

Breaking Down The Debates

The following is a news release, from Kansas State University, which quotes from several professors about how to watch presidential debates.

Description

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Newswise – Whether you think Presidential debates are vital to deciding which candidate gets your vote or you think they're a waste of time, there's one thing most people agree on – debates during election time have become an American institution over the past 25 years.

So for whatever reason you watch the debates, David Procter, William Schenck-Hamlin and LeAnn Brazeal, Kansas State University speech communication experts, recommend a number of things to watch or listen for:

*Narrative themes. Four years ago, everyone was talking about the “lock box” that Al Gore said needed to be put on social security. In addition, George W. Bush regularly talked about “nation building” in his 2000 campaign. Everyone had heard these ideas, these themes, by the time the election rolled around. In fact, even local and regional campaign literature mentioned the “lock box,” Procter said.

*Sound bites, or one-liners. “Those are the things the media picks up,” Brazeal said. For example, when Michael Dukakis and Lloyd Bentson debated George H.W. Bush and Dan Quayle in 1988, Quayle invoked the memory of John F. Kennedy. Bentson replied, “Senator, I worked with John Kennedy; I knew John Kennedy. Senator, you're no John Kennedy.”

“They plan these sound bites in advance and hope they have a chance to use them,” Procter said. “And then the media picks up on these and that's

what gets played for two or three days – not their policy on Bosnia or someplace, but rather, what's the sound bite that attracted the media."

*Avoiding a question/getting in what they want to say. "They have some things they know they need to say – they call them kernels," Brazeal said of the candidates. "These are things they put in speeches, in ads, in debates, and that make the message consistent. So even if a question will pull the candidate off message, or it's a question designed to put them on the defensive, they will try to find a way to work it back to something else. For them it's a benefit because it's positive, but for us, in terms of getting information, it's negative because we're not getting the answer to the question. It's a strategy they use."

*Non-verbal communication. "There are many examples of candidates who have done very well at that or horrible at that," Procter said. For example, he said he has shown a clip in his nonverbal course of a Dukakis debate. (Dukakis was against the death penalty.) In this segment, Dukakis was asked an emotional question about if his wife were raped and killed, would he then favor the death penalty for the person who attacked her.

Procter said he shows this clip with the sound off and then asks his class what they think Dukakis was talking about.

"They responded with all this boring stuff," Procter said. "'Oh, he's talking about taxes,' 'the economy,' 'schools.' But when you turn it up he's saying he's passionate about this. All of his words are saying one thing and his nonverbals are saying something else. He was attacked after this as being this iceman and the nonverbals illustrated that."

*Expectations. "When the media evaluate the debate they will really kind of evaluate it in terms of expectations," Brazeal said. "Like during the last election, expectations of Bush were really low and he performed better than the really low expectations and so everybody said, 'that's a great victory for Bush,' when really his performance wasn't outstanding. And that's not what people need to watch for in a debate – they need to evaluate on the issues."

"You end up having to judge the debates on everything except issues," Schenck-Hamlin said.

Kerry/Bush

Procter said that in the debates this fall, he expects the candidates to drive home themes they've already discussed in their ads and speeches.

President George Bush will carry on the narrative theme of John Kerry's "waffling" and "indecisiveness" during the debates because the Republicans believe they've found an issue where Kerry is vulnerable, Procter said.

"Bush will attack John Kerry on his inconsistencies and John Kerry will try to answer that issue," Procter said. "On the other hand, it seems to me one of the major issues emerging from the Democrats is the idea of competence in handling a war and the economy."

"What you want to do in the debates is contrast your strengths with the other person's weaknesses," he said. "So people do believe George Bush is decisive, so that contrasts with the view of John Kerry."

Brazeal said the good thing about the upcoming debates is that the candidates will have to provide some evidence of the themes they discuss. For example, Bush will need to give examples of when he's been decisive and when John Kerry has waffled.

"I'm not saying it's reality, but it's more depth than a 30-second spot," Brazeal said.

"I really believe people who watch the debates watch either to have their beliefs reaffirmed or, if they're truly undecided, to see what they feel they get from the candidates," Procter said. "Do they care about me? Will they be a good leader, be competent?"

Can you tell if a candidate is lying?

Did he stop making eye contact when he answered that question? Did she move her hands nervously over her mouth when she read that statement?

Although many people claim they can tell when another person is lying, Procter and Schenck-Hamlin said nonverbal cues are not altogether that reliable.

“Human beings are terrible lie detectors,” Procter said.

In fact, people are only slightly better than 50/50 in detecting a lie; more often, credibility is used to determine if someone is telling the truth.

“We can tell if someone is lying more through extended interaction with them,” Procter said. “We can notice if they’re doing something out of the ordinary.”

And the presidential debates are an even more difficult time to determine if someone is telling the whole truth – debaters rehearse forever before a debate.

“It’s all choreographed,” Schenck-Hamlin said.