

Focus | POLITICS 

# PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

By Sonya Quick and Molly Zisk /The Register

Barack Obama and Mitt Romney will soon face off in a series of televised debates. But by the first debate, 35 states will have started early voting, and research shows debates have only

offered candidates a nudge in past campaigns. Still, the debates should provide plenty of fodder for politics watchers, and studies show voters learn new information by watching.

## THE SETUP

### Town meeting format

Undecided voters selected by Gallup ask questions. Candidates have two minutes to respond. Another minute is given for the moderator to facilitate a discussion.



### Traditional format

The moderator selects and announces topics several weeks before the debate. Time is divided into six segments of about 15 minutes each. Candidates are given two minutes to respond. Remaining time used by the moderator for discussion.



All debates are 6-7:30 p.m. PDT  
**Sept. 6**

Early voting opens in North Carolina, the first in the nation. Before the first debate, 35 states will have started early voting. More than one in three voters is expected to vote early this year.

**OCT 3** **University of Denver in Denver**  
Format: Traditional  
Theme: Domestic policy

Topics: The Economy I, The Economy II, The Economy III, health care, the role of government and governing.

**Oct. 8**  
Early voting opens in California. In 2008, 41.7 percent of the presidential vote in the state was cast by absentee ballot.



**OCT 11** **Centre College in Danville, Ky. (Paul Ryan-Joe Biden)**  
Format: Traditional, but time is broken into nine 10-minute segments

Theme: Foreign and domestic policy  
Topics: Not yet announced.  
Moderator: Martha Raddatz, senior affairs correspondent for ABC News.



**OCT 16** **Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y.**

Format: Town meeting  
Theme: Foreign and domestic issues  
Moderator: Candy Crowley, chief political correspondent for CNN.

**Oct. 22**

Last day to register to vote in California for the general election.

**OCT 22** **Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla.**  
Format: Traditional  
Theme: Foreign policy

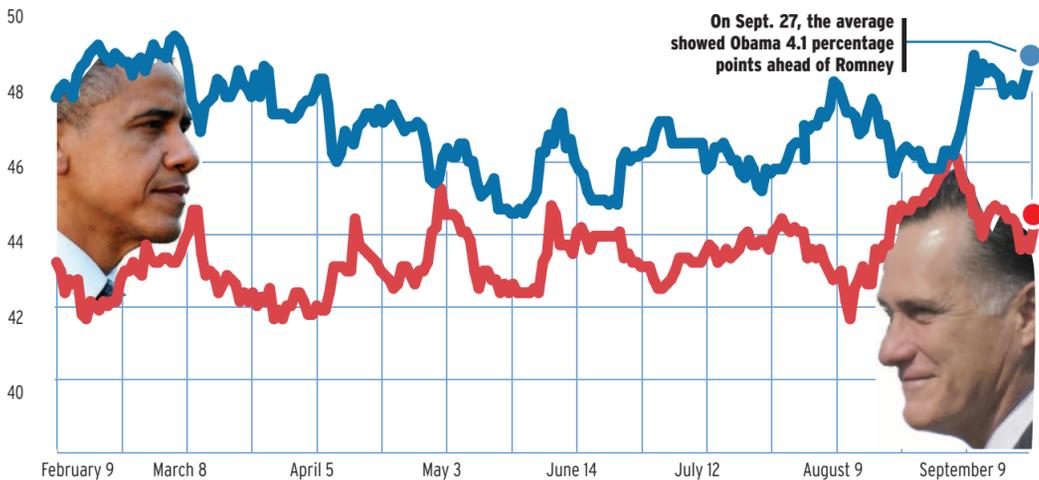
Topics: Not yet announced.  
Moderator: Bob Schieffer, chief Washington correspondent for CBS News and moderator for "Face the Nation."

## WHY IT MATTERS

With the presidential contest in its closing weeks and polls showing voter preferences starting to harden, the debates represent the last best chance for candidates to change minds, influence undecided voters and alter the course of the race.

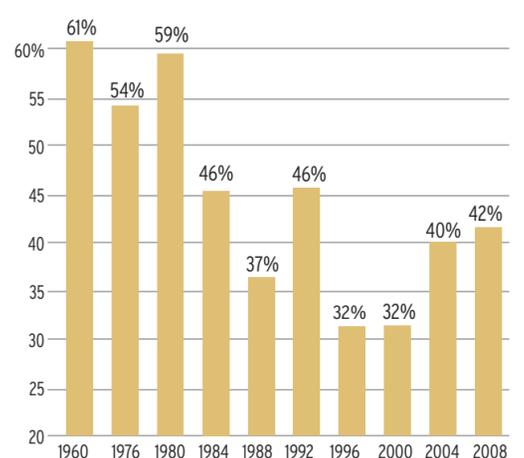
## APPROVAL RATINGS

The chart shows Real Clear Politics polling data, an average of nine national polling sources.



## TV VIEWERS

Percentage of households that watched presidential debates. Figures represent the most-viewed debate for that year.



## THE SHOW

**1-3 percentage points**

The potential impact of debates on polling, based on studies of past elections.

Many factors play into the vote, including current events, early voting, ads and media. Research shows debates have the greatest impact in close races and when voters still have questions about the character of the candidates.

### It's a tie

The color of neckties can change the way we perceive the candidates. Red helps us pay attention to details and shows the ability to take risks, given the color's association with stop signs and teachers' red pens. Blue boosts our ability to think creatively and is seen as calming



because of its affiliation with water and the sky. In 2008, Obama wore red for two debates and blue for the middle, town hall debate. McCain wore reverse colors. In primary debates, Romney wore blue in 17 of the 18 debates, while his challengers most frequently chose red.

### Effect on voters

Debates garner attention and studies show voters learn new information. But the information is unlikely to change many minds. Why?

- Many voters have already decided before the debates.
- Many people watch the debates in support of a specific party.
- Both candidates are usually well-prepared, making for similar performances.



### Blue and red

Historically, blue was most often used to represent Republicans and red Democrats.

The designation became reversed and stuck in many minds during the 2000 election. Before that election, the media alternated the color used for each party on voting result maps. In 2000, as the final vote changed often and dragged on past Election Day, TV networks used red for Republicans and blue for Democrats to make it easier to see changes in vote tallies.



## OVER TIME

### 1960

The first televised presidential debates. Most remember the pale and sweaty Richard Nixon, who was recovering from a knee infection, in contrast to the tan and energetic John F. Kennedy. The two are tied before the debates. Kennedy moves ahead by 4 percentage points in the polls after the debates and wins the popular vote by two-tenths of a percentage point.



### 1980

Ronald Reagan utters "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" The question helps move him ahead of President Jimmy Carter, going from 3 percentage points down to 3 up.

### 1988

In the vice presidential debate, GOP candidate Dan Quayle says he was at least as qualified for office as Kennedy. Democratic candidate Lloyd Bentsen replies famously,

**"Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."**

### 2000

George W. Bush moves from down 8 percentage points to 4 percentage points up during the debates when candidate Al Gore makes the wrong impression with his frequent sighs and eye-rolling.

Sources: Commission on Presidential Debates, The Early Voting Information Center at Reed College, George Mason University Professor Dr. Michael McDonald, U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Centre College Assistant Professor Benjamin Knoll, George Washington University Associate Professor John Sides, Gallup, ABC News, Live Science, Polidata, Smart Politics and Pew Research Center

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