycle, according to Alan Schroeder, a journalism professor at Northeastern University in Boston.

That's in part because elections today are more highly partisan than when televised debates began, said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communications of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Partisanship means most people simply reinforce the opinions of candidates they have already formed when they watch a debate, no matter what is said, said Jamieson.

Still, Jamieson said debates have the "greatest capacity to produce change," even if that just means that a candidate preparing for a debate must better understand their opponent, their opponent's positions and their opponent's "habits of the mind."

She said debate preparation requires a rare degree of engagement and that process helps candidates "be better governors" once they are elected.

Schroeder said the conventional wisdom is that debates are more for a candidate to lose than to win.

And that is especially true for an incumbent, making debates "extraordinarily dangerous" and "perilous" because news clips from missteps get played repeatedly, potentially overwhelming an otherwise positive performance.

"An incumbent president is in the greatest danger," he said, because "it is harder to play defense than offense," and sitting presidents must speak with constraint, weighing the repercussions of their words more carefully than their opponents.

Knowing the stakes, debates now are more controlled, rehearsed, stilted and practiced by the candidates than in the past, said Pomper.

"But it is valuable. A debate is one of the only times voters have when they can look at the same time at both candidates," he said.

Pomper said it is important to remember there are two audiences for a debate: the mass media and the people.

Each will see a debate through a different prism, the media focusing on drama, conflicts, personality and mistakes while the people are free to focus on the content of the ideas and policies each candidate voices.

He has a suggestion for viewing debates:

"Turn off the debate as soon as it is over and ask yourself what you want in a president and then ask yourself how they've measured up. Look for yourself, see for yourself."

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