Opinion: Presidential debates steeped in history

By Matthew Dallek

The first Republican presidential debate was a veritable blockbuster, with 24 million viewers tuning in last month. Its sequel next week at the Reagan Presidential Library in California may attract even more viewers. Why were so many Americans in this age of digital communications willing to watch 10 men on a debate stage making mostly canned remarks, charges, and countercharges?

The question has no simple answers, but a good start is to think of presidential debates as a modern civic rite rather than simply as an exercise in internecine warfare. We now take debates for granted, but the spectacle of candidates sparring verbally with each other as equals in pursuit of your support is a radically egalitarian concept.

The era of the modern presidential debate dates back to the mid-20th century. In 1948, Republicans Harold Stassen and Thomas Dewey squared off over whether the Communist Party ought to be outlawed. Democrats Estes Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson debated in the primary in 1956, a sleepy encounter featuring few fireworks. The Kennedy-Nixon 1960 general election debates became the most famous example of how debates supposedly can seal the candidates' fates before the electorate (since Nixon sweated so much), although there is little data showing that debates sway many voters' minds on Election Day. Ever since 1976, when Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter sparred on stage, debates have been the required staple of our presidential campaigns, a tradition replicated and emulated in many other countries as well.

But debates were stitched into the DNA of American public life

long before they assumed this role in presidential campaigns. Broadly defined, debates have been central to Americans' own definition of what it means to live in a modern democracy. The nation was established and shaped as a result of big debates about the proper distribution of power between empire and colonies, between federation and states, and between the sovereign and the individual. The Constitutional Convention was a debate about the future of slavery in the republic, states' rights, and the mechanics and principles of democratic elections. The Federalist Papers offered impassioned arguments by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton for the live debates that took place in most states over whether to ratify the new constitution.

Debates were instrumental in resolving crucial issues. Historian Todd Estes has described the Jay Treaty debate (whether to establish commercial links with England) in the mid-1790s as an argument pitched to the public, pitting Federalists against Jeffersonians in public rallies and on the floor of Congress. In the 19th century, debates in Congress, in the partisan press, and in town halls were how Americans hashed out deep-seated differences over such vexing questions as the Bank of the United States, territorial expansion, and the federal government's role in national infrastructure.

Over time, debates replaced violent means of settling our differences, such as pistol duels and full-fledged battles.

There's also this: American debates are distinctive for their blend of boisterous theater and genuine substance. This uneasy combination – coarse words and high-minded policy disputes – makes politics inspirational, accessible, and offensive to many Americans, all at the same time.

America's most famous debates, pitting Abraham Lincoln against Stephen Douglas during the 1858 Illinois Senate campaign, fused bald, racist demagoguery with detailed arguments about slavery's expansion into the western territories. The two

candidates engaged in personal attacks and misrepresented each other's positions. Lincoln declared his opposition to the rights of African-Americans to vote, sit on a jury, and seek elective office. Douglas warned that, under Lincoln, white Americans would be required, as one newspaper reported, "to eat with, ride with, go to church with, travel with, and in other ways bring Congo odor into their nostrils."

Richard Nixon's campaign operative Roger Stone once said, "The biggest sin in politics is to be boring." Debates require candidates not only to defend their positions, qualifications, and vision, but also to entertain and come across as someone voters can relate to, and will like. A good debate is part philosophical symposium, part comedic theater and part popularity contest.

The first Republican debate of the 2016 campaign delivered on all counts. Donald Trump certainly understands the demands of drama, while the exchange between Chris Christie and Rand Paul on spying, and the proper boundaries between civil liberties and a state determined to protect its people, was an entrée into a deeper debate about the proper balance between liberty and security in our post-Sept. 11 national security policies. In this sense, the first debate exemplified the seemingly contradictory, but fully complementary, strands in the American way of debates.

It's small wonder, then, that millions of us will tune in again next week.

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