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Senior Individual Website

Process Paper

430 words

I chose my topic because I have always been interested in film and mass media. The first 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate was always described to me as a pivotal moment in television history and I was interested in understanding what the real effects of that debate were.

This debate opened a new frontier in mixing politics and television. In the past, news segments about politics involved interviews or press conferences. Political debates were mainly consumed by voters through radio broadcasts or newspaper articles. The Nixon-Kennedy debates changed that forever by bringing politics, unfiltered, into the home of American voters.

To research this topic I started by watching a recording of the debate and a few recent reviews and analysis of it. Then I read through the New York Times archives, looking for interviews or opinion pieces to get a sense of what people were saying about it, if they liked the debate televised and if it affected their candidate preferences or not. I also used the archives at the Museum of Broadcast Communications and both the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum and the Richard Nixon Library and Museum website collections. I emailed the Nixon archives looking for transcripts from audio recordings, but got no response. While reading secondary sources, analysis articles, about the effects of the debate on the election, I noticed a history professor, Luke Nichter, who was mentioned quite often, so I also reached out to him for advice and suggestions for sources. While he recommended some useful sources, his

email did not provide any direct quotes. Lastly, I looked at records of the polling numbers and approval ratings in the archives at Gallup and the Pew Research Center to understand how the debate affected the candidates from a numbers perspective.

I decided to construct a website because of how important visual information is to my topic. When creating the website, first I picked out important images and clips from the debate and then I wrote out all of the content that came from my research.

My project shows that Nixon's appearance during the debate did not have as large an effect on the outcome of the election as people think. Instead, it changed the way that voters and politicians interacted with each other and with the campaign process. Rather than dramatically changing the direction of the 1960 election, it actually had more of a long-lasting effect in reviving public participation in politics and set a new precedent for political communication that we can see in presidential campaigns today.