

## **DEBATE WATCHER'S GUIDE: HOW TO SCORE CANDIDATE PERFORMANCES**

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For years, the rule of thumb was that if you were ahead, you didn't chance a debate; you didn't want to risk an unpredictable situation of any kind if you could avoid it.

But now, it's nearly impossible for just about any candidate to skip out - that is, without taking a terrible hit not only from the opposition but from the press.

It's gotten to the point that debating is seen as a civic duty for major candidates and failure to engage is viewed as an insult to the voters. Debate dodgers have something to hide, it is believed; they're afraid of the truth, opponents will charge.

As a result of Ronald Reagan's single-handed destruction of the incumbent-frontrunner excuse, there are more debates than ever before. Turn on your TV set during the last days of September and most of October and you'll see zillions of scared candidates in navy suits (and for the men, red striped ties) doing their best to stay out of trouble in front of God, press, voters, and - yikes! - the enemy himself.

Voters and news reporters often struggle to rate candidate performances in public debates. The purpose of this guide is to provide some organization and consistency to the scoring process.

While the actual number of points you give to Candidate A or deduct from Candidate B is purely a subjective evaluation, providing a commonly used format would be useful to keep track of the winners and the losers.

The Debate Score Card appears on page 31 - and can be used not just for presidential confrontations but for all elections.

### **Adding Points**

To use this score card, you start by writing the names of the candidates - or their initials - in the places provided. If you want to rate more than four candidates, therefore needing more than the four spaces provided, add columns for additional candidates.

With this system, every candidate starts off with 50 points. Throughout the evaluation process, points are added, then subtracted, ultimately producing a final score for each contestant.

Part A of the Score Card involves adding points - giving debaters credit for their successes. For each question, you may add one to 10 extra points (10 being the best) for candidates who do well or exceptionally well.

The following questions provide a guide to this section:

Did the candidate accomplish what he/she needed to do? To answer, you have to have some understanding of the strategic context. Let's look at the Reagan-Carter debate from 1980. Most observers thought it was imperative for Reagan to show that he was not a trigger-happy, right-wing extremist. By most measures, he achieved that goal in the one debate he had with Carter - and won the election shortly thereafter. In fact, Carter's mention that he had talked nuclear strategy with daughter Amy made some people wonder about the incumbent's good sense.

Another prime example of someone accomplishing his objective was the debate between Vice President Al Gore and Ross Perot in 1993 over the NAFTA issue. Gore's goal was to look competent, knowledgeable, and reasonable as a public official; he also needed to provoke Perot into an unflattering outburst. Both aims were achieved. In that tete-a-tete, Gore would have earned a full 10 in this area.

In line with this, it's important that a candidate reinforce his/her basic strengths and overcome basic weaknesses. This refers to pre-existing, pre-debate image attributes.

Bill Clinton, for example, is viewed by most voters as being compassionate and in sympathy with average people. In a debate, he should reinforce that view. Clinton is also said to have a character problem; polls show many voters don't believe what he says. In a debate, he should keep that reality in mind by being very specific about his arguments using third-party documentation whenever possible.

Bob Dole is thought of as being honest and patriotic. In a debate, he should make sure what he says and how he says it sharpens that image. On the other hand, many voters think Dole is too old to be president; it is imperative

that he not only avoid making mistakes that would highlight his age but that he project vigor, alertness, and strength in a way that diminishes the age issue.

Did the candidate meet or exceed expectations? Before most debates, there is a general consensus as to which candidates are likely to do best. In this year's presidential election, it is believed by most observers that President Clinton is a better public speaker and all-around stage performer than is rival Bob Dole. So if Dole is seen as besting Clinton in a debate, the incumbent would fall below expectations and the challenger would be rated as having far exceeded expectations. In that case, you add up to 10 points in Dole's column.

Did the candidate control the agenda and remain on the offense? It's usually a big advantage if a candidate is able to frame the issues in a debate. To do that, the candidate must assume an offensive posture from the start and never allow the opposition to maneuver him or her into a defensive crouch. Accomplishing this is worth extra points; it will permeate everything else in the debate.

Like it or not, first and last impressions are important. How one opens a debate performance - particularly in an introductory statement - is crucial in terms of accomplishing many of the other objectives discussed above. The closing statement is significant, too; it's advisable to leave voters with the right impression at sign-off time. Reagan's "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" close posed the right question for the audience to ponder - it was also a question for which he knew the answer.

Did the candidate get the better of the opposition in key exchanges and confrontations? When candidates are eyeball-to-eyeball, parrying and thrusting, it makes for memorable moments. Viewers usually remember the punches and counter-punches, not the positive set-pieces. For that reason, when candidates engage in hand-to-hand combat, it's important they're on solid ground; they shouldn't venture out with unprepared attacks or make charges that can't be supported on the spot.

When one contestant blunders, it opens an opportunity for the other side. Sometimes, to take full advantage of a blunder, a rival only needs to keep quiet and let it speak for itself; in other cases, the rival may need to point out the mistake, discuss why it was so bad, and relate it to larger themes.

In the 1976 Carter-Ford debate, President Ford earned his place in debate lore for suggesting that Eastern European nations were not under Soviet domination. That comment hurt Ford's credibility, especially when the press harped on the blunder after the debate. But what we're judging here is how the opponent took advantage of a mistake from the other side. Pundits argued then that Jimmy Carter did not effectively exploit Ford's gaffe; others say he didn't have to. Judge for yourself.

Did the candidate answer questions effectively? Most of the time in a debate, candidates are answering questions either from a panel of reporters, experts, civic leaders, average voters, or from one another. If a candidate is quick and answers the questions with crisp, cool, assured responses, it's a big plus.

Once you're finished scoring this section, total the earned points for each candidate and then add that number to 50 the starting score for all candidates. The result is the "Part A" subtotal.

### **Deducting Points**

Part B assumes that candidates are supposed to be in top form, including their personal appearance, tone, speaking style, and other matters such as knowledge, preparation, and alertness.

In every area where a candidate falls down, points are to be deducted.

So, if a candidate's hair and grooming appears just fine, you deduct no points. If a candidate's hair looks too plastic, or is unruly, then you may deduct one, two, or three points - depending upon how bad it is.

If a candidate looks tired and worn - the way Richard Nixon did in 1960 in the first debate against John Kennedy - then you deduct points. (Nixon would've also lost points for his make-up job.) If the candidate looks good - as Kennedy did - you neither deduct nor add points in this section.

The tone of a candidate's remarks are important. Many observers thought Bob Dole was too negative and acerbic in his vice presidential debate with Walter Mondale in 1976. A candidate who appears weak, as Jimmy Carter often did against Ronald Reagan in 1980, or uncertain, as Reagan occasionally seemed in his first debate with Mondale in

1984 and as Dan Quayle was in his 1988 debate with Lloyd Bentsen, loses points. Obnoxiousness can also count against a debater. In the NAFTA debate, Perot lost points in this area.

Speaking style is, of course, a major factor. Candidates need to be able to express their ideas with clarity; they must stay within time limits; they must maintain steady eye contact with the audience (when speaking to the audience) or the questioners (when the format makes that appropriate); and they must not speak either too slow or too fast.

Anything less means a point reduction.

Candidates who are well prepared, and who have ready soundbites for all occasions, must be careful they don't go too far and appear automated and canned. In his 1996 presidential campaign, Steve Forbes did a great job staying on message - with his "flat tax" proposal and his "hope, growth, opportunity" mantra - but he did it so automatically, with such precision and repetition, that after a while he seemed to be a programmed puppet mouthing meaningless slogans. While combatants must stay on message, and be willing to repeat and reinforce their pitch constantly, it can become overdone. Variety of tone, modulation, and phraseology can prevent that from happening.

There are a number of general matters that are also scored. For example, if a candidate seems to lack knowledge of issues being discussed. A nervous candidate is one who will not inspire confidence. Ineffective opening statements get a debater off on the wrong foot; poor closing statements represent a missed opportunity to leave the voters with a compelling, summary message.

If a candidate seems to lack alertness - "Can you repeat that question, please, I wasn't paying attention?" or "I'm, ah, sorry, but, ah, I lost my train of thought" - it projects a negative, and painfully memorable, impression.

While candidates are not perfect, and will make mistakes and miss opportunities even in a winning debate performance, they must be judged against high standards of performance.

The major blunder category should be reserved for serious lapses. For example, Gerald Ford's comment about Eastern Europe not being under Soviet domination deserved a -10; so did Dan Quayle's poor response in 1988 to inquiries as to what he'd do if he suddenly became president - which ultimately led to the "deer in the headlights" look he gave when Lloyd Bentsen landed his "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy" wallop.

Another instance was Reagan's feeble handling of Mondale's artful attack in 1984 when Mondale turned against his opponent the line Reagan, himself, had made famous - "There you go again" - with such devastating effect against Carter in 1976.

In the second 1992 presidential debate, George Bush's inability to understand a question from a young African American woman in the audience - "How does the deficit affect you personally?" - was a memorable moment that involved a verbal gaffe, failure to answer a question that was repeated over and over by a persistent moderator and questioner, and poor handling of an exchange. Because it combined so many errors, it's worth studying.

Bush began his answer by asserting, "I think the national debt affects everybody. Obviously, it has a lot to do with interest rates. It has...." At that point, the moderator interrupts, "She's saying you personally." The questioner chimes in while moderator is still speaking, "On a personal basis, how has it affected you?" The moderator punches the point one more time, "Has it affected you personally?"

Bush strains to figure out what the questioner is getting at; he now shifts his answer to a more personal one: "Well, I'm sure it has. I love my grandchildren. I want to think...." Questioner interrupts, "How?" Bush is clearly off stride; he's now thoroughly confused and meanders, searching for something to say. He throws out a line: "I want to think they can be able to afford an education. I think that's an important part of being a parent."

But Bush realizes he's headed nowhere, so he stops and garbles, "If the question is...if you're....maybe I won't get it wrong...." To find a way out of his hole, he helplessly asks the questioner, "Are you suggesting that if somebody has means that the national debt doesn't affect them?" The questioner attempts to respond, "Well, what I'm saying...." Bush interrupts her, and starts over: "I'm not sure I get it. Help me with the question and I'll try to answer it."

The questioner now explains how she knows people who have been laid off and are struggling with hardship. She stresses she wants to know how the economic problems affect Bush personally. The moderator jumps in to explain

that the questioner means the recession as well as the deficit. Bush then resumes an answer about going to a black church in Washington where he met people with troubles such as teenage pregnancy.

Bush's inability to relate to the issue at hand - which was central to this election and Bill Clinton's message that Bush did not "get it" when it came to understanding how average people were pained because of a weak economy - reinforced his opponent's argument. Bush's remark about "people with means" betrayed his privileged background. When he uttered, "I'm not sure I get it," it was the final blow. No wonder Bill Clinton cracked a smile.

Most debate injuries are self-inflicted. The Bush exchange was a good example.

It's now time to sit back in an easy chair with your favorite java brew, turn on the TV set, break out your "Debate Score Card," and watch the candidates battle it out - from school board to president, county supervisor to Congress. And when you do, you can give thanks for at least one thing; it's not you on stage sweating it out.

Faucheux, Ron. (1996) *Campaigns & Elections*. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2519/is\\_n10\\_v17/ai\\_18839569](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2519/is_n10_v17/ai_18839569)