

## **Schroeder**

Well there have always been debates of one sort or another in American politics, the famous ones being the 1858 Senatorial debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. Those went for hours, and hours, and hours, the candidates would just basically stand up speaking one at a time, and it was a big social event. People would turn up by the thousands and have picnics, and listen to it. And that's really the precursor of what has become our televised Presidential debates. Televised Presidential debates are of course a modern phenomenon, beginning in 1960 with John F Kennedy and Richard Nixon, but before that, candidates did not debate either on radio or on television, Kennedy and Nixon were the first ones to do it. And 1960 is an interesting year because it's also the year where penetration of households around the country, where television was almost complete. 90% of homes in 1960 had television sets. So suddenly this new apparatus that was becoming part of daily life entered the political arena as well with these Kennedy and Nixon debates. There were four of them that year, they lasted an hour each, and they were incredible well watched, and they were thought to be pivotal in Kennedy's election.

In 1984 we have incumbent Ronald Reagan, who probably didn't have to debate Walter Mondale that year because he was so far ahead in the polls. And I gave Reagan a lot of credit, I actually think Reagan is the reason we have debates today, because Reagan had the attitude that debates were a positive thing, and that any candidate ought to be able to stand up and take on his opponent, and lay out his ideas, and compare them with those of his opponent. It's free media, absolutely. Reagan had, there were only two Presidential debates that year. Reagan had a disastrous first debate where he seemed to lose his place, he was sort of meandering and babbling a little bit. In the follow up debate to that, the challenge he had was overcoming this perception that had been created in the public, and particularly in the press that he was too old for the job. Losing his edge, sort of not being mentally sharp, and there were articles written questioning is this man able to handle the job. They even interviewed his doctor, and it became this enormous post-debate story. In that follow up debate with Walter Mondale Reagan got off his famous zinger that about, "I'm not going to exploit for political purposes my opponents youth and inexperience." Even Walter Mondale started laughing at that, and it really clinched the deal for Reagan.

Well one of the things debates tend to do is reinforce existing perceptions that are out there about the candidates, and Michael Dukakis in 1988 had this reputation of being a sort of a bloodless technocrat. And in the final debate that year he was asked famously that opening question by Bernard Shaw in Los Angeles, "If your wife were raped and murdered what would be your opinion

about capital punishment?” because Dukakis had been on record as saying he opposed to capital punishment. And Dukakis gave a very, and answer that was no different than the answer he'd been giving all along, but displayed no emotion, and did not really acknowledge the personal message inherent in that question, and that really was thought to be by a lot of people watching just a confirmation that this man did not have a heart. Now was that fair, probably not. Adding to that, Dukakis had the flu, he was not in good physical shape that day, and yet, he really suffered the consequences of that debate.

The first President Bush hated debates, probably more than any other candidate with the possible exception of his son. And he hated doing it, he had a really bad experience with Geraldine Ferraro in 1984, and he did two debates with Michael Dukakis, but he was dragged into them kicking and screaming. And the really interesting debate that year was the Vice Presidential debate between Dan Quayle and Lloyd Bentsen, the famous one where Lloyd Bentsen says, “You're no Jack Kennedy,” words that I believe will be put on Dan Quayle's tomb when he dies. So you had a really lively and interesting Vice Presidential debate, and typically Vice Presidential debates are more fun and more interesting than the Presidential debates. The stakes are lower for the Vice Presidential candidates and so there's no quite as much pressure, they don't box themselves into such a narrow little field when they go out onto that stage. Furthermore, the characters have been a lot more interesting I think, if you sort of go down the list of Vice Presidential candidates, you've got some real interesting individuals there. In the 2008 Vice Presidential debate between Sarah Palin and Joe Biden for instance, that had a larger audience than any of the television debates between Obama and McCain, simply because people were more interested I think in watching her. But you know people like Dan Quayle and Admiral Stockdale, Al Gore, you just tend to have a different feel in a Vice Presidential debate.

Yea '92 is an interesting Presidential debate series, because it's the only time to date that we've seen three Presidential candidates on the stage in a general election debate. The first President Bush, Bill Clinton the challenger, and Ross Perot. Ross Perot got in by virtue of his poll standings, he was doing quite well. Well the rules for participation in the debates have changed a little bit over the years. At the moment you have to have as a candidate, a fifteen percent standing in five different national polls, which are averaged and if you meet that threshold you're in. Perot, I think back then I'd have to go back and look this up, I think it might have been ten percent, and whatever the threshold was he met it. And the thought is that general election debates are not the time to be introducing new characters onto the stage, that if you haven't already made your mark by then, that is not the appropriate moment to really put the third party up on the stage.

In the 1992 town hall debate, you have a woman in the audience stand up and ask the candidates how has the national debt personally affected you. But what she probably meant was the bad economy; the national debt was a little misleading. Bush took the question first and gave a very bad answer where he literally uses the words "I don't get it." Bush is just terrible in this response; he has no idea how to relate to the woman. After he finishes giving his answer he goes back to his stool and sits down, and you see him looking down at his watch as if he wants to get just out of there. Bill Clinton gets up, walks to the edge of the stage just to where he knows the camera is gonna capture him on a tight shot, very close to the woman, gives his response to her quite directly, asks her a couple of questions for more information, is brilliant, knocks it out of the park. And James Carville, the advisor to Clinton that year was watching the debate back stage and said to somebody at that moment, "We just won the election."

Al Gore in the first 2000 debate was criticized greatly after the fact for having rolled his eyes at Bush's answers, audibly sighed, and just looking like, "Oh my gosh I can't believe this guy said such a stupid thing." And it shows you sort of the power of the camera, the eye rolls and the sighs didn't look like much in the debate hall, in fact the moderator Jim Lehrer told me he didn't even notice it until after the fact when it was pointed out with him. So you do these things on camera, and they're magnified because they're on camera, and it came across as Gore being patronizing and condescending toward Bush, and one of the things debaters need to be very careful about is how they treat their opponent. That idea of being aggressive, but being appropriately aggressive against the opponent is really important and Gore did not handle that very well.

In the town hall debate in 2000 you have this odd moment where Al Gore during a George Bush answer decides to sort of physically stalk him and he walks over into his space and you get this wonderful look on Bush's face of sort of being caught by surprise, and he does a little head nod. The crowd in the studio started laughing at Gore and it really made him look foolish, and he quickly backed off. And Bush was quite spontaneous in his response; he had the crowd on his side. Gore ended up looking foolish and again it shows you the power of the visual, it's a tiny little moment, and it's just a camera shot, something that takes about two seconds in real time, but that spoke volumes to the audience about these two debaters.

In the first debate between Obama and McCain one of the takeaways was that McCain refused to make eye contact throughout with Obama even though they were standing only a few feet apart. Again it gives off this idea of rudeness or discourtesy towards your opponent that is a real turn off for people watching

these things. So McCain was very weird in that debate and had already gone in there reluctantly because he didn't want to be there in the first place. Barack Obama, who is not a naturally gifted debater was very good in those debates, I wouldn't say he was brilliant. He played a very safe game, there are no really memorable one liners or zingers particularly out of those debates, but he did what has to be done by any challenger on the stage, and that was present himself in a way in which he seemed plausibly Presidential to the audience. And so I think the debates were important for Obama in ratifying him as someone up to the job, he was very calm, very in control, especially as opposed to McCain who was a little all over the map in his delivery.

Governor Romney has a lot of debate experience, and unlike Obama he has a lot of recent debate experience because he went through 20 plus debates and forums with his Republican primary opponents. Obama by contrast has not done a debate in four years, so I think Romney has an advantage going in in that sense. Just that he's a little more in practice. I like to say that debating is a muscle that doesn't get used very often, and so Romney's been using that muscle and Obama has not. Romney is in command of his material, he's been out there on the campaign trail for years, he's been asked everything a million times. So it's gonna be very hard to stump him or surprise him. I think Romney has the ability to be aggressive when he needs to be. He's not afraid to go in for the kill, he's not afraid to twist the knife.

Sometime in the 1980's you began seeing the rise of what is called spin alley, which is this vast room where all of the reporters watch the debates on huge monitors, and the campaign sends surrogates into the room to schmooze reporters and to put the best face possible on their candidate's performance, And it's utterly chaotic, I watched a debate one time from spin alley just to have the experience, and I'd never want to do it again because you can't really see the debate because you're being pestered by surrogates all the time, and you're in a room with a bunch of people. It's disruptive, it's overwhelming, the audio is bad. You're looking down taking notes so you might miss an important reaction shot or something like that, and you're subject to the influence of everyone else's opinion. Now as the years have gone on and as we've entered the era of social media, spin alley has been somewhat supplanted by Twitter and Facebook, real time comments being made by millions of people who are watching these things, all of whom have opinions, and whose reactions constitute trends, and that then influences the spin, and then give the journalists who are talking about the debate in the aftermath, something to hang their commentary on. So spin alley gets more and more intense with each cycle, and is now accompanied by this sort of parallel reaction from the public that is manifesting itself on Twitter and Facebook.

I think the fact of real time reaction now means a whole different ball game for things like fact checkers. It used to be that you would wait until the next morning's Washington Post to read the fact check story, if something was right and what was wrong. And now, instant ability to fact check, the campaigns themselves by the way generate a lot of these Tweets. And they have people on standby who have marching orders to basically Tweet positively about their own and negatively about the other, and so spin alley still exists, but it's now sort of moved into cyberspace and intensified in a way that I think has very interesting implications for the future.

We see a lot of innovation with technology in primary debates, but not general election debates. The thought is that primary debates are a good place to experiment and a good place to try things that haven't been tried before. So for 2008 and 2012 for instance in the primary debates, you had You Tube debates where people submitted their questions on video. You also had in 2012 among the Republicans this year a Twitter debate. A very weird sort of Twitter debate where all the responses of course had to be in 140 characters or less, which just meant that the candidates would use 20 Tweets to give their responses, and were no less verbose. There was a lot of problems with that, nobody was sure really who was Tweeting. There was some thought that the candidates just had their surrogates doing the responding and that the candidates themselves were not directly involved. The problem is also a time problem, there was a lot of lag between the question being shown and the responses coming in, and meanwhile you'd veer off into some other topic. So it was a failure as a debate, but it was an interesting failure and it does show some of the possibilities maybe for the future of integrating sort of real time involvement of the audience, and letting people ask questions of the candidates, but there are a lot of mechanics involved that make that problematic.

My feeling is that the general election debates are not the place to innovate. The stakes are too high, the audiences are too large, there's just too much going on to get too cute with the technology. So I agree that maybe the general election debates have not kept pace with the innovations of the media, but I'd rather see them be a little bit of a lagging indicator rather than the place where new things are tried. It's just too risky for everyone involved.

There's several sort of important moments during the presidential campaign, including the conventions, but the conventions I think are decreasing in importance, and they've certainly been decreasing in popularity among viewers because they're so rehearsed, and so choreographed and there's no element, there's a lot of theatricality but there's no element spontaneity to that theatricality

with rare exception. The debates by contrast, because they can't be scripted in advance, are much more theatrical and much more attractive I think to people who just want to watch a good television show and take the information in. I think the debates are also particularly important for undecided or low information voters who wait until pretty late in the game to start paying attention to the race because it's kind of one stop shopping. All you have to do is basically sit there for 90 minutes and pay some attention and you're gonna get a pretty good fix on the candidates and their policies. So this idea of spontaneity, the lone really moment in this entire process where there's the possibility that things might go off script, I think that makes debates attractive.

Really live television is a pretty unusual animal, and it's something that's attractive by virtue of it being live. And if you look at the highest rated programs on television in a given year, it's always the Super Bowl first, the debates second in years in which they're held, but things like the Academy Awards, you know award shows that are live. This idea that you tune in and anything might happen as you are watching. That's really attractive to viewers as viewers, but it's also I think useful to citizens as voters just because one of the things that we're looking at is how do these candidates respond under pressure, and I think a debate gives you a little insight into a President's style and a President's ability to role with the punches. If we saw a Presidential candidate on a debate stage that looked nervous or intimidated, that would not translate very well to a voter who was trying to figure out who do I want when there's some horrible world crisis, who do I want dealing with that? So I think that you'll never get a real accurate mechanism for predicting how someone will behave in office, but debates at least allow us to see how they respond in a live unscripted environment.

You know candidates are by being live, and by not having a teleprompter in front of them as was the case at the convention where every word had been vetted, and every word was essentially being read off a teleprompter. So what candidates will try to do sometimes in order to protect themselves is seek formats that favor short snippets of conversation. In the 2008 Vice Presidential debates for instance you had 90 second response times, 2 minutes of discussion. That was insisted upon by Sarah Palin's handlers because they knew that she could memorize something for 90 seconds and give a coherent response, but as soon as you're knocked off that format of short time increments, anything can happen. Now what's interesting about the 2012 debates, is the formats as proposed by the debate commission, and I should say that as we tape here the campaigns themselves have not signed off on that so this is potentially subject to change, but the format this year the idea is to get away from short response times. To have open ended discussion periods of 15

minutes on a given topic that does not force the candidates into quick little sound bites.

The moderator in this open ended format has a lot of control over the flow of the conversation, and has the ability to seek clarifications and go in for follow ups if a candidate tries to stonewall or evade a response, and the candidates can speak to each other, which is something that in other countries that hold debates is pretty normal, but in American debates typically the candidates have not wanted any part of direct exchange with each other, they're very intimidated by this prospect.

Well one of the things that's always negotiated is whether the candidates stand or sit. You had a candidate like Dick Cheney for instance who insisted upon being seated for a couple of reasons. One, he was very comfortable with that because he had done *Meet The Press* so many times, and that's basically the *Meet The Press* format. The other was he has a bad heart, and they were afraid that if they had him stand for that whole time that he might you know sort of start weakening, and they certainly didn't want that image on camera. My feeling is that table debates, sit down debates are the best for engendering conversation, and the proposal for 2012 calls for the candidates to be seated for all but the town hall debate, so I'm hopeful that the combination of the table setting and the open ended format will allow for a bit more dialogue than normal.

You have all of this sort of weird history in debates of the taller candidate seeming to have a physical advantage. In the case of Michael Dukakis, Geraldine Ferraro, both of whom were shorter than their opponents they actually built little mounds behind the lectern so that the candidate would appear to be equal in height. The problem with that is at the end of the debate when they shake hands with each other, you see Michael Dukakis actually stepping down, and it looked even more ridiculous than if he had just been standing there normally.

I love political conventions as a political junkie, and as a news junkie and here's why: To me it's all about new talent, it's basically you know *America's Got Talent* or *American Idol*. It's the place where you get to see the up and comers, and I think that's really valuable for the process. I think it's incredibly valuable for these individual candidates especially the young ones who don't have a lot of experience on the national stage. It puts them on the map. Barack Obama would not be Barack Obama had it not been for that convention speech in 2004 here in Boston. That was so pivotal in establishing him, so I think that from a programming standpoint the days of the convention being a big deal and the days of the conventions drawing enormous audiences, that's probably over. But

it's now becoming more of a niche event that is obviously designed to rouse the base of the Party but that also has a public role in introducing new characters to the political soap opera of America. So I hope they're around for a long time and I hope that we'll always have at least that format of letting the new people come up and give a speech. And sort of waving the magic wand over these talented prospects some of whom are gonna get sent up to the big leagues.

Well politics really are about young people in the sense that any action that is taken now has implications that will ring true for decades to come, and so if you are a young person you ought to be interested in politics because they are talking about you, and they are talking about the world in which you will have to live, and the rules by which you will have to play. And young people have too often I think an apathetic attitude toward politics or a feeling that it's not about them. The words may not be about them but the actions are about them. And so for young people it's really important to have a stake in that conversation and to be very vigilant about what is being done in what in is effect their name, because all of these things that the politicians do are gonna have repercussions way down the line.