

# The power of television debates

September 26th 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of the first televised presidential debate. On this day in 1960, almost 70 million people in the United States watched Senator John Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon debate on national television. This was the first time many voters could see the presidential candidates and listen to them talking about issues live on television. It was one of the most popular television programmes in history and changed the way elections were fought around the world.

At the time, Nixon was recovering from a knee injury. He looked pale but refused to wear make-up for the television cameras. Kennedy, on the other hand, agreed to wear make-up. After spending the summer in California he looked healthy and relaxed. 1960s television was black and white. Kennedy wore a dark blue suit that looked impressive on television. Nixon, on the other hand, chose to wear a grey suit that looked weak in comparison.

There were rules to follow in the debate. The moderator asked questions, and each candidate had sufficient time to give their answers. Curiously, people who listened to the debate on the radio thought Nixon performed better. It was the people who watched the debate on television who thought Kennedy was more convincing. When he answered a question, he looked directly into the camera, talking directly to the people in their homes. Unlike Nixon, he didn't sweat and he looked more like a leader.

There were four television debates before the November election and more than half of all voters said the television debates had influenced their decision. However, when the country went to vote, no-one was 100% sure who would be the winner. It wasn't until the following day that John F. Kennedy knew he was going to be the 35th President of the United States.

Although other countries followed the American example and started organising television election debates, the United Kingdom waited almost 50 years to have its first election debate. On April 15th 2010, the leaders of the three main parties had the first of three leaders' debates. Each debate lasted 90 minutes.

Around 10 million viewers watched the UK debates. In the 60s, Kennedy won the television debates by appearing to be more relaxed and genuine on television. In 2010 it was Nick Clegg, the leader of the third largest political party in the UK, the Liberal Democrats, who appeared to be the more relaxed speaker in the first debate. However, his party didn't do very well in the election.

There's no doubt that television debates play an important part in the election process but it doesn't seem that they have the power to win an election.

## 1 Match the nouns with the definitions.

candidate    debate    election    leader    moderator    party    vice president

- 1 an occasion when people vote for someone to represent them \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 one of the people competing in an election \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 the person in control of a group, organisation or country \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 a group of people who have similar ideas about the way in which a country should be run \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 a political leader immediately below the president of a country \_\_\_\_\_
- 6 a discussion in which people give different opinions about a subject \_\_\_\_\_
- 7 the person in charge of a discussion between people with different opinions \_\_\_\_\_

**2** Read the article and find the answers to these questions.

- 1 What anniversary is being marked on September 26th 2010?
- 2 Who took part in the debate?
- 3 How many debates were there before the election?
- 4 In which year was the first leader debate held in the UK?

**3** Read the article again and decide if the statements below are true (T) or false (F).

Circle the correct answer and correct the false statements.

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1 More than 70 million watched the first television debate.           | T / F |
| 2 Many people didn't know the presidential candidates' faces.         | T / F |
| 3 Kennedy didn't wear make-up because he looked healthy.              | T / F |
| 4 People listening to the debate on radio preferred Nixon.            | T / F |
| 5 After the TV debate everyone knew Kennedy would win the election.   | T / F |
| 6 The first leader debate in the UK took place nearly 50 years later. | T / F |

**4** Choose the correct adjective to complete the sentences and put them in the comparative or superlative form.

convincing dark good healthy pale popular relaxed

- 1 The Kennedy–Nixon TV debate was one of the \_\_\_\_\_ television programmes in history.
- 2 Nixon looked \_\_\_\_\_ than Kennedy because he was recovering from an injury.
- 3 Kennedy looked \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ than Nixon.
- 4 Kennedy wore a \_\_\_\_\_ suit than Nixon.
- 5 People listening to the radio thought Nixon performed \_\_\_\_\_ .
- 6 People watching television thought Kennedy was a \_\_\_\_\_ leader.

**5** Answer the questions.

- 1 When was the last election in your country?
- 2 Did the candidates have a television debate?
- 3 If 'yes', did you watch the debate?
- 4 Were there many rules the people taking part had to follow?
- 5 Do you think television debates are a good thing?
- 6 Can television debates change the way people vote?

**6** Complete the task.

Think of a subject to debate in class. Form two or more groups with opposing views on the subject. Elect a moderator. Groups prepare their arguments while the moderator prepares some questions to ask. Hold the debate.

## Glossary

**convincing** (*adjective*) – someone who seems to be telling the truth or behaving in a natural way

**injury** (*noun*) – physical damage done to a person or a part of their body

**issue** (*noun*) – a subject that people discuss or argue about

**live** (*adjective*) – a television programme that can be watched at the same time as it happens

**pale** (*adjective*) – lighter than usual, as if unwell

**Senator** (*noun*) – someone who is a member of the Senate (part of the US Congress)

**viewer** (*noun*) – someone who watches television programmes

**voter** (*noun*) – someone who votes in an election