

Presidential debates have always been opportunities for political theater. During a debate, each candidate is simultaneously presenting their own policy ideas while trying to demonstrate to voters that they are the best candidate and that their opponent is the wrong choice. As a result, the media coverage of debates tends to focus on “one-liners” or “zingers”—particular jabs at an opponent that jump out and make an impression with the audience.

Although the 2020 debate season will not feature large live audiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the true audience of the debate—at-home viewers—remains. Thus, the American people can still expect a mixture of substantive policy discussion and “gotcha moments.” Use the guide below to help establish your expectations for the debate and identify the policy areas that are most important to you.

LEARNING FROM PAST DEBATES

Watch ONE of the following clips from previous presidential debates between an incumbent president and a challenger and respond to the questions below.

- [D – Pres. Barack Obama, R – former Gov. Mitt Romney \(2012\)](#)
- [D – Sen. John Kerry, R – Pres. George W. Bush \(2004\)](#)
- [D – Pres. Bill Clinton, R – former Sen. Bob Dole \(1996\)](#)

1) What policy issues were being debated in this exchange?

2) Who do you feel presented the most convincing argument and why?

3) Who do you believe the at-home audience thought to have the strongest performance in this exchange? Why?

ANTICIPATING THE DEBATE

Answer the questions below and keep your responses in mind as you watch the debate later.

1) What are three policies or issues you hope to hear the candidates discuss during the debate?

2) How do you anticipate the incumbent (Pres. Trump/Vice Pres. Pence) to address these issues?

3) How you anticipate the challenger (former Vice Pres. Biden/Sen. Kamala Harris) to address these issues?

4) Which candidate do you expect will perform the best during the debate and why?