

22. THE YEAR 2000 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

As happens in almost every presidential election, the year 2000 presidential television debates began with a “debate over debates.” Because there is no legal requirement for major party candidates to participate in television debates, the Democratic and Republican candidates work to shape the debate format in a way they think will benefit their respective candidacies. The candidates get away with this because each one holds a trump card, which is the ability to sabotage the debates completely by refusing to debate.

Not that a candidate would be wise to do such a thing. The debates are too well-established a part of the presidential campaign for a major party candidate to opt out without facing a storm of criticism. But the threat not to participate in the debates is sufficient enough that each candidate can exercise considerable leverage over the debate format that is finally adopted.

Thus, over the years, presidential candidates have argued over such things as whether or not one candidate, because he is shorter than his opponent, will be allowed to stand on an “elevator box” hidden behind the podium and thus gain a few inches of extra height.

The issue most argued over, however, is the debate format. Will the candidates only give speeches? Will the candidates answer questions from a panel

of newspaper reporters? Will the candidates respond to questions from a randomly-selected group of undecided voters? Questions such as these are hotly argued and negotiated between the Democratic candidate, the Republican candidate, and the bi-partisan Commission on Presidential Debates.

The candidate who apparently was most concerned about the year 2000 presidential television debates was George W. Bush, the Republican nominee. The Bush family had very unpleasant memories of the 1992 debates, when Democratic candidate Bill Clinton easily outscored President Bush, George W.'s father. The younger Bush was particularly skeptical of the traditional debate format. Under that scenario, the candidates formally stand behind a podium and answer issue-oriented questions from a panel of newspaper reporters, the vast majority of whom tend to vote Democratic and support liberal political positions.

George W. Bush argued for a more informal and off-the-cuff debate format in which he and Albert Gore, Jr., the Democratic nominee, would sit around a table with a single moderator, perhaps a popular political talk show host such as Tim Russert of NBC or Larry King of CNN. "My best moments come when I'm more relaxed and I can get a couple of quips in," Bush told reporters. "I don't want to be too planned and structured." Bush thought formal debates "sucked the air out of the campaign" by pitting newspaper reporters, who ask trick questions, against the

candidates, who are over-rehearsed and deliver mainly poll-tested sound bites.¹

But George W. Bush only got part of what he wanted. Al Gore had offered to debate Bush under any format and at any time. Bush's efforts to shape the 2000 presidential debates to his own advantage suddenly began generating negative coverage in the press. In the end, Bush agreed that the first of three debates with Gore would be in the traditional format. The only change was that the questions would come from a single member of the news profession, PBS *News Hour* host Jim Lehrer.

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The first television debate of the year 2000 presidential campaign was held on Tuesday, October 3, 2000, on the Boston campus of the University of Massachusetts. The temperature in the debate hall was noticeably chilly. Al Gore insisted that the thermostat be turned down so there would be less chance he would perspire heavily under the bright television lights. It was the sort of small detail that presidential candidates argue for vociferously when negotiating debate procedures with the bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates.

As the debate began, it first appeared that Al Gore was going to score a big victory. As many political pundits had predicted, George W. Bush fumbled the answers to a number of questions. To the well-informed members of the news

media, Bush often appeared to not really know what he was talking about. Also picking up on Bush's ineptness was Al Gore, who began to grimace and sigh heavily into the microphone every time Bush gave an answer that Gore thought was either incorrect or badly misstated. Gore also seemed overly eager to interrupt George W. Bush and get the final word on each subject being discussed.

But there was a disconnect between press opinion and public opinion on the first presidential television debate of 2000. At first the reporters and commentators, with their vast knowledge of American government and politics, deemed Gore the winner because he clearly knew more than Bush. Then, when the public opinion polls and focus group evaluations of the first debate started to roll in, a much different picture emerged.

Gore had come across to the general public as a stuffed-shirt and a big know-it-all. His heavy sighing as Bush was speaking, coupled with "eye-rolling, snorting, head-shaking, moaning, and derisive displays of disbelief" antagonized almost everyone who saw it.² One commentator noted that, for the average American, listening to Al Gore was "like wandering into the wrong classroom." Gore was a "condescending star professor of intimidating knowledge pandering to a bunch of dim students."³

Albert Gore, Jr., paid a heavy price for being so anxious to show up George

W. Bush as a dummy in the first debate. The following weekend, on the *Saturday Night Live* television program on NBC, Gore was parodied mercilessly for his heavy sighing and efforts at stealing the microphone from Bush. The actor playing Al Gore told a never-ending sob story in an effort to keep Bush from speaking and then tried to deliver two closing statements.

One newspaper columnist described Gore in the first debate as the “Teacher’s Pet from hell.” Gore’s performance was compared to a sophisticated New York waiter (Gore) putting down a rube from the West (Bush) who does not know how to order dinner properly in an upscale Manhattan restaurant.⁴

In the year 2000, Al Gore raised losing a presidential television debate to a new level. Instead of just committing a gaffe, or being the target of a Bush zinger, Gore showed up for the debate with the wrong persona. He presented a negative characterization of himself for the entire 90-minute debate that did his campaign immeasurable damage.

Then, in the days following the debate, another problem emerged. News reporters discovered that a number of things Gore said in the debate were his customary overstatements. Most notably, Gore charged that a 15-year-old girl in Sarasota, Florida, had to stand all day in her classroom because her school was so overcrowded. A local radio station checked the story and discovered the girl had

to stand for only one day, and that only was because \$100,000 worth of new laboratory equipment had just been delivered to the classroom.⁵

Technically, George W. Bush did not win the first debate. He did come across to the public as a nice person who was much more gentlemanly than Al Gore. And Bush launched a minor zinger at Gore by accusing the Democratic nominee, who characteristically spouted an unending series of facts and figures, with using “fuzzy numbers.” But the real reason Bush won was the expectations game. Bush was expected to do poorly, so when it was Al Gore who came over to the public in a negative way, the first debate was touted by the press as a big Bush victory.

All of which goes to prove that, in an age of public opinion polls and focus groups, the winner of the debate is the candidate whom the public likes. “The debates never seem to be about what is said; they are about the gut reaction of the audience.”⁶

Al Gore dropped as much as five points in a number of polls the week following the first debate.

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The second debate of the year 2000 presidential election cycle was held October 11 at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This

debate was the only one structured the way George W. Bush had wanted, with Bush, Gore, and moderator Jim Lehrer of PBS seated around a conference table.

Ironically, the Albert Gore, Jr., who showed up for the second debate was the complete opposite of the one who appeared at the first debate. This Al Gore was subdued, agreeable, and treated Bush respectfully.

But this “yet another version of Al Gore” did not please the press and public any more than the aggressive and condescending Gore of the first debate. The Democratic nominee was characterized as deferential to the point of obsequiousness. As *Newsweek* put it, “Attack Al had overcorrected into a self-parody of somnolent contrition and politesse.”⁷

So, for the second time, Bush was declared the winner. Bush did not make any big mistakes, and Gore came over to the public as too meek and unsure of himself. Those are not the characteristics most of the public seeks in a President.

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The third debate was held October 17, 2000, at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. The format for this debate was town-hall style, with the two candidates answering questions from the audience. Not surprisingly, a third version of Albert Gore, Jr., emerged at the third debate.

This Al Gore moved around on the stage and at times came so close to

George W. Bush that he almost seemed to be invading Bush's body space. Gore appeared to be violating the debate rules by walking about so much, or at least he was stretching the rules to the limit. But the strategy was working. Gore's constant movements distracted from what Bush was saying. And, as Gore surely intended, Bush started to become unnerved by Gore's actions.

At one point Bush seemed to be looking at moderator Jim Lehrer in hopes the newsman would enforce the rules and make Gore hold still. But no help came from Lehrer, who seemed to be just as confused and upset by Gore's wanderings as Bush was. And not only was Gore being aggressive physically. He answered every question from the audience by first drawing a sharp and negative contrast between his position on the subject and Bush's position.

At the end of the debate, Bush criticized Gore for spending the third debate attacking Bush rather than answering audience questions. Bush then effectively faulted Gore for helping to perpetuate the sharp partisan conflict in the capital city of Washington. Bush pledged to bring cooperation and progress to the national government and to restore honor and dignity to the presidential office. Bush's closing line thus was a direct dig at the many character scandals of the Clinton-Gore Administration.⁸

The news reporters and commentators declared Al Gore the winner of the

third debate, but there was much speculation that Gore's aggressive movements may have cost him support. "Gore Scores Points But Loses Votes," said the *New York Times* in an editorial page sub-headline. "This debate was conducted in body language," wrote *New York Times* columnist William Safire. "Gore bestrode the stage like a Colossus, expressing confidence in a John Wayne swagger, once almost butting his puffed-out chest against Bush."⁹

But, nonetheless, Al Gore was declared the winner of the third debate. The final score thus was two debates for George W. Bush and one debate for Albert Gore, Jr. It was good for Gore that he won the final debate, however. He scored a small comeback and finished the process with a somewhat redeemed public image.

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The overall impact of the year 2000 presidential television debates was to help the candidacy of George W. Bush. By appearing in three different debates with three contrasting personas, Albert Gore, Jr., confirmed the widespread conception of him as a man constantly searching for the right "personality" that would be popular with voters and win a presidential election. Yet none of the three Al Gores presented in the three debates appeared to be anything near what the public wanted.

A popular Hollywood movie from the past concerned a woman with

multiple-personality disorder and was entitled “The Three Faces Of Eve.” *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd summed up Al Gore in the year 2000 presidential debates as “The Three Faces Of Al.”¹⁰

Endnotes - Chapter 22:

1. “Gore’s Summer Surprise,” *Newsweek*, November 20, 2000, p. 89.
2. William Safire, “Bush Wins By Not Losing - At Least In Round 1,” *Denver Post*, October 6, 2000, p. 7B.
3. Richard Reeves, “Gore May Be Too Smart For Us,” *Denver Post*, October 8, 2000, p. 2K.
4. Maureen Dowd, “His Lyin’, Sighin’, Heart,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2000, p. A31.
5. Richard Berke, “Tendency To Embellish Fact Snags Gore,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2000.
6. Richard Reeves, “Another Joint Appearance,” *Denver Post*, October 1, 2000, p. 3(I).
7. “Face To Face Combat,” *Newsweek*, Special Election Issue, November 20, 2000, p. 107.
8. Author’s notes, Third Presidential Television Debate, October 17, 2000.
9. William Safire, “King Pyrrhus’s Victory,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2000, p. A31.
10. Maureen Dowd, “The Popular Pariah,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2000, p. A31.