

The Debates Are Over: Is the Verdict In?

October 14. I watched all six hours. Frankly, I felt obliged to do so. But as I watched more and more, I was also drawn to do so by the drama unfolding on my television screen. These debates were far more substantive than any in the past. The president and his challenger, the vice president and his opponent, all talked about real issues and showed real differences. In a snap poll taken last night, more than 70 percent of the undecided voters polled claimed that the debates had helped them to make their decision. I think all of this is good for democracy.

Who won? Two answers are possible. Drawing on poll results, both those asking who the respondent thought won the debate and those measuring change in the "horse race" after the debate, one must conclude that Senator Kerry won the first debate and held that advantage through the rest. Polls after the second and third presidential debates—and the poll after the one vice presidential debate—showed that neither debater scored a decisive victory. However, the victory that Senator Kerry scored in the Miami debate on foreign policy moved his poll numbers significantly. Before the debate he was behind, in some polls by more than 10 percent. After it he had closed the gap in all polls, moving ahead in some. The race remained close after the debate last night. By this measure, therefore, the debates aided the challenger.

But there is another way to measure how well the candidates did in the debates. How did they do with their base supporters? In this case, the debates—even the first debate—produced no clear winner. Each candidate appealed clearly to his base. The supporters of each liked what they heard. For Senator Kerry this was particularly important, because some of his base had been unsure before the debates. Last week we wrote about women voters. If you viewed the debate last night, you saw Senator Kerry making explicit appeals to female voters. He needs to win the women's vote in order to win the election. He made explicit to female voters why they should support him last night. That clearly was one of his goals. In it he was extremely successful.

The journalists covering the debates and the public reacting to them saw two candidates who were remarkably clear in how their views contrasted. Headlines in this morning's papers say things like, "A Deep Divide on Domestic Front" (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A30674-2004Oct13.html?referrer=email>) and "Standing Tall in their Respective Corners" (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31345-2004Oct14.html?referrer=email>). That is precisely the point of debates. They give the voting public information about where the candidates stand—and these two candidates stand far apart on a series of issues: how we got into the war in Iraq, how we are waging the war on terrorism, how we should forge foreign policy, what we should do to fix our health care system, how we are going to combat the loss of manufacturing sector jobs in America, how one acts to keep an economy on course, how the tax burden in the United States should be shared, whether abortion should be legal under any circumstances, whether the government should fund embryonic stem cell research, how to improve our nation's schools, and many more. It was difficult not to see those differences if you watched the debates, even if you watched less than the six hours I watched.

Why then are some Americans still undecided? To some extent, it is because they did not watch the debates and have not studied these issues. If you do not

understand this, you should review our discussion in chapter 3, particularly the sections on what distinguishes voters from non-voters and how one decides for whom they will vote.

But even some who watched the debates remained undecided. Why? I think the answer lies in another set of headlines one could read this morning, headlines that took up this theme: "Attacks Misleading and Out of Control" (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31325-2004Oct13.html?referrer=email>). That story begins with the sentence, "Facts took a holiday in last night's presidential debate."

Voters who are following the campaign and are undecided have to sort their way through "facts" presented by the candidates in forums like last night's and, if they live in battleground states in which the airwaves are filled with ads about the campaign, through conflicting sets of "facts" bombarding them through the television. One has to be quite sophisticated to understand the nuances, to understand who is telling the truth and who is not.

FactCheck.org and the major networks try to sort through the clutter and expose untruths. But that is always done after the fact—and only the most ardent political junkie follows up to see how the conflicting claims are sorted out. More frequently the viewer either throws his or her hands in the air in despair or goes with the candidate who seems more genuine. That is why the affect of the candidates during the debate is so important. That is why President Bush has worked so hard to get rid of the curled lip and the derisive smirk and why Senator Kerry has worked so hard to appear friendly and congenial. The public is left to judge on appearance, because the truth of the claims is often not clear—and if the truth is foggy, even the vast differences between the two candidates may not appear clear.

Is there a solution to this problem? Not an easy one. However, I was struck with the number of opportunities lost by the debate moderators. I am not criticizing the individuals so much as the system. But wouldn't it have been wonderful if Jim Lehrer or Charlie Gibson or Gwen Ifill or Bob Schieffer had said, just once, "Excuse me, Mr. President, but do you think it is fair to say Senator Kerry voted to raise taxes 98 times, when 6 of those votes dealt with one bill proposed by Senator McCain to raise the cigarette tax?" [n.b., the example is accurate, but the exact numbers may not be] or, "With all due respect, Senator Kerry, you keep saying that on the President's watch we have lost 1.6 million jobs, but in fact those are manufacturing jobs, some of which have been made up for with jobs gained elsewhere, so the real number is closer to half a million" [same disclaimer]. Or wouldn't it be wonderful if some nonprofit, reformist organization ran ads right after each presidential ad, simply correcting the record.

"You dream," I hear you saying. You are right. I do. I long for a clear, open and honest debate. I do believe that the media has a more forceful role to play than the one we describe in chapter 10. They would not have to play this role forever—just a few times and the lesson would be learned. As citizens, I think we should all begin demanding this. A fair, objective, critical media could make the contrasts in this election apparent for all to see.