

A Win for Kerry In the First Debate

John Kerry won the first debate and with it a shot at reinvigorating his campaign for the presidency. But in the first blush, vote preferences among viewers were unmoved.

Among a random sample of 531 registered voters who watched the debate, 45 percent called Kerry the winner, 36 percent said it was Bush, and 17 percent called it a tie. It was a clean win for Kerry: Independents by a 20-point margin said he prevailed.

Moreover, while 70 percent of Bush's supporters said Bush was the winner, considerably more Kerry supporters – 89 percent – said their man won.

Who won? (among debate viewers)	
Kerry	45%
Bush	36%
Tie	17%

As is customary, the debate did not immediately change many minds. Bush's support was 50 percent among viewers before the debate and 51 percent after it; Kerry's, 46 percent before, 47 percent after. Ralph Nader had 1 percent before and a tad less than that after.

Vote preference among debate viewers		
	Before the debate	After the debate
Bush	50%	51%
Kerry	46%	47%
Nader	1%	<0.5%

This kind of immediate reaction is typical in presidential debates, which tend to reinforce viewers' preferences rather than change them. But the debates – an essential window on the candidates' style as well as their substance – can affect the race more subtly as voters move toward their final judgments.

The results of this survey are not among all registered or likely voters; instead they are among registered voters who watched the debate Thursday night. Still they are similar to the race overall, 51-45 percent among likely voters, in an ABC News/Washington Post poll earlier this week.

PARTY ID – Political party allegiance of debate viewers also was quite similar to its division among all likely voters nationally. Among debate viewers, 35 percent identified themselves as Democrats, 35 percent as Republicans and 24 percent as independents. It was a 36-35-23 percent division among all likely voters in the last ABC/Post survey.

	Party ID of debate viewers	
Democrats		35%
Republicans		35
Independents		24

Partisanship drove views of who won, but again the advantage was to Kerry. While 69 percent of Republicans said Bush won, more Democrats, 81 percent, said Kerry won. And among independents, 48 percent said Kerry won, while 28 percent picked Bush.

	Who won?		
	Kerry	Bush	Tie
Democrats	81%	6	11
Republicans	7	69	22
Independents	48	28	24

GROUPS – While there's a gender gap in presidential preference, pluralities of men and women alike said Kerry won the debate. Women picked him over Bush as the winner 46-39 percent; men picked Kerry by 43-34 percent. Men were more apt, though, to call it a tie.

	Who won?		
	Kerry	Bush	Tie
Men	43%	34	23
Women	46	39	12

Kerry also was called a winner disproportionately by people in two groups – older (age 65+) and younger (18-29) registered voters – collectively, 49 percent of them called Kerry the winner, 34 percent Bush. (But very few 18- to 29-year-olds watched; they tend to be less interested in politics.) Among middle-aged voters it was a closer 42-38 percent split.

Debate viewers in the East and West, the two regions where Kerry's done better in vote preference, also were somewhat more likely to call him the winner. Views on who won were more evenly divided in the South and Midwest.

METHODOLOGY - This survey was conducted by telephone among a random-sample panel of 531 registered voters who watched the presidential debate. Respondents were initially interviewed Sept. 23-29. The results have a 4.5-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

Here are the full results:

1. Who, in your opinion, won the debate?

	Kerry	Bush	Tie	No opinion.
9/30/04	45	36	17	2

2. Presidential preference among debate viewers:

	Bush	Kerry	Nader	Other	No opinion.
Post-debate	51	47	*	*	1
Pre-debate	50	46	1	*	1

* = less than one percent