

POLITICO

Past debates show pitfalls, opportunities

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Barack Obama and John McCain will face off in a debate on Friday, 48 years to the day of the first televised presidential debate, between the upstart senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, and the sitting vice president, Richard M. Nixon.

Kennedy, looking calm and confident, came out on top, and a key reason was that he understood the power of television better than Nixon, who had a lousy makeup job and stood at the podium visibly sweating, looking like a deer caught in headlights.

More than any policy wrangling, it was those images that helped cement voter attitudes toward the two candidates. And in the same way, political analysts said, tonight's debate undoubtedly will leave behind strong impressions — perhaps an elevation of style over substance — that will shape voter opinions in the run-up to November's election.

"The lesson from the debates is that it matters more how the impressions of the candidates have changed than who technically lost the debate," said James Campbell, who specializes in presidential campaigns at the University of Buffalo.

"People don't elect debaters. They elect presidents," he said. "They don't care who was better or worse from the standpoint a debate judge would judge it. They are looking for character traits and the ability to deliver a message that they want from their leaders."

It could be a well-delivered one-liner, a gigantic gaffe, or simply a performance by Obama or McCain that exceeds expectations or reinforces a negative stereotype.

"Obama has to put people at ease that if a call came in at 3 o'clock in the morning that he would know what to do, and that's not a terribly high bar to cross," said Richard Norton Smith, a presidential historian at George Mason University. "A draw will not only be perceived as a victory in public terms — for the rest of the campaign it will focus the campaign on domestic issues."

For McCain, analysts said, a key aim will be to dispel concerns that, at 72, he is too old to be president. Unfortunately for him, Ronald Reagan already used a terrific foil for the age issue during his 1984 debate against Democrat Walter Mondale, when Regan famously quipped, "I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." Mondale was 55 at the time.

Both McCain and Obama will be looking for a potential game-changer that solidifies them as the front-runner. But Gallup polling data suggests that presidential debates rarely alter the outcome of a race.



“We have this notion that debates are game-changers, and they’re not,” said David Lanoue, a political scientist at the University of Alabama. However, he said, “Debates move the needle three or four points,” and “in an election like this, that is critical.”

In 1992, Ross Perot’s strong and folksy debate performance (“I’m all ears,” the notoriously big-lobed candidate cracked, to uproarious laughter) was pivotal to his rise in the polls, which helped doom the reelection bid of incumbent George H.W. Bush. Ironically, it was Bush, not the eventual winner of the election, Bill Clinton, who demanded that Perot join the debates.

Similarly, the 1960 debate helped Kennedy ease concerns about his inexperience and may have tipped the election in his favor, political analysts say.

Obama and McCain also will be looking to avoid major blunders, which can be impressionist as well as factual: George H.W. Bush checking his watch in 1992 (stereotype: aloof), Al Gore sighing in 2000 (condescension) and George W. Bush scowling in 2004 (cowboy).

“In 2004 there were overwhelming differences between Bush and Kerry,” but the lasting impression was Bush’s scowling, said Sidney M. Milkis, a political historian at the University of Virginia. Although personality traits can highlight substitutive issues, “It can go too far when we are down to scowling and sighing,” he said.

“It’s the ‘Saturday Night Live’ test,” said George Mason’s Smith. “If your performance in a debate invites caricature, then you’ve lost the debate.”

Major gaffes are perhaps a candidate’s worst nightmare, such as the one committed by Gerald Ford, who in a 1976 debate against Jimmy Carter erroneously declared, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.”

In 1988, Democrat Michael Dukakis was asked whether he would favor the death penalty if someone raped and murdered his wife, and Dukakis responded as if delivering a position paper on why he opposed capital punishment. For many voters, the cold, unemotional reply underscored the impression of Dukakis as a liberal Democrat more concerned with the welfare of criminals than victims.

McCain and Obama also will try to capture the debate narrative, as Reagan did in his 1980 debate against Carter when he asked Americans: “Are you better off than you were

four years ago?" Reagan also used the debate to soothe concerns that he was too dangerous, too conservative and too Hollywood for Washington, using another one-liner ("There you go again") to convey the sense that he was an ordinary American fighting Washington.

Reagan narrowly trailed Carter before their debate and jumped to a 3-point lead after it.

Pundits point to the Reagan-Carter debate as a good comparison for Friday's contest between McCain and Obama, which is to focus primarily on national security and foreign policy, but which is expected to stray into economic issues as well.

Carter ran amid stagflation, an energy crisis, and turmoil abroad, and Reagan campaigned in part on a message of "change." Democrats hope Obama, too, can score a Reagan-like blowout simply by allaying anxieties over his candidacy — though Reagan had the advantage of being better known to the American public in 1980 than Obama is today.

"The range of possibilities for Obama to help and hurt himself may be greater than for any other candidate in American history," Lanoue said. "We haven't had a presidential candidate who has come out of nowhere since at least 1976, with Jimmy Carter, and with so much to prove."

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