

University of New England

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF
THE PROGRESSIVELY INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF
MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**Submitted by
Constantinos E. Scaros, BA, MA, JD**

School of Humanities

University of New England

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of general election debates on American presidential elections from their inception in 1960 to 2008, comprising ten debate seasons (there were debates in each election – every four years – except in 1964, 1968, and 1972). Determining if debates matter explores more than whether they determined the election result, although that notion is discussed as well. Other criteria studied regarding the debates impact include how the debaters, their campaigns, the media, the political pundits, and the voters perceived them, whether the media's role grew progressively influential as post-debate analysis became more prevalent, how television in particular was the dominant medium throughout the years examined, with the Internet emerging from 1996 forward, and how the debates serve as lenses to observe broader political, social, and cultural aspects of American society.

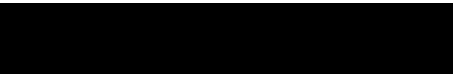
This thesis concludes that the debates matter indeed, and that their influence has grown progressively throughout the ten debate seasons analyzed. The primary sources examined are the debates themselves, in both video and text formats, and reaction until election day of each given season as depicted in polls, newspaper and magazine articles, and subsequent debates. Secondary sources include retrospective commentaries on previous debate seasons and on political, social, and cultural aspects of American society reflected in the debates.

There are no absolute conclusions drawn that any debate or debate season directly correlated to an election result, although pre- and post-debate polls are examined, as well as comments by debate analysts and the debaters and their campaigns regarding the debates' impact on the ensuing elections.

The study is limited to the first ten debate seasons, concluding with the 2008 election. Nonetheless, as evidence of the debates continuing progressive influence, the emergence of their importance even in the primary seasons is addressed regarding the 2012 and 2016 campaigns, though in the case of both of those seasons (particularly 2016, which has yet to be completed as of this writing), insufficient time has elapsed to include adequate scholarship to give them the full treatment they deserve, vis-à-vis their 1960 to 2008 counterparts.

CERTIFICATE OF DISSERTATION

The work contained in the dissertation is the bona fide work of the candidate, Constantinos E. Scaros, the work has not been previously submitted for an award, and that, to the best of the candidate's knowledge and belief, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement and reference is made in the dissertation to that work.



Candidate

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STYLES

The font is Arial 12-point.

Chapter titles appear in all capital letters, and for each debate season all of the debates by election winner party, debater name, and occupation. Each debate in the season is listed, followed by the number of television viewers, in parentheses.

Debates are referred to by number (unless there was only one debate between/among those candidates), with election winner's name first (e.g.: Kennedy-Nixon 1, Reagan-Carter, Clinton-Bush-Perot 3).

Ibid. is used only when a footnote is the exact replicate (author and page number) of the preceding footnote. If only the author but not the page number is the same, *Ibid.* is not used.

Unless otherwise noted, analysis or speculation contained herein is attributable to the writer(s)/speaker(s) in the source(s) provided.

Unless otherwise noted, "debates" refer to general election debates that include at least one major party (Democrat or Republican) presidential or vice presidential nominee.

Unless otherwise noted, "America" and "American" refers to the United States of America, not to any other country in North America or South America.

In the references, multiple sources of a common author are listed chronologically.