1960: The First Mass Media Election

The new medium of television played a decisive role in the race between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon

By Monica Davey in Chicago



They stood side by side in Chicago, peering out from America's black-and-white television sets one Monday evening in September 1960: John F. Kennedy, the tanned, photogenic Democratic candidate for President, and his Republican opponent, Richard M. Nixon, who many viewers thought looked pale and sweaty beneath a noticeable 5 o'clock shadow.

The imagery of that first nationally televised presidential debate, one of four that fall, marked a turning point in the election and, more significantly, a sea change in what the nation's political contests would look like forever after.

In many ways, the 1960 election was the first modern American political campaign, with all its TV-induced stagecraft, symbolism, and microscopic media glare—so evident this year in the race between Senators Barack Obama and John McCain as another new medium, the Internet, scrambles the rules all over again.

"Those debates changed the conversation entirely," says Larry Sabato, a political scientist at the University of Virginia. "Television is all about image, not substance," Sabato says, adding, "Kennedy was elected based largely on what happened in those debates."

More than 70 million people (out of a nation of 179 million) watched that first debate. Vice President Nixon, 47, had been a debater in college and was expected to overwhelm Kennedy. But the 43-year-old Massachusetts Senator, with his TV-friendly poise, seemed to gain support from many people who had questioned his relative inexperience and youth.

Debating Who Won

On a Chicago studio set far more simple and stark than any seen in the 2008 campaign, the pair ticked off answers to fairly dry questions about education, the minimum wage, and the federal debt.

The next day, the nation's reaction underscored the power of the television tableau: People who had listened to the debate on radio were more likely to think Nixon had "won," while those who watched it on TV were more likely to think Kennedy came out on top. TV viewers tended to think that Nixon, who was recovering from the flu but had declined to wear makeup, looked awful, right down to his light gray suit, which made him blend into the studio's backdrop. Impressions of viewers from Nixon's hometown of Whittier, Calif., made clear just how indelible the television images had been—even to an exceptionally friendly crowd.

"He looked sick, but also a little unsure," Albert W. Upton, who had been Nixon's drama coach at Whittier College, told *The New York Times*. And Nixon's former law partner, Thomas Bewley, said, "Dick just didn't look good. His...clothes were wrong. He didn't have the old spirit."

'The Action Is in the Studios'

Nixon learned his lesson: In the three debates that followed, he wore a darker suit and makeup and didn't pull his punches, as some felt he had in the first meeting.

Much like the Internet today, television seemed to become ubiquitous overnight: By 1960, 90 percent of American homes had a set. The new medium forced candidates and campaigns to evolve on the fly: That year, Nixon and Kennedy both appeared on *The Jack Paar Show*, the precursor of *The Tonight Show*. TV ads, first used in the 1952 presidential election by Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower, became a critical part of elections in 1960. Historian Theodore White, who wrote about the 1960 campaign, said: "Television is the political process; it's the playing field of politics. Today, the action is in the studios, not in the backrooms."

Nixon's commercials trumpeted his experience as Eisenhower's Vice President, promised to keep America safe during the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and warned that Kennedy would raise taxes. Kennedy's ads presented him as ready to lead during a time of great tension in the world, highlighted his commitment to create jobs and equal opportunities for all Americans, and questioned whether Nixon was exaggerating his experience. (One ad showed a clip of President Eisenhower in which he was unable to name a single major contribution by Nixon as Vice President.)

Americans were riveted. With Eisenhower finishing up his second term and unable to run again, neither candidate had the advantage of incumbency. And Kennedy was seeking to become the first Roman Catholic in the White House—as dramatic a first in 1960 as those possible this year when a black man, Obama, could become President, or a woman, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, could become Vice President.

That November, the election was decided by the narrowest margin in decades, with Kennedy winning the popular vote by a fraction of 1 percent—fewer than 120,000 votes. The close margin set off a debate about whether fraud had changed the outcome in places like Illinois, which Kennedy won. In Chicago, Mayor Richard J. Daley (his son is Mayor today) held off releasing results until hours after the polls closed. Almost 50 years later, the extent of voting shenanigans in 1960 and whether they actually affected the result is still hotly debated.

After a dramatic inauguration in January 1961, President Kennedy, with a young, attractive family that intrigued the nation, went on to use the media in ways that no President had before. He invited photographers into the White House to take candid photos of him and his family, helping to create the Kennedys' Hollywood-like mystique. He allowed his presidential press conferences to be televised live—after which he would analyze tapes of his performance, right down to the lighting and camera angles.

Cuba Crises

Kennedy's brief presidency was most notable for several dramatic developments in the Cold War. In April 1961, in an effort to overthrow the new Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro, he ordered the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion by a group of C.I.A.-trained Cuban exiles. Many were killed or captured, and an embarrassed Kennedy found himself negotiating for the return of survivors.

In October 1962, after seeing evidence that the Soviet Union was installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, Kennedy ordered a Naval blockade of the island nation, which is only 90 miles from Florida. After 13 tense days in which Washington and Moscow were on the brink of nuclear war, the Cuban Missile Crisis ended when the Soviets backed down and removed the missiles.

A little more than a year later, on Nov. 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated as he rode in a motorcade in Dallas; Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, who was two cars behind in the motorcade, took the presidential oath that afternoon. In case anyone doubted the impact of the 1960 presidential election, consider this: Despite the fact that millions of households around the nation watched the Kennedy-Nixon debates, no debates between the major-party candidates for President were held during general elections for the next 15 years. In large part, that was because incumbent candidates found ways to decline them: 1960 made it clear just how risky they could be.

From TV to YouTube

But starting with the 1976 race between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, debates became the norm, a high-pressure requirement for any presidential hopeful. And the intense spotlight of TV meant that witty soundbites and campaign blunders became iconic moments in presidential races.

In 1976, President Ford misspoke when he said that Poland, at the time still a Communist satellite, was independent of the Soviet Union; it was a gaffe that haunted him through Election Day, when he lost. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan, who some thought had grown too old for the job, effectively put the question to rest by lightheartedly pledging during a debate not to "make age an issue" for Walter Mondale, his younger Democratic opponent. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush was seen impatiently checking his watch while debating Ross Perot and Bill Clinton, who went on to win the election.

This year, debates, soundbites, and campaign-trail miscues could also have a dramatic impact in November, amplified all the more by the 24/7 nature of cable TV and the Web.

"That 1960 race changed a lot, and you can see its impacts still," says Vanessa B. Beasley, a communications professor at Vanderbilt University. "It changed who ran for office."

"And now, in an age of YouTube, image matters even more," Beasley adds. "It's more important than ever that a candidate be telegenic, and that he act not too hot and not too cool. We're watching for all of it."