

THE TELEVISED PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES
IN CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

by

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For my parents

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. In 1960, following his election as President of the United States, John F. Kennedy said of the campaign: "It was TV more than anything that turned the tide."¹ During the campaign, Kennedy, a senator not as familiar to the nation as his opponent, then Vice President Richard M. Nixon, engaged in four televised debates with Nixon. Each debate was viewed by 65 to 70 million Americans.² Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, believed that Kennedy's election would have been impossible without the debates.³ Nixon thought his poor physical appearance at the first debate hurt him and caused a setback in his campaign. Nixon concluded that Kennedy gained the most from the televised debates.⁴

There were no more televised debates between the major party nominees for President until 1976, when Democrat Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer and former Georgia governor, debated Republican incumbent Gerald Ford three times. One hundred million people saw all or some of the debates.⁵ In 1976 the Democratic challenger won the election and credited his victory to the televised debates. "If it

hadn't been for the debates, I would have lost," Carter said shortly after winning the election.⁶

Four years later, in 1980, incumbent President Carter was defeated in his bid for re-election by Republican Ronald Reagan, whom he debated on television one week before election day. Carter blamed his defeat partially on what he thought was his poor performance in the debate. "I lost it myself," Carter said of the election while watching the returns on television. "I lost the debate, too, and that hurt badly."⁷ Reagan strategists, meanwhile, considered the debate to be a major factor in Reagan's victory. |

Since the 1960 televised presidential debates, every four years candidates have either wanted to debate, or wanted to avoid debates for political reasons. The debates can hurt or help a politician and his opponent. Thus, presidential candidates have seen the debates as a tool to be used or a weapon to be avoided.

B. 1. | The purpose of this paper is to analyze how candidates try to use ^{television} ~~televised~~ debates to their advantage, and if their perceptions of ^{television} ~~televised~~ debates as campaign tools are correct. | This paper concentrates on the debates of the 1980 campaign and uses the 1960 and 1976 debates for comparative purposes. In Chapter II we will review the pertinent literature. Chapter III is a brief history of the debates. In Chapter IV we will discuss the motivations and objectives of candidates who seek or avoid debates.

Candidates' styles before the camera and their preparations to exude certain images will be discussed in Chapter V.

The impact of the debates--on the voters, viewers, the press and candidates' campaigns--is the subject of Chapter VI. Conclusions will be drawn in Chapter VII.