

Rating the Debate: Another Dead Heat

Given the closeness of the race, viewers' verdicts on the first presidential debate could not be more fitting: It's another dead heat.

Among a random national sample of registered voters who watched the debate, 42 percent said Al Gore won - and about as many, 39 percent, called George W. Bush the winner. The rest called it a tie or had no opinion.

	Who won?
Gore	42%
Bush	39
Tie	13

Few minds, moreover, were changed. In interviews conducted before the debate, prospective viewers split 48-45 percent between Bush and Gore. In interviews with the same people after the debate was over, it was virtually identical - 49-45 percent. (This isn't the horse race among all likely voters -- just among registered voters who watched the debate Tuesday night.)

	Vote preference - registered voters who watched the debate	
	Before debate	After debate
Gore	45%	45%
Bush	48	49
Nader	3	2
Buchanan	1	1

This kind of outcome is usually the case in presidential debates - they tend to reinforce existing perceptions rather than change them. Indeed among viewers who supported Gore before the debate, 93 percent still supported him after it. And among those who supported Bush beforehand, an identical 93 percent were still for him after it was over.

Similarly, among Gore supporters, 79 percent said their man won. And among Bush supporters, 70 percent called their candidate the winner.

These views represent the undiluted opinions of viewers immediately after the debate ended - before any spinmeisters had their say.

GENDER - The large gender gap in presidential preference was reflected in views of the debate. Among men, 45 percent said Bush won, 32 percent Gore. But among women, 52 percent said Gore won, 33 percent Bush.

	Who won?	
	Men	Women
Gore	32%	52
Bush	45	33
Tie	18	9

AGE - Significant time at the debate was spent on two issues of special interest to older Americans - prescription drug coverage and Social Security. Viewers older than 60 were slightly more apt to say Gore won the debate; middle-aged viewers were a bit more apt to pick Bush as the winner, and those aged 31-44 divided about evenly. (Very few people in the youngest age group, 18-30, tuned in.) Again, though, vote preferences didn't budge.

	Who won?		
	31-44	45-60	61+
Gore	40%	35	45
Bush	38	44	37
Tie	17	16	11

METHODOLOGY - This survey was conducted by telephone among a random-sample panel of 491 registered voters who watched Tuesday's debate. Respondents were initially interviewed Sept. 28-Oct. 1. The results have a 4.5-point error margin. Fieldwork by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

Here are the full results:

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

	Gore	Bush	Tie	No opin.
10/3/00	42	39	13	5

2. Presidential preference among debate viewers:

	Gore	Bush	Buchanan	Nader	Other	No op.
10/3/00 - post-debate	45	49	1	2	*	2
10/1/00 - pre-debate	45	48	1	3	1	2