

September 28, 2008

Debate Watchers Give Obama Edge Over McCain

Obama seen as improving his standing on the economy

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- Americans who watched the first presidential debate on Sept. 26 gave Barack Obama the edge over John McCain as having done the better job in the debate, by a 46% to 34% margin. These results are based on a special *USA Today*/Gallup Poll conducted on Saturday, Sept. 27, the first day after the debate.

Regardless of which candidate you happen to support, who do you think did a better job in last night's debate?

■ Sep 27, 2008



GALLUP POLL

The questions about the debate were asked of a random sample of 1,005 national adults as part of the Gallup Poll Daily tracking program on Saturday. Of the total sample of adults, 63% said they had watched the debate. Another 12% said that they had seen, heard, or read news coverage of the debate, and the rest said they had neither seen the debate nor news coverage thereof.

Did you happen to watch or listen to the nationally televised presidential debate or see, hear, or read any news coverage of the debate?

	%
Yes	63
No	37
Saw news coverage	12
Did not see news coverage	25

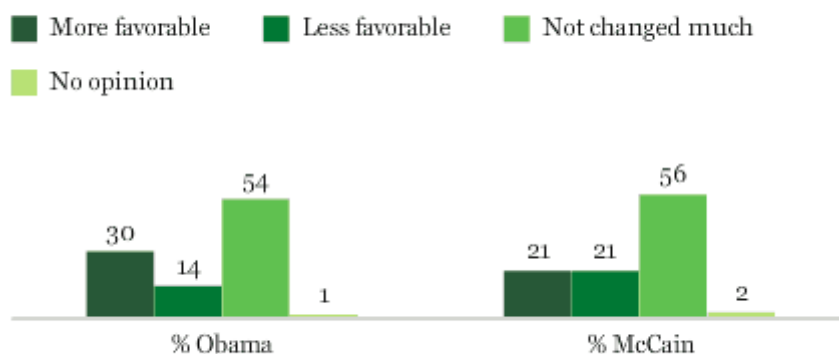
GALLUP POLL

The data show a predictable pattern of response from Republicans and Democrats. Seventy-two percent of the former and 74% of the latter said that their party's candidate did the better job in the debate. This reinforces the conventional wisdom that many viewers watch a debate through their preexisting perceptual framework and end

up with nothing more than reinforcement for what they believed before the debate began. But among the crucial group of independents who watched the debate -- those most likely to actually be swayed by what transpired, Obama won by 10 points, 43% to 33%.

Not only did Obama win the debate among debate watchers, they say that their attitudes towards the Democratic candidate also improved as a result. Thirty percent of debate watchers said they came away with a more favorable image of Barack Obama, while just 14% said they had a less favorable image. On the other hand, John McCain did not fare as well. Just as many watchers said that they developed a less favorable image of John McCain -- 21% -- as said they gained a favorable image of McCain as a result of the debate.

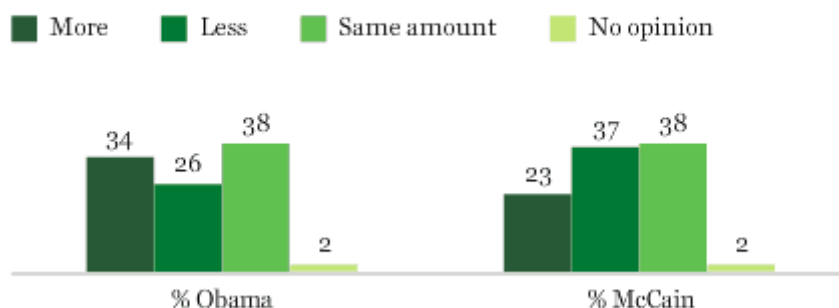
How has your opinion of the candidates been affected by the debate?



GALLUP POLL

Although the debate was supposed to deal with foreign policy, the first portion of the questions asked by moderator Jim Lehrer focused on the economy and the financial bailout plan being negotiated by Congress. This economic focus appears to have been positive for Obama; debate watchers ended up with more confidence in Obama's ability to deal with the economic problems facing the country, rather than less confidence as a result of the debate. By contrast, 37% of debate watchers said that the debate gave them less confidence in John McCain on economic matters rather than more.

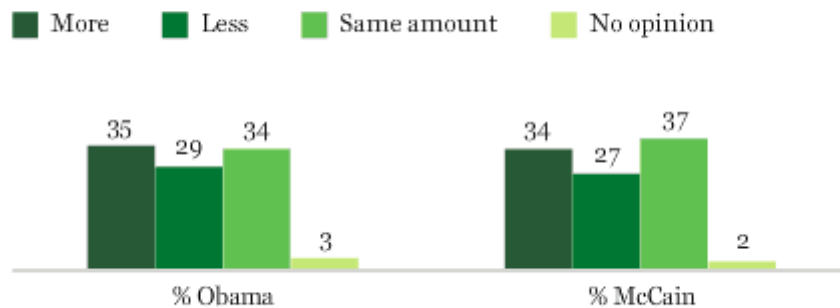
Do you now have more confidence, less confidence or the same amount of confidence in the candidate's ability to deal with the economic problems facing the country?



GALLUP POLL

Debate watchers saw little difference between the two candidates on national defense and foreign policy as a result of the debate; both Obama and McCain appeared to have come away with slightly improved images on foreign policy.

Do you now have more confidence, less confidence or the same amount of confidence in the candidate's ability to deal with matters of national defense and foreign policy?



GALLUP POLL

Finally, by a fairly substantial margin, debate watchers said that Obama was the candidate who offered the best proposals for change in the debate, by a 17 percentage point margin over McCain.

Based on what you saw or read about the debate, which candidate offered the best proposals for change to solve the country's problems?

	%
Obama	52
McCain	35
Neither	8
No Opinion	5

GALLUP POLL

Implications

History shows that "winning" the first presidential debate does not necessarily translate into winning the election. Ross Perot, Al Gore, and John Kerry are among those who were seen by debate watchers in quick reaction polls as having done the better job in the first debate of their campaign year, and all eventually lost their elections. There are two presidential (and one vice presidential) debates yet to come, and much can change. The most important indicator of the impact of the debate may be trends in overall candidate support, where, at the moment, Obama leads McCain.