

McCain, Obama debates crucial

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The few weeks since the Democrat and Republican conventions have been tumultuous, with a media frenzy around Sarah Palin's nomination as the Republican vice-presidential candidate, John McCain's poll surge and then fallback, and a major financial crisis. This crisis not only has international ramifications but threatens to leave the next president with a \$1trillion debt that will seriously impact on his ability to implement any election promise, whether it is health-care reform or tax cuts.

The first presidential debate between Barack Obama and McCain was always going to be interesting, and the twists keep coming McCain says he wants to postpone today's (American time) debate, but Obama says "it's more important than ever" that the country hear from its next president. Presuming it goes ahead, and with Americans frightened by what the economic implosion means for their mortgages, jobs and futures, the first debate could turn into the pivotal election decider that the debate between Richard Nixon, then the Republican vice-president, and John F. Kennedy became 48 years ago. This 1960 debate, also on September 26, was the first presidential debate to be televised, and attracted 70million American viewers (40 per cent of the population, then 179 million). Only one debate since, the October 28, 1980, debate between President Jimmy Carter and his challenger Ronald Reagan, has attracted a bigger audience.

Going into the 1960 debate, Kennedy was seen as young (he was 43) and inexperienced, and there were serious concerns about his Catholic faith. Nixon was only three years older, but portrayed himself as the knowledgeable Washington insider who could manage the Cold War.

On the issues debated, the candidates were evenly matched. Indeed, those who heard the first debate on the radio pronounced Nixon the winner. But the visual contrast was dramatic. Nixon, recovering from a serious knee injury, was pale with a heavy "five o'clock shadow" and was obviously discomforted by Kennedy's smooth delivery and charisma. Among television viewers, Kennedy was perceived the winner of this, the first of four debates, by a very large margin.

At election time more than half of all voters reported that the 1960 debates had influenced their opinion and 6 per cent reported that their vote was the result of the debate alone. The "Great Debates" as they became known, created a precedent in US presidential politics and internationally, although not until after Nixon had left the scene. Perhaps wisely, he refused to debate in 1968 and 1972. The first televised leaders' debate in Australia was in 1984, between Bob Hawke and Andrew Peacock.

The 1976, 1980 and 1984 presidential and vice-presidential debates were conducted under the auspices of the non-partisan League of Women Voters, but the League pulled out of the 1988 debates when the demands of the candidates around every issue of every debate escalated. The press release announcing this stated: "It has become clear to us that the candidates' organisations aim to add debates to their list of campaign-trail charades devoid of substance, spontaneity and answers to tough questions."

Since 1988 the debates have been conducted by the Commission on Presidential Debates, a non-profit and non-partisan corporation. However, the arguments from campaign managers over the minutiae of every conceivable issue continue and are assuredly being waged even now on behalf of Obama and McCain.

In the end the debates are really set pieces, around questions which, if not known ahead of time, are predictable. It is the desire for predictability which keeps this year's candidates cautious about the involvement of "new media" such as YouTube.

They recognise that for the majority of viewers these debates are more about a slip of the tongue, an awkward gesture, and the seemingly spontaneous one-liners. These provide the telling moments that shape elections and live on in history rather than any substantive answer or policy outline.

However, despite the shocks and missteps we all remember, the history of debates is that they do more to reinforce trends and reputations than to change them. But this is a crucial election, and when two candidates go head to head live, anything can happen.

So presuming McCain and Obama meet at the University of Mississippi for the first of three debates, the pressure on them will be as intense as it gets in politics.

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