

Then: Leadership on Television

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will focus on television. With the invention of the television, appearances became more and more important. Not only could Americans directly hear their presidents and presidential candidates, they could see them. Perhaps the most famous case of appearances mattering in a presidential campaign was especially the presidential campaign between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy in 1960. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Leadership on Television



BEFORE YOU START

What role has television played in U.S. politics?

1. Leadership on Television

The next milestone of communication technology in American history is, of course, the television. Electronic television was successfully tested by Philo Farnsworth in 1927 and became a fixture in American homes at the very end of the 1940s and through the 1950s (Eschner, 2017). This new communication technology had the unparalleled experience of delivering immediate information, including visuals, to home viewers. Farnsworth's invention revolutionized not only how we consume entertainment, but also how we get our news and follow politics.

Today, we're used to seeing press conferences where the president answers questions from reporters and provides updates on important current events and national developments. Press conferences began during the administration of Woodrow Wilson in 1913, but the first televised press conference took place in 1955, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower allowed cameras into the White House to broadcast one from the Indian Treaty Room (Kumar, 2011).

Eisenhower may have been the first president to hold televised press conferences, but historians generally consider John F. Kennedy to be one of the first "television politicians." In fact, television may have been a deciding factor in the 1960 presidential election between Kennedy and Richard Nixon. For the first time in 1960, presidential debates were broadcast on both radio and television. After a debate in which Kennedy appeared tan and fit while Nixon looked pale and ill at ease, Kennedy's poll numbers jumped (Parkinson, 2010).

Kennedy's **communication skill** and charisma were perfectly suited to the medium of television, and he would

go on to use TV very effectively during his administration. For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, he used televised addresses to communicate with a public that was terrified of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider your own communication strengths. What medium (e.g., newspapers, television, or internet) would best suit your own style of communication?



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how television added additional dimensions to presidential communication. By the 1960s, Americans adapted to **leadership on television**, and tuned in for presidential debates and other televised addresses. Like the radio before it, the television quickly affected how presidents and other politicians communicate with voters.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

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