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Debates decisive for some; others still unsure

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Millions watched the four presidential debates this year. Did they really change anyone's opinion?

Count Franklin Clayton among the persuaded.

"Well, having watched all the debates including (Thursday's), I'm reluctantly going for (Barack) Obama," the Little Egg Harbor Township man said Friday. "I don't think (John) McCain's proposals are going to work."

Clayton was one of 33 people who watched and scored the single vice presidential and three presidential debates for The Press of Atlantic City at the newspaper's Pleasantville headquarters.

Editors strove for a balance of political affiliations, genders and other demographics. Ultimately the panelists included 13 Democrats, nine Republicans and 11 unaffiliated voters. There were 23 men and 10 women. People who attended were asked who won, who they would vote for and were asked a series of questions about the candidates' content and style.

Results were mixed, but overall, more said they thought Democrat Obama did better than Republican McCain in their debates.

But did they sway people's votes? Yes and no.

Clayton, an unaffiliated voter who attended the Sept. 26 debate panel, initially went home uncertain.

"I was undecided. I thought McCain had experience. Obama did not have experience. McCain, at least, had some military advisers," he said.

Then he watched the other debates.

"Watching Obama, he seemed to be a little more experienced than the commentators and the people parroting him," Clayton said. "He doesn't seem as irritating as he seemed on the radio. Watching him, I think I could tolerate him."

Debates can sway voters, Sharon E. Schulman said, but it usually involves either a serious mistake or a candidate decisively reacting to outside events, coupled with how they present their case.

Before the debate panels, Schulman, the director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, gave Press voter panels a quick rundown on debate techniques.

Modern candidates are far more aware of how they appear on camera and are very conscious of the image they portray. "Every candidate today knows how to use the medium," she said, "but some know how to use it better than others."

Bernard Umbaugh was initially undecided, but the debate with Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin made all the difference.

"I am going to vote for Obama and I think that my decision was easy after McCain picked Palin," the Little Egg Harbor Township Democrat said. "I don't think - because of his age, I don't think he's too old to serve as president, but you don't know what's going to happen these days. I can see (Democratic vice presidential candidate) Joe Biden being president, but I can't imagine Palin being president."

After the Sept. 26 debate, Umbaugh said he thought McCain did well, telling The Press, "To me, it was clear that he has a really sharp mind. He showed he knows the international landscape and world leaders."

He soured on the Arizona senator after watching later debates with friends.

"One person said, 'He's an angry old man.' And you know what's interesting? The man who said that is older than McCain," he said, adding. "Obama is very cool. It's almost Kennedy debating with Nixon and McCain kind of reminded me of Nixon. He's uptight. And John Kennedy was kind of like the Obama cool. Nobody's going to rattle him."

Before the debates Carolyn Shontz leaned toward Obama, something that solidified over time.

"McCain always seemed like he was more of a president at first and, I don't know, I guess he got less so and Obama became more so over time," she said.

Shontz, an unaffiliated Dennis Township voter who attended the Sept. 26 debate, said watching all four debates allowed her to see the candidates alone, without ads or the analysis of a talking head.

But she questioned how much of an effect the president has on the economy. "I would have liked to (have) heard them say something about that, but the public doesn't want to hear it. The public wants to think the president will be able to wave a magic wand and fix all the problems."

Not all were swayed by Obama.

"I think McCain did better as each debate went forward, and I thought the last night he did really well," said Sea Isle City resident Terence Libro.

Libro, an unaffiliated voter who said he is inclined toward conservatism, said he disliked Obama and thinks the Illinois senator would redistribute wealth if elected.

He said that while he had not considered McCain to be a true conservative, he attended the Oct. 2 vice presidential debate with an open mind. After watching all four debates, he favored McCain and Palin more than Obama and Biden.

"The one thing that Barack Obama has going for him is his eloquence," Libro said of the debates. "He says a lot of words but not much is produced in those words. McCain, he tends to stumble a bit, and I think that hurts him."

Pleasantville resident Herbert McCrae, a registered Republican, wrote on his Oct. 2 debate evaluation that he was undecided.

Last Friday, the Pleasantville man decided he would vote for McCain.

He watched all but the final debate, because he was initially inclined towards McCain but his mind was not made up.

"I did want to hear more. I did want to see more, because things can happen, just like in sports, things can happen to turn people's minds around."

Similarly, Jaidev S. Anand favored McCain after the Oct. 7 debate. Further debates only cemented that in his mind.

Anand, 69, said American economic disparity seemed much smaller when he emigrated from India in 1970. He blamed a collusion of the rich and poor against the middle class, something he thinks McCain would remedy.

The unaffiliated Galloway Township voter discounted what he considered the support by younger voters, saying younger voters are more interested in change for change's sake.

The final debate sealed matters for him when he said Obama repeatedly lied. While he admitted McCain had some faults, he said, "This is like a desperation kind of situation. I think voting for Obama is like believing in magic."

Others entered and left the debates uncertain.

"I'm probably more confused now than before," said Mahlon Laird, an unaffiliated voter from Little Egg Harbor Township who attended the vice presidential debate. "I don't think the debates did much for me one way or the other."

He said he learned more about the candidates' positions through the news media than any of the debates, especially on economic issues.

"All four of them are good, intelligent, caring individuals, but I'm just not sure they are willing to tell us what we need to hear about what they will have to do to get out of this," Laird said. "It is not going to be quick, easy and painless, and I don't think they are willing to tell us that."

Similarly, Cindy Towner, a Northfield Democrat, said she watched all of the debates but remained uncertain.

"It's hard to say because I've been listening more since that debate, but there's still stuff about both parties that I don't like," She wondered if the candidates will really fulfill their campaign promises and if Palin would be qualified to be president if McCain dies.

Before the Oct. 2 vice presidential debate, Towner complained loudly about Palin, but said Monday, "she really didn't seem that bad by the end."

It's the first time since her first presidential vote in 1972 that she was uncertain about who she was voting for. "It's frustrating," Towner said. "I don't know who I'm going for, and I don't know how upset I will be when the other one gets it."

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