

This Day in History... September 26, 1960

America's First Televised Presidential Debate

On September 26, 1960, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon took part in America's first televised debate, which revealed just how important this growing medium would be on future politics.

Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts and Vice President Richard Nixon were in a close race for the presidency during the 1960 elections. So it was decided that they would face off in a debate – the first ever in America for the presidency. Furthermore, it was also be televised, which was another first.

The two candidates' preparations couldn't have been more different. Nixon had recently battled the flu, which left him pale and underweight. He was tired from campaigning, wore an ill-fitting suit, and refused to wear makeup. Kennedy, on the other hand, was tan from his campaign in California and used the day to rest and prepare himself for the issues to be discussed. Nixon later admitted he "had never seen him looking so fit."



Kennedy went on to win the presidency by the closest popular vote margin in the 20th century.



Nixon was so turned off by the Kennedy debates that he refused to debate his opponents in 1968 and 1972.

An estimated 70 million viewers – at that time the largest audience ever – tuned in to watch the first of four debates on September 26. They saw a contrast that had little to do with politics. Nixon appeared haggard and pale, sported a five o'clock shadow, and perspired heavily. Kennedy looked fit, relaxed, and handsome as he showed confidence and poise.

Post-debate polls reflected the power of imagery as radio listeners gave Nixon a slight edge while television viewers overwhelmingly felt Kennedy had won. Nixon rebounded in the next three debates – gaining back his weight, wearing makeup, and being more assertive. Many believe Nixon won the second and third debates, while the fourth was a draw. The third debate was notable in that it marked the first time split screen technology was used to show people on opposite sides of the country at the same time. Nixon in California appeared next to Kennedy in New York, while the moderator was in Chicago.

Election exit polls suggested that more than half of all voters were influenced by the debates, with more than 3.5 million voters reversing their previous decision in favor of Kennedy.

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