

The second US presidential debate: Gore throws himself on the mercy of the media

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The performance of Vice President Al Gore in the second presidential debate, held October 11 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, revealed a basic truth about the US election campaign. There are, in effect, two campaigns—the appeal by the candidates for the votes of the general electorate, and their appeal for the backing of the corporate and political elite that dictates, through the media, official public opinion.

As is evident from Gore's pronounced change in course from the first debate, held October 3, to the second, the candidates and their professional handlers gear their tactics first and foremost to winning the unofficial campaign for the support of the media. When Gore met his Republican opponent, Texas Governor George W. Bush, in the first televised contest in Boston, the Democratic candidate was buoyed by the bounce in opinion polls he had gained from the Democratic convention, where he tapped into the reservoir of public discontent with a pseudo-populist appeal to “working families” and denunciations of “big polluters,” “big HMOs” and other sections of big business.

In the initial debate Gore sought to press his advantage, attacking Bush's tax cut plan as a windfall for the rich. According to post-debate opinion polls, the public consensus was that Gore had gotten the best of his opponent. But the media countered with a week-long anti-Gore offensive, citing some minor factual errors in Gore's remarks to legitimize the charge of the Bush campaign that the vice president was a “serial exaggerator” who lacked credibility.

A few days' scolding by the media was sufficient to throw the Gore campaign into turmoil. It was a chastened and remorseful Gore who sat across the table from Bush in the second debate. The populist rhetoric was largely gone. There was no mention of “working families,” and no hint of major government programs to address the problems of health care or education. Instead Gore pointedly declared his opposition to “government-run” health care and said he was for “shrinking the size of government”—a calculated bow to the Republican right.

Toward the end of the debate Gore virtually threw himself on the mercy of the media, saying ruefully, “I got some of

the details wrong last week in some of the examples that I used, and I'm sorry about that. And I'm going to try to do better.”

Bush was no less concerned with scoring points with the media, which has at various points voiced the concerns within the political and business establishment that the political parvenu from Texas has neither the intellect nor the experience to handle the job of chief executive. Bush made a point of stressing in his opening remarks that “an administration is not one person,” and reassured the media and political establishment that his running mate Richard Cheney, whose extensive résumé includes White House chief of staff, congressman, Secretary of Defense and oil company CEO, would be “a person to stand by my side.”

The extraordinary sensitivity of both candidates to the media is an expression of the increasingly narrow base upon which the two-party political system rests. Broad masses of the population are alienated from both parties and view their nominees with deep-seated distrust. The active and engaged support that once existed among large sections of workers and urban middle class layers for the Democrats, and among Main Street businessmen, professionals and small farmers for the Republicans, has long since eroded.

The prevailing apathy is reflected in the declining number of potential voters who even bother to watch the TV debates. The October 3 debate attracted a mere 47 million viewers, one of the smallest audiences in recent history. Nearly 10 million fewer people tuned in for the second debate, the second smallest audience since the TV debates began in 1960. For the past two decades voter turnout at the polls has steadily declined to 40 percent of the electorate or less, and there is no indication that this year will see any significant reversal of the downward trend.

This erosion of popular support was reflected in the decision of both candidates to distance themselves from their respective parties. Not only was there no general appeal from either Bush or Gore for people to vote Republican or Democratic in the congressional and state-wide elections, the words “Republican” and “Democrat” were all but

banished from the October 11 debate.

In the name of shunning the appearance of partisan bickering, both candidates were at pains to avoid the stigma attached to the parties they officially represent. When, for example, Bush chided Gore on the failure of the Clinton-Gore administration to enact health care reform, Gore refused to make the obvious point that the Republicans, who have controlled both house of Congress since 1995, are chiefly responsible for scuttling the administration's proposals.

This is to be explained in part by the Democrats' repudiation of their own 1993 plan for comprehensive health care coverage, or any other substantive social reform. When Bush boasted that Clinton's "government-run health care system" had been "stopped in its tracks," Gore remained silent.

As has been the case throughout the campaign, neither candidate raised the Republican campaign for Clinton's impeachment. The silence on the right-wing conspiracy to reverse the results of two national elections reached the point of farce when Bush declared, in response to a question on same-sex marriages, "I don't really think it's any of my concern how you conduct your sex life. And I think that's a private matter." Gore stood mute and allowed to pass unchallenged this remark from the standard bearer of a party that spent an entire year attempting to use a sex scandal to remove Clinton from office.

In the aftermath of the debate, some Democratic congressmen publicly criticized Gore for refusing to attack the Republican Congress and thereby undercutting their efforts to win back control of the House of Representatives.

The alienation of the two official parties from the masses of working people has gone hand in hand with a sharp rightward shift of the entire political establishment over the past two decades. The political spectrum of official politics has narrowed, the policy differences between the two parties have grown increasingly marginal, and the political system has functioned ever more openly as an instrument of the most privileged and powerful social layers.

All of these processes were on display in the debate, the first half of which dealt with foreign policy questions. Both candidates began by declaring their support for Israel and placing the blame for the current bloodletting in the Middle East on the Palestinians and PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat. They proceeded from there to state their common support for last year's air war against Serbia, the ongoing US assault on Iraq, and the escalating US military intervention in Colombia. At one point Bush quipped that the debate was beginning to look like a "love fest."

The two candidates sought to outdo one another in their support for the US military. If anything, Gore projected a

somewhat more aggressive military posture, supporting the deployment of American troops around the world in what Bush disparagingly called "nation-building" interventions.

When the moderator turned to domestic issues, Gore was at pains to cast his reform proposals in a moderate light and placate right-wing opinion. On gun control, he stated twice that he would do nothing "to affect the rights of hunters or sportsmen." He joined with Bush in opposing same-sex marriage. When Bush made the grisly boast that the racists convicted of murdering James Byrd in Texas would be executed—"Guess what's going to happen to them? They're going to be put to death"—Gore, likewise a supporter of capital punishment, remained silent. When Bush raised the question of cultural values, Gore repeated his threat to crack down on the entertainment industry.

Only at the end of the debate did Gore return, in a more muted tone, to his populist-style attack on Bush as a representative of privilege and power, criticizing the governor's tax policies in Texas.

The general response of the media pundits to the second debate suggests that Gore is still in the running for the nod of the official opinion makers. While generally conceding victory in the debate to Bush, they made a point of approving the vice president's comportment in debate two as compared to his first outing. Some commentators even warned Bush against becoming overconfident.

There is no guarantee that the winner of the unofficial race for the support of the media establishment will emerge triumphant when voters go to the poll on November 7. A whole host of factors that can have a pronounced impact on the outcome loom in the background—growing signs of recession, turmoil on the stock exchange, rising oil prices, the threat of war in the Middle East. But the dynamics of the campaign demonstrate the degree to which both parties and all of their candidates are beholden to a privileged elite that wields the ultimate power in America.



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