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APPEARANCE IN POLITICAL CAREERS: KENNEDY VS. NIXON

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### Appearance in Political Careers: Kennedy vs. Nixon

Today, it is commonplace to consider physical appearance, charisma, and on-camera representation as necessary elements underlying one's success in a political career. However, this was not always true. Until the middle of the twentieth century, physical appearance played a rather insignificant role in politics. The rapid technological development and increasing popularity of TV made political candidates closer to voters. As a result, politicians' appearance and on-camera representation have become decisive factors, shaping society's preferences. The turning point in this regard dates back to September 26, 1960, when the presidential candidate debates were broadcasted live on TV for the first time in US history. On the next day after the debates between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the words of the candidates were not remembered, but the candidates' appearances.

The role of visual representation in the twenty-first century can hardly be overestimated. The fact that some top-rank politicians may invest thousands of dollars into their appearance has become a common thing. In contrast, it might be challenging for the young generation to realize that less than a century ago, the physical appearance of political candidates was a matter of almost zero importance. A physical disability could have hardly become an obstacle for candidates applying for the highest political positions in the country. As an illustration, Woodrow Wilson served as the US President from 1913 to 1921 despite being partially paralyzed after a stroke. Another prominent example is Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was a paraplegic due to polio, yet remained the US President from 1933 until his death in 1945. Eventually, the first decades of the Cold War were marked by the flourishing consumer culture and increasing access to TV. As a result, the role of physical appearance in the US social, economic, cultural, and political lives has increased drastically.

To understand the crucial essence of the 1960 presidential elections comprehensively and, particularly, the Kennedy-Nixon debates on September 26, it is necessary to have a more thorough look at the US agenda of that time. The 1960 elections definitely came at an extremely important period in US history. The global rivalry with the Soviet Union had almost reached its peak as Moscow-backed Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba and the Soviet Sputnik satellite was launched as a part of the space race competition. The struggle for minority's rights along with the increasing dissatisfaction of the US population with the country's involvement in the Vietnam war were the major domestic challenges that the future president was about to face. The societal requests for genuinely new approaches to both foreign and domestic policy was tremendous at that time. Vice-President Nixon was considered primarily as a successor of Dwight D. Eisenhower, and was expected to reinforce the conservative Republican course. In contrast, John F. Kennedy articulated progressive and unconventional political ideas that the US society was so desperately seeking for.

Interestingly, these dominating perceptions of Nixon and Kennedy have also found an explicit reflection in the candidates' physical appearance. Despite being only four years younger than Richard Nixon, John Kennedy appeared substantially healthier, fitter, and physically stronger than his competitor. The first televised presidential debates made this difference in appearance obvious for the entire US population. In the days preceding the debates, Richard Nixon experienced problems with health. Namely, while campaigning in North Carolina, the Republican candidate injured his knee and got an infection. Nixon was hospitalized and, by the time of the debate, was particularly underweight, frail, and sallow. On September 26, the debates' participants were offered makeup before going live. Hearing that Kennedy refused, Nixon also declined the offer which, eventually, turned out to be a mistake.

In contrast to Nixon's doughy appearance, Kennedy had a bronzed complexion that made the Democratic candidate look much healthier. Interestingly, Kennedy's tan was a result of Addison's disease—an endocrine disorder. This fact is particularly indicative of how often subjective perceptions come into play when it is connected to visual appearance. Nevertheless, Kennedy's advantageous physical appearance on that night persuaded many voters to choose the Democratic candidate. Ultimately, there are reasons to state that the 1960 debates marked the beginning of the media age in politics. First and most obvious, the candidates for presidential office have never before debated live in front of a television audience. The overall number of the debates' viewers had reached the point of one hundred million Americans. Second, the candidates had to defend their arguments and attack those of the rival immediately while standing in front of each other. That was an entirely new experience and format for both candidates.<sup>1</sup> Third, an agreement to participate in live debates was the largest risk that both candidates took throughout the campaign.

The majority of historians and political observers agree that that the power of images in politics "was never more vividly demonstrated than inside a Chicago television studio on the evening of September 26, 1960."<sup>2</sup> In less than two months, John F. Kennedy won the elections with 49.7% of votes to Nixon's 49.5%. According to a post-electoral poll, more than half of the voters admitted they were influenced by the first televised debate while making a final decision. Undoubtedly, the 1960 debates was a turning point in the history of national politics. Since the

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1 John W. Self, "The First Debate over the Debates: How Kennedy and Nixon Negotiated the 1960 Presidential Debates," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2005): 362.

2 Joseph W. Campbell, "TV Viewers, Radio Listeners, and the Myth of the First Kennedy-Nixon Debate" in *Getting It Wrong: Debunking the Greatest Myths in American Journalism*, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.

Nixon-Kennedy competition, politicians from both parties have reconsidered the role of physical appearance in the struggle for voters' preferences. The rapid development of television provided politicians with brand new opportunities to capitalize on their physical features, oratory skills, and sense of humor. If in 1960 the benefits gained by Kennedy using his physical appearance were to a large extent accidental and little expected, today matters have changed totally. Entire departments and teams of professionals are working on politicians' appearances to capitalize on the candidates' strong points and to mitigate potential losses stemming from one's weaknesses.

All things considered, the 1960 televised debates between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy are fairly considered to be a crucial point in the history of US politics. There is certain evidence that Kennedy's victory in the presidential elections became possible largely due to his beneficial physical appearance compared to the Republican candidate. One may fairly argue that the 1960 debates also uncovered the subjectivity underlying perceptions made solely on one's visual appearance. Nevertheless, physical appearance continues to remain one of the most important factors underlying politicians' predisposition to succeed.

## Bibliography

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