

TEACHER GUIDE

1960 DOC. #1: Nixon-Kennedy Debate

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1960 saw the first debates between presidential candidates from opposing parties. They were also the first televised debates. The results highlighted the power of this relatively new communication medium. In the Kennedy-Nixon debates some commentators wondered whether the candidates' effort to appear attractive on TV would distract from essential issues of competence and qualifications.

The candidates agreed to four televised debates. For the first debate, Nixon arrived at the studio appearing tired and underweight having just recovered from a short illness. He was also exhausted due to his attempt to fulfill his pledge to campaign in person in all fifty states. Kennedy, on the other hand, arrived tanned and rested from a day in the sun preparing for the debate. A record 70 million viewers watched the debates. In the process they made TV the "front porch" of the 1960s as observed by CBS correspondent, Charles Kuralt (Troy 210).

The clip you will see is from the final summary statement of each candidate at the end of the first debate held in Chicago on September 26.

- > **Instruct** half the class to turn their backs to the screens or to cover their eyes so they only hear the audio part. The other half should watch the video.
- > **Ask** students to pay particular attention to what issues each candidate raises and to consider which candidate is most convincing. After showing the clip you might ask students to write their thoughts on the issues raised by each candidate and on who did better in their estimation.
- > **Play** 1960 doc. #1a.

QUESTION **What are the main issues raised by Nixon in his summation?**

- SUGGESTED ANSWER
- 1) The Soviet Union has not gained economically over the United States,
 - 2) Kennedy would rely too much on the Federal government to stimulate growth,
 - 3) Healthcare for seniors should be by choice, not mandated,
 - 4) Truman's presidency caused inflation, thus hurting those on a fixed income,
 - 5) He stands for growth and progress.

1960 DOC. #1a



Nixon-Kennedy Debate

Video Clip

LENGTH: 6 minutes 45 seconds

QUESTION **What are the main issues raised by Kennedy in his summation?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER
 1) The Soviets pose a problem for the United States, which must maintain superiority,
 2) Republicans oppose Social Security,
 3) Republicans have not moved forward as FDR did to support freedom and security,
 4) The military and social strength of the U.S. must be increased.

- > **Ask** the students who only heard the audio to indicate with a show of hands which candidate they found the most convincing. Do the same with those who watched the video. Compare and discuss the reactions of both groups. Explain that those listening on the radio felt that Nixon did as well or better than Kennedy. Those watching on television felt that Kennedy had won, even among Nixon’s supporters (Boller 299). By 1960 far more people were watching television than listening on the radio to an event like this.
- > **Explain** to students that you will now show brief video-only clips of both Kennedy and Nixon as the camera showed them listening to their opponent. Pay attention to what each man communicates through facial expression.
- > **Play** the video clip of Kennedy listening to Nixon, followed by Nixon listening to Kennedy (no audio, video only).

- > **Play** 1960 Doc. #1b:

QUESTION **What impressions do you get of Kennedy’s mood or character as he listens to Nixon?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He is relaxed, confident, and reflective.

EVIDENCE he looks forward, lowers his head, then raises his head and looks directly at Nixon

1960 DOC. # 1b



**Nixon-Kennedy Debate
 (reaction shots - no audio)**

Video Clip
 LENGTH: 30 seconds

> Play 1960 Doc. #1b:

QUESTION	What impressions do you get of Kennedy's mood or character as he listens to Nixon?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He is relaxed, confident, and reflective.
EVIDENCE	he looks forward, lowers his head, then raises his head and looks directly at Nixon
QUESTION	What impressions do you get of Nixon's mood or character as he listens to Kennedy?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He is uncertain, nervous, perhaps defensive.
EVIDENCE	he looks down then raises his head to watch Kennedy without turning his head; his eyes shift back and forth; he has a slight frown

FURTHER QUESTIONS

How could a direct comparison of the candidates via TV close-ups effect voters' impressions? Is this a good way to determine if someone is prepared to be President?

The press "spin" on this debate took a relatively minor difference in appearance between the candidates and made it a major issue that probably helped Kennedy beat Nixon in a close race. Can you think of other times when a minor mistake or the appearance of a candidate was "spun" into a major issue by the media? Is this a good thing or a bad thing for democracy?

ADDITIONAL INFO

When the proposal to debate was raised, Eisenhower had recommended that Nixon decline since he already had the major advantage of name recognition. Kennedy was anxious to gain national exposure and to show that he was intelligent and experienced. Nixon, however, was confident of his ability to debate and he felt that he could show up Kennedy in this format.

Both candidates decided not to use the skills of CBS' make-up artist prior to the debate. Kennedy took a little make-up around the eyes and Nixon used "Lazy Shave" to cover his beard stubble. Following the debate, Nixon's mother and thousands of others called the network to see if he was ill. Nixon's health and appearance improved in subsequent debates but the damage had already been done. The Democrats used footage from the debates in their TV ads, highlighting Kennedy's self-assurance and Nixon's shifting eyes.

Journalist Eric Sevareid commented that "the processed politician has finally arrived" with the era of televised debating (Cornog 254).

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Economic Issues

Foreign Policy

Media Bias

Reaching Voters (TV debates):

Debates themselves were not new to political campaigns. The 1858 Illinois Senate debates had given wide exposure to newcomer Abe Lincoln against veteran politician Steven Douglass through national newspaper reports (1860 doc. #1 and #2).