


# PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES IN THE U.S.

A Primer


## What are the rules?

The Harris and Trump campaigns have agreed to a 90-minute debate with two commercial breaks, no live audience, and each candidate's mic muted while the other is speaking. They must debate without using notes or consulting with their advisors during the commercials. To decide which podium is whose and who will give the first closing statement, they will flip a coin. Reporters from ABC News will moderate the event, though other networks and streaming services are permitted to simulcast it.


## What are a campaign's goals in a debate?



**First, do no harm.** Candidates typically prioritize reducing the risk of gaffes—misstatements of fact or flubbed responses—that will get replayed repeatedly. That is why they often pause their campaign travel to do several days of debate prep. The most damaging gaffes are those that seem to enforce an existing negative characterization of a candidate, which explains why two candidates can make the same “mistake” but have it affect one candidate more.



**Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative.** Viewers might tune in for only a few minutes, so candidates continuously try to use their speaking time to emphasize what they view as their most popular positions and avoid those they feel are liabilities for their campaign. This explains why they might appear to dodge a question or twist an answer away from the topic they were asked about.



**Spin, spin, spin.** Studies by political scientists and social psychologists consistently have shown that voters' impressions of a debate are shaped more by media coverage afterward than by the event itself. So campaigns work hard to make the case that they won the debate, and their social media teams begin pushing out favorable clips even before the event concludes.

# Do presidential debates make a difference?

Political scientists caution against overemphasizing the impact of presidential debates, which usually occur late in an election season when many voters have made up their minds. Polling bumps candidates have received from strong performances tended to fade by Election Day.

But in close elections, marginal gains can be decisive. In the 1960 contest between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy, the election would have gone the other way had Nixon won 5,000 more votes in Illinois and 24,000 more in Texas. That year's first-ever televised debate attracted an audience of 66.4 million viewers—37% of the U.S. population at that time. Scholars name Kennedy's strong performance in front of a vast audience as an important force propelling him to victory that fall.

Forecasters expect Tuesday night's viewership to exceed the 51 million Americans who watched the June debate between President Biden and President Trump and perhaps approach the 84 million who tuned in to see the first debate between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then-candidate Trump in 2016. As most election-watchers expect another close race this November and with early voting beginning in five states this month, this likely will be the candidates' only chance to speak to an audience this large before Americans cast their ballots. And voters tell surveyors they find debates much more helpful to their decision-making than news coverage or campaign ads.

## What are helpful questions to ask while I watch?

### What do I think should be the next president's top priorities?

Before you turn on the TV, consider the issues you most want to hear the candidates discuss. What do you think are the most pressing problems facing the United States? What do you expect they will say about it? What do you hope they will say? If neither candidate addresses your issues, ask why that might be. Consider how your experiences and perspectives might differ from the majority of voters whom the candidates are trying to target. For instance, in the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, 90% of voters were over the age of 29, 81% did not live in an urban setting, and 56% did not have a college degree.

### Will the candidate be able to enact their policy vision?

More likely than not, the next president's party will not control both houses of Congress. The Constitution and the judiciary put limits on what the president can accomplish without Congressional support. In some policy areas (e.g., federal regulations, foreign policy, immigration) the executive branch can move more autonomously. In others (e.g., taxation, budget appropriations, judicial appointments) Congress holds more power than the president. And in still others (e.g., education, policing), state and local governments are in the driver's seat.

### What strategies are the candidates using to appeal to voters?

Rhetoricians encourage us to listen for the deployment of logos, ethos, and pathos. In a presidential debate, logos would include the construction of logical arguments and the marshaling of convincing evidence to support them. Ethos involves a candidate's performance of professionalism (acting "presidential") and invoking their qualifications for the job. Pathos refers to emotional appeals designed to empathize with voters and garner hope for and enthusiasm about the campaign.

### When and why do your peers come away with a different impression of a candidate than you do?

The diversity of perspectives within Deerfield's student body is one of its great strengths and also affords you the ability to come to understand why a candidate's arguments prove persuasive to some and not to others. Instead of jumping into a fiery common-room debate, consider adopting the approach of an anthropologist or a focus group facilitator and ask those with whom you disagree how they came to believe the way they do. Not only will this help sustain Deerfield's tight-knit community by helping us know each other better, but it might even lead you to change your mind!