UNLV Presidential Debate Essay Contest Grade 12 Winner

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Presidential debates are institutions of modern day campaigns that are necessary to actively unite and engage Americans in our political process in order to select quality leaders. Through these debates, Americans are able to make an educated decision to come election day.

Debates have a way of swaying the populations and have the potential to change history. The earliest debates occurred in 1858 with the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Thousands of spectators turned out to watch this political showdown in one of seven towns across Illinois. These were the epitome of domestic democracy, and thanks to the telegraph, the debates were reported by newspapers across the entire nation. It was a turning point in the election and brought Lincoln into the national spotlight as a viable Republican leader. In 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon took part in the first-ever televised presidential debate and changed history. Polls revealed that more than half of all voters had been influenced by these “Great Debates” and 6% asserted that the debates alone had decided their choice ("The Kennedy-Nixon Debates"). Bruce DuMont, president of the Museum of Broadcast Communications said, “On that date, politics and television changed forever. After that debate, it was not just what you said in a campaign that was important, but how you looked saying it.” With globalization and mass media, the modern debate evolved in the 21st century. Social media completely changed how people discussed debate in real time. Live updates allowed the
rhetorical brawl and discussions to continue both in-person and online, as well as intensified opinions through the sharing of knowledge on the internet.

In the face of cutthroat politics, empty promises, and prejudicial remarks, debates reveal a degree of transparency and accountability that cannot be found in other media about candidates’ platforms. Debates coerce candidates to express their presidential mettle, oratory skills, knowledge of policy, and ability to actively think and speak on their feet. Candidates can no longer hide behind manipulated media, edited television ads or Super PACS. With this in mind, it’s no surprise that most Americans feel alienated from their political leaders and representatives. In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015, only 19% of Americans said they trusted the government (Sides). In the last midterm election of 2014, America had a voter turnout of 36.4%, which was the lowest turnout since 1942 (Montanaro, D., Wellford, R., & Pathe, S.). Debates are a way to bridge the gap between Washington and constituents and increase civic efficacy.

Presidential debates are high-stake, but they reflect the pressure of the biggest job of the nation: the presidency. It’s their opportunity to get their message to the widest number of people, and that’s what our country is all about. It’s about the government being the servant to the people and emphasizing civic virtue, and that’s why presidential debates are crucial to the modern campaign process.

Works Cited:

