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Bush-Kerry Debates

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Bush-Kerry Debates

How important are the three debates between President Bush and Senator Kerry? What does Bush have to do to keep his momentum? What does Kerry have to do to knock Bush off his stride?

Organized debates have always been scripted. Do you think Lincoln and Douglas were unscripted when they had their famous debates in 1858? They rehearsed beforehand and knew exactly what they wanted to say when they squared off; the format required them to develop their arguments in hours-long blocks of time.

Although scripted, the three debates between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry are critically important to the future of our nation. In this quadrennial civic ritual, each candidate will have the opportunity to lay out his vision for what America should stand for and do over the next four years. Tomorrow night will be especially important for Sen. Kerry, who is not as well known as the president. This is his hand-shake with the American people.



The first debate, in Coral Gables, Florida, on the campus of the University of Miami, will center on foreign policy and homeland security. If you have still not decided whom you should vote for on November 2; if you have questions about each candidate's record, agenda, statesmanship, and view of America, then you should tune in. There is no better way to take the measure of the contestants than when they fight in the same arena.

Even if you think you have made up your mind, you will still want to watch how your candidate performs when in the same arena with his opponent. If you think that the nation is on the right track, that President Bush is doing a good job in the war on terror, in the war in Iraq, and in our relations with allies, then you will want to fight for his re-election on November 2. If, on the other hand, you think that the nation is on the wrong track, that President Bush is not focused on the right enemies in the war on terror, that he made a mistake to go into Iraq the way he did, and that he has alienated allies as well as potential allies, then you will want to fight for Senator Kerry's election.

CANDIDATE STRENGTHS

Bush's advantages going into the three debates:

- he is president, the incumbent, the commander in chief with experience and an awesome bully pulpit;
- he has momentum and is ahead in the polls, especially in critical swing states;
- he has relatively united supporters who back the war in Iraq;
- he has exercised steady leadership during a tough time in U.S. history;
- he has a simpler, clearer message;
- he is personally optimistic, which the American people usually respond favorably to;
- he has a bold vision of American greatness;
- Americans tend not to switch horses in midstream when at war; Madison during the War of 1812, Lincoln during the Civil War, Franklin Roosevelt during World War II, and Richard Nixon during Vietnam were re-elected in wartime. (Because of their unpopularity, Truman and Johnson declined to run for another term while the nation was at war.)

Kerry's advantages going into the debates:

- as a prosecutor and senator, he has great debate experience;
- because he is behind in the polls, the public's expectations are not necessarily great;
- he is taller and thus has a physical advantage over his opponent;
- he has a deeper, more sonorous voice;
- he has a reputation for great physical courage;
- in tough races, he usually rises to the occasion down the home stretch.

CANDIDATE WEAKNESSES

Bush's disadvantages going into the debates:

- steady stream of bad news and images from Iraq;
- changed reasons for going to war against Iraq;
- on the defensive regarding the war in Iraq;
- economy has experienced a net job loss (first president since Hoover to have that happen);
- the federal surplus turned into a considerable deficit due to his spending priorities;
- health care costs are still skyrocketing;
- the Social Security debate has not been settled, even though Bush has been president with a GOP Congress;
- the cost of a gallon of gasoline is over \$2 in most places around the U.S.;
- Bush is thought to be stubborn, even when it would be in the nation's interest to adjust policy;
- Iran and Korea -- two of the three nations in the axis of evil -- are going nuclear;
- Iraq -- the other nation in the axis of evil -- was never nuclear;
- misspeaks when tired;
- people think by a two-to-one margin that he'll win the debate, so expectations are high.

Kerry's disadvantages going into the debates:

- he has one of the most liberal voting records in the U.S. Senate;
- he is not your "ordinary guy," and sometimes lacks warmth and is thought aloof;
- early on, the Bush campaign successfully defined him as a flip-flopper;
- at other times, the Bush campaign has successfully labeled Kerry "another Massachusetts liberal";
- his supporters are not united over U.S. policy toward Iraq.

CANDIDATE STRATEGY

Bush strategy in the debates:

- look presidential (no smirking);
- stay composed;
- hammer the point that Kerry has no core values, but changes his mind based on politics;
- successfully defend his decision to go to war against Iraq;
- show the American people that progress is being made in Iraq.
- show that his tax cuts are leading to economic recovery.

Kerry strategy in the debates:

- look presidential;
- put the president on the defensive regarding Iraq;
- have a clear exit strategy for getting out of Iraq;
- overcome the perception that he is a flip-flopper;
- attack the president for Iran and North Korea going nuclear on his watch;
- be prepared to answer in an undefensive manner when challenged on his liberal voting record;
- attack Bush's economic policies, especially his tax cuts, especially since he is the first president since Herbert Hoover to see the economy lose jobs on his watch.

GRADING THE DEBATERS

Following are several criteria by which to judge the performance of each candidate in debate:

- personality (Is the attitude optimistic, confident, authoritative, strong? Common touch, ability to connect?)
- character (honest, trustworthy, good?)
- knowledge (Who has a better command of each topic that is brought up?)
- vision (Who has the greater vision of America's history, purpose, and destiny in the world?)
- logic of the arguments
- passion in making the case
- elocution (language use, manner of expression, diction, figures of speech)
- body language (What is being communicated with the stance, arms, hands, and face?)
- zingers
- gaffes

Debate teachers often use the "five classical canons of rhetoric" to assess speakers. These criteria have been around since Cicero (hence the Latin terms): invention (content), disposition (organization), elocution (style), memory, and delivery.

DEBATE SCHEDULE (all times Eastern)

1. September 30, Coral Gables, FL, 9 pm
2. October 8, St. Louis, MO, 9 pm (town hall format consisting of an audience of undecided voters)
3. October 13, Tempe, AZ, 9 pm

The vice presidential candidates -- Republican incumbent Dick Cheney and Democratic challenger Senator John Edwards -- will square off in one debate on October 5, Cleveland, OH, 9 pm.

(Question from Jim H. of Houston, TX)