

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT—2009-2012

Television's Defining Moment:

The Election of 1960

From Dan Martin

Grade: 11th

Length of Class: 48 minutes

Inquiry (Essential Questions):

- How did post World War II international events shape the election of 1960?
- What influence did the use of the television have in deciding the outcome of the election of 1960?

Objectives (Content & Skills):

- Students will:
 - Analyze primary & secondary source documents
 - Find specific reasons and evidence to support a position

Materials (Included below):

- Document A: Transcription and video of the first debate between Kennedy & Nixon
- Document B: Secondary source analyzing the significance of the Election of 1960 by Liette Gidlow

Activities:

- Students will silently read along as they listen to the Kennedy and Nixon's first live television debate involving the Election of 1960 (do not display the video)
- Students will then watch the same dialogue that took place as Americans did back in 1960.
- Students will then meet in pairs deciphering & analyzing the primary source video and documents to find reasons and evidence to defend a position.
- Each pair is responsible for completing the questions together.
- A class discussion will follow using the documents as the basis for the conversation.
- Students will begin reading a secondary source document analyzing the significance of the Election of 1960 completing the discussion questions for homework.

Assessment:

- Students questions will be collected and graded at the start of the following class period pertaining to the article passed out at the end of class.
- Informal observation of student responses during group discussion.

Connecticut Grade Level Expectations:

- Standard 1.3
 - 25. Evaluate the role and impact of the significant individual on historical events
- Standard 2.1
 - 1. Find relevant and accurate information from a variety of sources to answer a history/social studies question
- Standard 2.2
 - 3. Cite evidence from a source to determine an author's purpose and intended audience
 - 4. Analyze and explain multipurpose visual materials
- Standard 2.4
 - 10. Prepare formal oral arguments using relevant evidence to defend a point of view.
 - 11. Ask relevant questions related to social studies / history to initiate, extend or debate a point of view
- Standard 3.1
 - 1. Use evidence to develop an interpretation of a historical event

Document A:

The Election of 1960: Nixon (R) vs. Kennedy (D)

Context: On 26 September 1960, 70 million U.S. viewers tuned in to watch Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts and Vice President Richard Nixon in the first-ever televised presidential debate. It was the first of four televised "Great Debates" between Kennedy and Nixon. The first debate centered on domestic issues. The high point of the second debate, on 7 October, was disagreement over U.S. involvement in two small islands off the coast of China, and on 13 October, Nixon and Kennedy continued this dispute. On 21 October, the final debate, the candidates focused on American relations with Cuba. The Great Debates marked television's grand entrance into presidential politics. They afforded the first real opportunity for voters to see their candidates in competition, and the visual contrast was dramatic.

Speech Transcription:

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Nixon. That completes the opening statements, and now the candidates will answer questions or comment upon one another's answers to questions, put by correspondents of the networks. The correspondents: [introducing themselves: "I'm Sander Vanocur, NBC News;" "I'm Charles Warren, Mutual News;" "I'm Stuart Novins, CBS News;" "Bob Fleming, ABC News."] The first question to Senator Kennedy from Mr. Fleming.

MR. FLEMING: Senator, the Vice President in his campaign has said that you were 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 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 uh - government is comparable. Secondly, I think the question is uh - 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 twenty-five 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. SMITH: The next question: Mr. Novins.

Mr. SMITH: The next question to Vice President Nixon from Mr. Vanocur.

MR. VANOCUR: Uh - Mr. Vice President, since the question of executive leadership is a very important campaign issue, I'd like to follow Mr. Novins' question. Now, Republican campaign slogans - you'll see them on signs around the country as you did last week - say it's experience that counts - that's over a picture of yourself; sir uh - implying that you've had more governmental executive decision-making uh - experience than uh - your opponent. Now, in his news conference on August twenty-fourth, 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'm 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 uh - if you know the President, that was probably a facetious remark. Uh - 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 uh - 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 always maintained and very properly so that he is entitled to get what advice he wants from his cabinet and from his other advisers without disclosing that to anybody - including as a matter of fact the Congress. Now, I can only say this. Through the years I have sat in the National Security Council. I have been in the cabinet. I have met with the legislative leaders. I have met with the President when he made the great decisions with regard to Lebanon, Quemoy and Matsu, other matters. 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. Uh - 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 uh - 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 uh - session in the House of Representatives and after being defeated for the Senate in fifty-eight and was a distinguished president. There's no certain road to the presidency. There are no guarantees that uh - if you take uh - one road or another that you will be a successful president. I have been in the Congress for fourteen years. I have voted in the last uh - eight years uh - and the Vice President was uh - presiding over the Senate and meeting his other responsibilities. I have met uh - decisions over eight hundred times on matters which affect not only the domestic security of the United States, but as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The question really is: which candidate and which party can meet the problems that the United States is going to face in the sixties?

MR. SMITH: Mr. Vanocur's question for Vice President Nixon.

MR. VANOCUR: Mr. Vice President uh - in one of your earlier statements you said we've moved ahead, we've built more schools, we've built more hospitals. Now, sir, isn't it true that the building of more schools is a local matter for financing? Uh - Were you claiming that the Eisenhower Administration was responsible for the building of these schools, or is it the local school districts that provide for it?

MR. NIXON: Not at all. As a matter of fact your question brings out a point that I am very glad to make. Too often in appraising whether we are moving ahead or not we think only of what the federal government is doing. Now that isn't the test of whether America moves. The test of whether America moves is whether the federal government, plus the state government, plus the local government, plus the biggest segment of all - individual enterprise - moves. We have for example a gross national product of approximately five hundred billion dollars. Roughly a hundred billion to a hundred and a quarter billion of that is the result of government activity. Four hundred billion, approximately, is a result of what individuals do. Now, the reason the Eisenhower Administration has moved, the reason that we've had the funds, for example, locally to build the schools, and the hospitals, and the highways, to make the progress that we have, is because this Administration has encouraged individual enterprise; and it has resulted in the greatest expansion of the private sector of the economy that has ever been witnessed in an eight-year period. And that is growth. That is the growth that we are looking for; it is the growth that this Administration has supported and that its policies have stimulated.

MR. SMITH: Senator Kennedy.

MR. KENNEDY: Well, I must say that the reason that the schools have been constructed is because the local school districts were willing to increase the property taxes to a tremendously high figure - in my opinion, almost to the point of diminishing returns in order to sustain these schools. Secondly, I think we have a rich uh - country. And I think we have a powerful country. I think what we have to do, however, is have the president and the leadership set before our country exactly what we must do in the next decade, if we're going to maintain our security in education, in economic growth, in development of natural resources. The Soviet Union is making great gains. It isn't enough to compare what might have been done eight years ago, or ten years ago, or fifteen years ago, or twenty years ago. I want to compare what we're doing with what our adversaries are doing, so that by the year 1970 the United States is ahead in education, in health, in building, in homes, in economic strength. I think that's the big assignment, the big task, the big function of the federal government.

Video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaggQcvLO_o

Be prepared to answer the following focus questions:

1. Based on the *audio clip* of the 1960 debate between Nixon and Kennedy provide **two specific reasons** to support who you felt won the debate?
2. Based on the **audio clip** provide specific examples / pieces of evidence supporting which candidate did a better job persuading the American citizens that their position were stronger.
3. Based on the *video clip* of the 1960 debate between Nixon and Kennedy provide **two specific reasons** to support who you felt won the debate?
4. Provide specific examples / pieces of evidence from the **video clip** demonstrating how Kennedy used the media and television to his advantage.
5. Predict based on the material provided above which candidate was victorious in securing the election of 1960.

Document B:

The Great Debate: Kennedy, Nixon, and Television in the 1960 Race for the Presidency

by Liette Gidlow

Imagine the setting. Since soon after the close of World War II, the United States had been engaged in a heated Cold War with the Communist Soviet Union. Within the previous four years, Soviet tanks and troops had crushed a democratic revolt in Hungary and threatened to run the Allies out of West Berlin, drawing tighter the Iron Curtain that closed off Eastern Europe from the West. The USSR had stunned the world with the successful launch of Sputnik, the first space-orbiting satellite, and raised fears that the Soviets would quickly achieve military superiority in space. Earlier that year, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had reached a fever pitch when an American pilot was shot down and captured while spying on Soviet military installations.



In the race for the presidency that November, one candidate was young, had served little more than a single undistinguished term in the US Senate, and could offer no experience to speak of in foreign affairs. The other candidate, a two-term vice president, had made a successful political career out of battling Communists at home and abroad, relentlessly pursuing former State Department official Alger Hiss, and even going toe-to-toe with the Soviet premier himself, prevailing over Nikita Khrushchev in the “Kitchen Debate” by arguing for the superiority of the American way of life. At a time when the missile gap was one of the most pressing issues of the election, political commentators compared the two candidates and joked about the “stature gap” between them. If you were betting on who would win the high-stakes presidential election to become the leader of the free world that fall, which candidate would you have put your money on?

Well, the year was 1960, and the victorious candidate was not the experienced one, but the youthful one. Part of the reason that John F. Kennedy captured the presidency was the way he performed in a series of televised debates against his Republican opponent, Richard M. Nixon. The Kennedy-Nixon debates stand out as a remarkable moment in the nation’s political history, not only because they propelled an unlikely candidate to victory, but also because they ushered in an era in which television dominated the electoral process. Recalling the nineteenth-century tradition of “front porch” campaigns in which groups of citizens traveled to a presidential candidate’s home to meet him and question him about the issues, Charles Kuralt of CBS News declared that Kennedy’s skill with the medium helped to make television the nation’s new “front porch.”

As for the Kennedy-Nixon debates, there had never been anything quite like them. The first nationally televised presidential debates; they attracted an audience of an unprecedented size. Some seventy-seven million Americans. Over sixty percent of the adult population watched the first exchange. The four prime time debates were broadcast in September and October and presented in a format that has since become familiar, with opening and closing statements offered by each candidate and questions posed by a panel of journalists.

The debate made Kennedy look like a winner. His practice of looking at the camera was answering the questions – and not at the journalists who asked them, as Nixon did – made viewers see him as someone who was talking directly to them and who gave them straight answers, Kennedy’s performance showed not only that he was a knowledgeable and credible elected official, but also that he just plain looked better. The often repeated story is that polls taken after the first debate showed that most people who listened to it on the radio felt that Nixon had won, while most who watched it on television declared Kennedy the victor. A polished public speaker, Kennedy appeared young, athletic, handsome and poised. Nixon, wearing a gray suit that blended with the television backdrop, pale and thin after a recent hospitalization for the flu, sporting a five-o’clock shadow, and refusing to wear make-up, appeared tired, pallid, and sweaty. He freshened up his appearance for the next three debates, but years later he remembered the lesson well. When he opened his next presidential bid in 1968, it’s no wonder he declared himself “tanned, rested, and ready.”

More important than Kennedy's appearance, however, was the way that he used television to frame issues and blunt criticism. Well aware of the public's worries about a "stature gap," at the beginning of the fall campaign season Kennedy used President Eisenhower's own words to address voter concerns. Eisenhower and Nixon had had a frosty relationship almost from the start, soon after naming Nixon as his running mate in 1952; the President nearly booted him off the ticket when charges of a Nixon campaign flush fund came to light. Only Nixon's highly strategic "Checkers" speech saved his job. Eisenhower did not even endure Nixon until late in the 1960 campaign. Turning the two Republicans' strained relationship to their advantage, Kennedy advisors skillfully worked an excerpt from one of Eisenhower's press conferences into a campaign advertisement. Asked at the press conference what contributions Vice President Nixon had made to his eight-year administration, Eisenhower replied that, given a week, he might think of something. The replay of that quip, and the reports' raucous laughter afterward, deflated the significance of Nixon's vaunted experience. When in the side-by-side comparison later afforded by the debates Kennedy showed that he was well informed and well spoken, he succeeded in putting the issue to rest altogether.

Answer the following questions for homework:

1. How did post World War II international events influence America's decision with regards to the Election of 1960?
2. To what extent did television change / influence a debate since the "age of television"?
3. What evidence does the author provide to support why many Americans felt that Kennedy had won the first debate aired on television?