

• Advanced Critical Reading – The Great Debates

The first of the Great Debates, between Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts and the incumbent Vice President Richard Nixon on September 26, 1960, centered around domestic issues. The topic of the next debate, on October 7, was a clash over U.S. policy regarding two small islands off the Chinese coast, and on October 13, this controversy continued. On October 5 21, the final debate, the candidates focused on American/Cuban relations.

Few of the 70 million viewers could have fathomed what this first–ever televised presidential debate augured, not only for this specific series of debates, but more importantly for the preeminent role the fledgling medium would play in the future of the political arena.

A pallid Nixon arrived at the Chicago CBS studios after a grueling day of campaigning. 10 The previous August a knee infection had sidelined him. He was still twenty pounds underweight, and he perspired profusely in an ill–fitting shirt. Moreover, he declined makeup to burnish his hospital pallor. The freshly–painted studio backdrop had dried to an ashen hue that obscured his matching suit.

The Democratic contender by contrast exuded a robust glow after a month of 15 campaigning in California. He had spent his day rehearsing potential questions and relaxing. An aide later admitted that he supplemented his natural glow with a smidge of makeup. He was fit, trim, and confident.

Despite the remarkably similar agendas and arguments of the Republican and the 20 Democrat, TV viewers unequivocally believed Kennedy to be the victor – whereas people who had followed the debates on the radio held the opposite opinion. The age of TV had arrived, and the subsequent party shuffle proved the undeniable potency of television.

Questions

1. The author is mainly concerned about
 - A) the debating styles of John Kennedy and Richard Nixon during the 1960 Great Debates
 - B) the domestic issues which affected the result of 1960 Great Debates
 - C) the health of Richard Nixon at the time of the 1960 Great Debates
 - D) the number of television viewers who tuned in to the 1960 Great Debates
 - E) the effect of television on the results of the 1960 Great Debates
2. It can be inferred from the passage that
 - A) Kennedy was a better debater than Nixon
 - B) Nixon was the unequivocal winner of the 1960 debates
 - C) The Democrat beat the Republican in the 1960 election
 - D) Nixon was more prepared for the first debate than Kennedy
 - E) Kennedy and Nixon disagreed strongly on issues on the home front.
3. According to the passage, which of the following was true of Richard Nixon?
 - A) He had a five o'clock shadow during the first debate.
 - B) He wore a brown suit during the first debate.
 - C) He warned of the impending Cuban crisis.
 - D) He limped onstage for the first debate.
 - E) He lost his job after the election.

Answers and Explanations

1. The correct answer is E.

- A) The debating styles of John Kennedy and Richard Nixon during the 1960 Great Debates were similar, since TV viewers and radio listeners ended up with different opinions of who won the debates.
- B) The candidates had similar agendas and arguments, so domestic issues were not pivotal.
- C) Richard Nixon was not sick at the time of the 1960 Great Debates. He was thin and pale, but there is no mention that he was sick.
- D) The number of television viewers who tuned in to the 1960 Great Debates was not the author's main concern.
- E) Correct. The effect of television on the results of the 1960 Great Debates was the main concern of the author

2. The correct answer is C.

- A) Kennedy was not a better debater than Nixon: people who followed the debates on radio thought Nixon had won the debates.
- B) Nixon was not the unequivocal winner of the 1960 debates; people who watched the debates on TV thought Kennedy was the winner.
- C) Correct. The Democrat beat the Republican in the 1960 election; there was a party shuffle. This is mentioned in the last line (21) of the passage. Since Nixon, the Republican, was the incumbent, the shuffle resulted in Democrats taking office.
- D) There is no mention of whether Nixon was more prepared for the first debate than Kennedy. Kennedy rehearsed the day of the debate.
- E) Kennedy and Nixon did not disagree strongly on issues on the home front. They had similar agendas and arguments.

3. The correct answer is E.

- A) He had a five o'clock shadow during the first debate. While this fact is widely known, it is not mentioned in the passage.
- B) He did not wear a brown suit during the first debate. His suit was obscured by the ashen-colored – gray – paint.
- C) Whether Nixon warned of the impending Cuban crisis was not mentioned in the passage.
- D) Whether Nixon limped is not mentioned in the passage.
- E) Correct. Nixon lost his job after the election. Since there was a party shuffle, the incumbent lost his job. The incumbent Vice President was Richard Nixon.