

Political Debates: Advising a Candidate

Topic: The Kennedy/Nixon Debates

Grade level: 7-12

Subject Area: US History, Civics, Government

Time Required: 1-2 hours

Goals/Rationale

Political debates are an important part of the election process, whether on the local, state or national level. On September 26, 1960, an estimated seventy million Americans, about 2/3 of the electorate, watched Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon face each other in the first live televised presidential debate.

After the debate, Kennedy turned to his advisors for an analysis and feedback. Clark Clifford, a Kennedy family attorney and presidential advisor, sent his assessment of the debate to JFK in a memo, offering advice to the candidate.

In this lesson plan, students analyze excerpts from the first debate and Clifford's memo. They then identify a candidate they support in a current election and, using the Clifford memo as a model, watch a political debate to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate and provide written advice to him or her for future debates.

Essential Question

In what ways are voters persuaded to support a particular candidate?

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- analyze a primary source.
- consider what makes a candidate a “winner” or “loser” in a debate.
- determine what issues are important to the student in an upcoming election.
- select a candidate they think most aligns with their views of the issues.
- watch a debate and evaluate the performance of the candidates.
- write a memo to their chosen candidate giving him or her advice on how to improve his/her performance for a future debate.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National Civics and History

Center for Civic Education: V (E) How can citizens take part in civic life?

National Center for History in the Schools: Era 9, 3B Examine the role of the media in the election of 1960.

Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework – American Government

Topic 4 (2) Research the platforms of political parties and candidates for state or national government and analyze data on campaign financing, advertising, and voter demographics, to draw conclusions about how citizens in the United States participate in public elections.

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should know how to analyze a piece of text. They also should have some knowledge of current issues and events on a local, state, and national level.

Historical Background and Context

Cold War concerns permeated this debate, which was focused on domestic issues. As the incumbent Vice President, Nixon highlighted the successes of the Eisenhower years while Kennedy attempted to show its failings. Nixon compared the record of the Eisenhower Administration with the previous Democratic administration of Truman to show that the US had prospered over the Eisenhower years. He contrasted his proposals for education, health and housing which would require less government spending with Kennedy's proposals which he believed relied too much on the federal government and would suppress the "creative energies" of Americans. Kennedy criticized the untapped manufacturing and scientific potential of the US and inefficiencies in agricultural policies during the previous seven years as well as expressing concern about racial discrimination that denied opportunities for African Americans and Latinos. Both debaters responded to questions about their experience and their ability and work with Congress.

Materials

- [JFK in History: Campaign of 1960](#)
- Excerpts from the Kennedy/Nixon September 26, 1960 debate (*included in this pdf*)
- Clark M. Clifford memo, dated September 27, 1960 - [page 1](#), [page 2](#) (*also included in this pdf*)
- Debate Score Sheet (*included in this pdf*)

Procedure

1. Have students read [JFK in History: Campaign of 1960](#) to provide historical background on the debates.
2. Have students read excerpts from the September 26, 1960 debate. (The entire debate is available [here](#).)
3. Provide students with a Clark M. Clifford memo to Kennedy dated September 27, 1960.
4. Discuss the following:
 - a. What points did Clifford make in writing that Kennedy was "the winner"? (*Kennedy was concise, convincing, and kept Nixon on the defensive*)
 - b. Brainstorm how a candidate can be convincing, and how he/she may keep the other candidate on the defensive.
 - c. What were Clifford's main concerns? (*Kennedy should make sure voters know that his political goals are different from Nixon's; he needs to differentiate himself; and he needs to show more personal warmth.*)

- d. Why would it be important for the challenger to differentiate his goals from the incumbent administration?
 - e. What were Clifford's suggestions for dealing with these concerns? (*Kennedy should be specific in bringing up the differences in their goals; he should bring up his discussions with ordinary people and his contacts with Navy servicemen to show he understands the concerns of average Americans.*)
5. Use Clifford's concerns and suggestions as you discuss with your students the important attributes that make a candidate a "winner" of a debate.
 6. Brainstorm the issues in an upcoming election in your area. Take notes of students' responses and share the notes with them. Have students discuss where they stand on the issues.
 7. Have students research where the candidates stand on these issues, and have them write a one-page paper describing which candidate's views are most compatible with their own and why.

Assessment

For homework, have students watch a political debate, filling in a "score sheet" handout to help them evaluate the debate. (We have suggested a few attributes in the handout, but you should add your own based on your previous brainstorming with students.) Have them use their "score sheet" to write a memo to their chosen candidate in the style of Clark Clifford noting:

- who they think "won" the debate.
- what worked or didn't work for their candidate.
- how their candidate can help to improve his/her image.
- what their candidate can do to better persuade voters that he/she is the right choice for them.

Encourage students to use their memo as a way to give specific help to their candidate, not as an opportunity to denigrate the other candidate.

Excerpts from the September 26, 1960 Presidential Debate

The debate began with an introduction by Howard K. Smith of CBS, followed by opening statements of approximately 8 minutes by the two candidates. Senator Kennedy was the first speaker.

MR. KENNEDY. Mr. Smith, Mr. Nixon.

In the election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln said the question was whether this Nation could exist half slave or half free.

In the election of 1960, and with the world around us, the question is whether the world will exist half slave or half free, whether it will move in the direction of freedom, in the direction of the road that we are taking, or whether it will move in the direction of slavery.

I think it will depend in great measure upon what we do here in the United States, on the kind of society that we build, on the kind of strength that we maintain...

This is a great country, but I think it could be a greater country; and this is a powerful country but I think it could be a more powerful country.

I'm not satisfied to have 50 percent of our steel-mill capacity unused.

I'm not satisfied when the United States had last year the lowest rate of economic growth of any major industrialized society in the world--because economic growth means strength and vitality. It means we're able to sustain our defenses; it means we're able to meet our commitments abroad.

I'm not satisfied, when we have over \$9 billion dollars worth of food, some of it rotting even though there is a hungry world and even though 4 million Americans wait every month for a food package from the Government, which averages 5 cents a day per individual.

I saw cases in West Virginia, here in the United States, where children took home part of their school lunch in order to feed their families because I don't think we're meeting our obligations toward these Americans.

I'm not satisfied when the Soviet Union is turning out twice as many scientists and engineers as we are.

I'm not satisfied when many of our teachers are inadequately paid, or when our children go to school part-time shifts. I think we should have an educational system second to none...

I'm not satisfied when we are failing to develop the natural resources of the United States to the fullest. Here in the United States, which developed the Tennessee Valley and which built the Grand Coulee and the other dams in the Northwest United States, at the present rate of hydropower production--and that is the hallmark of an industrialized society--the Soviet Union by 1975 will be producing more power than we are.

These are all the things I think in this country that can make our society strong, or can mean that it stands still.

I'm not satisfied until every American enjoys his full constitutional rights. If a Negro baby is born, and this is true also of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in some of our cities, he has about one-half as much chance to get through high school as a white baby. He has one-third as much chance to get through college as a white student. He has about a third as much chance to be a professional man, and about half as much chance to own a house. He has about four times as much chance that he'll be out of work in his life as the white baby. I think we can do better. I don't want the talents of any American to go to waste.

I know that there are those who want to turn everything over to the Government. I don't at all. I want the individuals to meet their responsibilities and I want the States to meet their responsibilities. But I think there is also a national responsibility...

I don't believe in big government, but I believe in effective governmental action, and I think that's the only way that the United States is going to maintain its freedom; it's the only way that we're going to move ahead. I think we can do a better job. I think we're going to have to do a better job if we are going to meet the responsibilities which time and events have placed upon us...

MR. SMITH. And now the opening statement by Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

MR. NIXON. Mr. Smith, Senator Kennedy. The things that Senator Kennedy has said many of us can agree with. There is no question but that we cannot discuss our internal affairs in the United States without recognizing that they have a tremendous bearing on our international position. There is no question but that this nation cannot stand still, because we are in a deadly competition, a competition not only with the men in the Kremlin, but the men in Peking. We're ahead in this competition, as Senator Kennedy, I think, has implied. But when you're in a race, the only way to stay ahead is to move ahead, and I subscribe completely to the spirit that Senator Kennedy has expressed tonight, the spirit that the United States should move ahead.

Where then do we disagree?

I think we disagree on the implication of his remarks tonight and on the statements that he has made on many occasions during his campaign to the effect that the United States has been standing still...

Is it true that this administration, as Senator Kennedy has charged, has been an administration of retreat, of defeat, of stagnation?

Is it true that, as far as this country is concerned, in the field of electric power, and all of the fields that he has mentioned, we have not been moving ahead?

Well, we have a comparison that we can make. We have the record of the Truman administration of 7 years, and the 7 years of the Eisenhower administration.

When we compare these two records in the areas that Senator Kennedy has discussed tonight, I think we find that America has been moving ahead.

Let's take schools. We have built more schools in these 7 years than we built in the previous 7, for that matter in the previous 20 years.

Let's take hydroelectric power. We have developed more hydroelectric power in these 7 years than was developed in any previous administration in history.

Let us take hospitals. We find that more have been built in this administration than in the previous administration. The same is true of highways.

Let's put it in terms that all of us can understand.

We often hear gross national product discussed, and in that respect may I say that when we compare the growth in this administration with that of the previous administration, that then there was a total growth of 11 percent over 7 years; in this administration there has been a total growth of 19 percent over 7 years.

That shows that there's been more growth in this administration than in its predecessor...

What kind of programs are we for?

We are for programs that will expand educational opportunities, that will give to all Americans their equal chance for education, for all of the things which are necessary and dear to the hearts of our people.

We are for programs, in addition, which will see that our medical care for the aged is much better handled than it is at the present time.

Here again, may I indicate that Senator Kennedy and I are not in disagreement as to the aim. We both want to help the old people. We want to see that they do have adequate medical care. The question is the means.

I think that the means that I advocate will reach that goal better than the means that he advocates.

I could give better examples but for whatever it is, whether it's in the field of housing or health or medical care or schools, or the development of electric power, we have programs which we believe will move America, move her forward and build on the wonderful record that we have made over these past 7 years.

Now, when we look at these programs might I suggest that in evaluating them we often have a tendency to say that the test of a program is how much you're spending. I will concede that in all the areas to which I have referred, Senator Kennedy would have the Federal Government spend more than I would have it spend.

I costed out the cost of the Democratic platform. It runs a minimum of \$13.2 billion a year more than we are presently spending to a maximum of \$18 billion a year more than we're presently spending.

Now the Republican platform will cost more too. It will cost a minimum of \$4 billion a year more, a maximum of \$4.9 billion a year more than we're presently spending.

Now, does this mean that his program is better than ours?

Not at all, because it isn't a question of how much the Federal Government spends. It isn't a question of which government does the most. It's a question of which administration does the right things, and in our case, I do believe that our programs will stimulate the creative energies of 180 million free Americans. I believe the programs that Senator Kennedy advocates will have a tendency to stifle those creative energies. I believe, in other words, that his programs would lead to the stagnation of the motive power that we need in this country to get progress...

I know Senator Kennedy feels as deeply about these problems as I do, but our disagreement is not about the goals for America but only about the means to reach those goals.

MR. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Nixon...

MR. FLEMING.(ABC News) Senator, the Vice President in his campaign has said that you are naive and at times immature. He has raised the question of leadership.

On this issue, why do you think people should vote for you rather than the Vice President?

MR. KENNEDY. Well, the Vice President and I came to the Congress together in 1946.

We both served in the Labor Committee. I've been there now for fourteen years, the same period of time that he has, so that our experience in government is comparable.

Secondly, I think the question is "What are the programs that we advocate?"

What is the party record that we lead?

I come out of the Democratic party, which in this century has produced Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, and which supported and sustained these programs which I've discussed tonight.

Mr. Nixon comes out of the Republican Party. He was nominated by it. And it is a fact that through most of these last 25 years the Republican leadership has opposed Federal aid for education, medical care for the aged, development of the Tennessee Valley, development of our natural resources.

I think Mr. Nixon is an effective leader of his party. I hope he would grant me the same.

The question before us is: Which point of view and which party do we want to lead the United States?

MR. SMITH. Mr. Nixon, would you like to comment on that statement?

MR. NIXON. I have no comment.

...

MR. VANOCUR. (NBC News) Mr. Vice President, since the question of executive leadership is a very important campaign issue, I would like to follow Mr. Novins' question.

Now, Republican campaign slogans--you'll see them on signs around the country as we did last week--say it's experience that counts (that's over a picture of yourself; sir), implying that you've had more governmental, executive decision-making experience than your opponent.

Now, in his news conference on August 24, President Eisenhower was asked to give one example of a major idea of yours that he adopted. His reply was, and I'm quoting:

"If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember."

Now that was a month ago, sir, and the President hasn't brought it up since, and I am wondering, sir, if you can clarify which version is correct, the one put out by Republican campaign leaders or the one put out by President Eisenhower?

MR. NIXON. Well, I would suggest, Mr. Vanocur, that if you know the President, that that was probably a facetious remark. I would also suggest that insofar as his statement is concerned, that I think it would be improper for the President of the United States to disclose the instances in which members of his official family had made recommendations, as I have made them through the years to him, which he has accepted or rejected...

The President has asked for my advice, I have given it; sometimes my advice has been taken, sometimes it has not. I do not say that I have made the decisions, and I would say that no President should ever allow anybody else to make the major decisions. The President only makes the decisions. All that his advisers do is to give counsel when he asks for it. As far as what experience counts and whether that is experience that counts, that isn't for me to say.

I can only say that my experience is there for the people to consider, Senator Kennedy's is there for the people to consider.

As he pointed out, we came to the Congress in the same year; his experience has been different from mine, mine has been in the executive branch, his has been in the legislative branch.

I would say that the people now have the opportunity to evaluate his as against mine, and I think both he and I are going to abide by whatever the people decide.

MR. SMITH. Senator Kennedy?

MR. KENNEDY. Well, I'll just say that the question is of experience and the question also is what our judgment is of the future and what our goals are for the United States and what ability we have to implement those goals.

Abraham Lincoln came to the Presidency in 1860 after a rather little known session in the House of Representatives and after being defeated for the Senate in '58, and was a distinguished President. There is no certain road to the Presidency. There are no guarantees that if you take one road or another that you will be a successful President....

The question really is: which candidate and which party can meet the problems that the United States is going to face in the '60's?

MR. SMITH. The next question to Vice President Nixon from Mr. Fleming.

MR. FLEMING. (ABC News) Mr. Vice President, do I take it, then, you believe that you could work better with Democratic majorities in the House and Senate than Senator Kennedy could work with Democratic majorities in the House and Senate??

MR. NIXON. I would say this: That we, of course, expect to pick up some seats in both in the House and the Senate.

We would hope to control the House, to get a majority in the House in this election. We cannot, of course, control the Senate.

I would say that a President will be able to lead; a President will be able to get his program through to the effect that he has the support of the country, the support of the people.

Sometimes we--we get the opinion that in getting programs through the House or the Senate it's purely a question of legislative finagling and all that sort of thing.

It isn't really that. Whenever a majority of the people are for a program, the House and the Senate responds to it; and whether this House and Senate, in the next session is Democratic or Republican, if the country will have voted for the candidate for the Presidency and for the proposals that he has made, I believe that you will find that the President, if it were a Republican, as it would be in my case, would be able to get his program through that Congress.

Now I also say that as far as Senator Kennedy's proposals are concerned, that again the question is not simply one of a Presidential veto stopping programs. You must always remember that a President can't stop anything unless he has the people behind him, and the reason President Eisenhower's vetoes have been sustained, the reason the Congress does not send up bills to him which they think will be vetoed is because the people and the Congress, the majority of them, know the country is behind the President.

MR. SMITH. Senator Kennedy.

MR. KENNEDY. Well, now let's look at these bills that the Vice President suggests were too extreme.

One was a bill for a dollar twenty-five cents an hour for anyone who works in a store or company that has a million dollars a year business. I don't think that's extreme at all, and yet nearly two-thirds to three-fourths of the Republicans in the House of Representatives voted against that proposal.

Secondly was the Federal aid to education bill. It - it was a very--because of the defeat of teacher salaries, it was not a bill that met, in my opinion, the needs. The fact of the matter is it was a bill that was less than you recommended, Mr. Nixon, this morning in your proposal.

It was not an extreme bill, and yet we could not get one Republican to join; at least, I think, four of the eight Democrats voted to send it to the floor of the House, not one Republican, and they joined with those Democrats who were opposed to it.

I don't say the Democrats are united in their support of the program, but I do say a majority are and I say a majority of the Republicans are opposed to it...

One party is ready to move in these programs; the other party gives them lip service.

MR. SMITH. Can I have the summation time please?

We've completed our questions and our comments. In just a moment we'll have the summation time.

The debate ended with 3 minute closing statements.

9/27/60

MEMORANDUM ON TELEVISION DEBATE
WITH VICE PRESIDENT NIXON, SEPTEMBER 26TH

To: Senator John F. Kennedy

From: Clark M. Clifford

Your time is so limited, I shall make my comments as brief as possible.

- 1) You clearly came out the winner. You were clear, concise and very convincing.
- 2) You kept Nixon on the defensive. This kept him off balance and was a great plus for you.
- 3) Unquestionably this appearance made you votes. I feel sure the other three will do the same.

Suggestions.

- 1) Nixon is making a determined effort to convince the American people that your and his goals are the same. That the only difference lies in the means to attain those goals.

This is false. The goals are very different, and he must not be permitted to create the illusion that you and he are working toward the same end.

Be prepared the next time to point out specifically the positive differences that exist in goals, i. e., minimum wage, housing, etc.

If Nixon can convince the people that his and your philosophies are the same, then he will rob you of one of your greatest strengths.

- 2) Attention must be given to adding greater warmth to your image. If you can retain the technical brilliance and obvious ability, but also project the element of warm, human understanding, you will possess an unbeatable combination.

Give illustrations based upon contacts with service personnel when you were in the Navy. Also conversations you have had with ordinary

people who have discussed their problems with you during the campaign.

- 3) Take advantage of every opportunity to appear with Nixon. You are better than he is.

C.M.C.

September 27, 1960

Debate Score Sheet

As you listen and watch the candidates, record examples of each attribute and rate the candidates' performance in that category. (excellent = 4; good = 3; fair = 2; poor = 1)

Attribute	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
Knowledge of issues	Score:	Score:	Score:
Ability to frame issues in an understandable way	Score:	Score:	Score:
Assertiveness	Score:	Score:	Score:
Ability to improvise	Score:	Score:	Score:

Appearance			
	Score:	Score:	Score:
Personality (Warmth, Charisma, Wit)			
	Score:	Score:	Score:
(Have students add to list)			
	Score:	Score:	Score:
	Score:	Score:	Score: