Nothing demarcates the late stages of a presidential campaign more certainly than the looming candidate debates. Three of these quadrennial confrontations are coming to your TV set soon, the first on Sept. 30, so it’s a propitious time to review what we know about debates--or perhaps more accurately, what we think we know about them.

The modern era of presidential debating began in 1960 when John Kennedy debated Richard Nixon in a series of four debates. These were the first televised debates, and there was not another until 1976. But since then both presidential and vice presidential debates have been held regularly. Debates are now considered de rigueur events during presidential campaigns.

Since 1960 a considerable body of conventional wisdom has accumulated about debates. It can be summarized:

1. **DEBATES REINFORCE PRE-DISPOSITIONS, AND MOBILIZE SUPPORTERS.** Many watch debates to confirm decisions. Debates rarely change minds; most viewers tend to have their pre-debate views strengthened, while few are persuaded to switch allegiance.

2. **DEBATES USUALLY FAVOR THE CHALLENGER.** Typically incumbents have more to lose, while challengers have more to gain. For this reason, incumbents don’t usually want to debate, while challengers usually do.

3. **EXPECTATIONS INFLUENCE HOW DEBATES ARE PERCEIVED.** Both campaigns try to play down expectations for their own performance and raise expectations for their opponents. Spin is pervasive. What people believe happened during a debate is often determined by which side wins the spin battle.

4. **“SOUND BITES” FROM DEBATES CAN MATTER MORE THAN THE DEBATE ITSELF.** Pithy sound bites often rebroadcast in news accounts of the debate can influence less interested voters. Consequently, candidates are coached that complex answers are not necessary nor are debates about demonstrating detailed knowledge of the policies or operations of government.

5. **STRATEGISTS BELIEVE IT’S HARD TO WIN A DEBATE BUT EASY TO LOSE IT.** Generally candidates tend to play not to lose. They try to avoid the big gaffe or the embarrassing answer. Consequently, it’s tough for either candidate to land a knock out punch during the debate.

All this accumulated conventional wisdom provides each new political generation with a map for formulating debate strategy.

Certainly, candidates take the debates very seriously, and plan for them carefully. Rival campaigns negotiate furiously before debates for tactical advantage: where will the debates be held; when during the campaign will they be held; what formats will be used; who will moderate; who will be in the audience and so on.

The intensity of debate preparations underscores the considerable importance both media and candidates attach to these candidate collisions. Both the pols and the press take the debates very seriously, perhaps too seriously. It is not clear that debates really matter in the outcome of an election. And it is unlikely that they are decisive.
This is not orthodox thinking about debates. The conventional wisdom assumes debates are important. Campaign lore from the Kennedy-Nixon race has long held that Kennedy, the underdog in 1960, won the election because he beat Nixon in the debates. But the hard evidence for this conclusion is scant. Kennedy more than stood his ground during the first debate, but Nixon at worst held his own in the other two. Moreover, Nixon was actually gaining on Kennedy at the end of the campaign.

Evidence is similarly weak that the debates have been decisive in other presidential contests. For example, some believe that Gerald Ford’s gaffes on Eastern Europe critically wounded him in his contest with Jimmy Carter. But Ford’s loss that year was more likely due to an ongoing recession, continuing resentment over Watergate, and the Nixon pardon.

In fact, almost every recent presidential race generates its anecdotes in support of the argument that debates win or lose elections. In 1984, during Ronald Reagan’s first debate with Walter Mondale, he appeared confused and stumbled over answers. One of the fundamental questions of the campaign crystallized—Reagan’s age.

But Reagan put the question behind him in the second debate with his witty answer to a question about his age—responding that he would not make age an issue by exploiting his opponent’s “youth and inexperience.” Reagan’s age dissipated as an issue in the campaign.

And in the 1988 debate, so it is believed, Michael Dukakis lost his chance to beat George Bush when the anti-death penalty Dukakis was asked what he would do if his wife was brutally raped and murdered. Dukakis gave a cold and impersonal response that hurt him with viewers. His opponent George Bush used the moment to establish a much closer and more emotional rapport with the viewers.

But four years later, George Bush stumbled against Bill Clinton in 1992 when he was caught on camera looking at his wristwatch—apparently bored by the proceedings. In another example of a major debate mistake, when asked how the deficit affected him personally, Bush did not understand the question and came across as distant and aloof, reinforcing the view he was out of touch.

The problem with these many little stories is they are just that: only stories, interesting anecdotes that make a point, but don’t prove the point. The hard cold fact is that the elections from 1976 through 2000 more plausibly hinged on other factors including the economy and foreign policy. The debates probably were not decisive.

Some have contended that the razor thin contest this year will somehow make the 2004 debates matter. But we have had other close elections, including 1960, 1976, and 2000. If the debates weren’t decisive then, they arguably won’t be decisive this year either.

This particular heresy, however, is unlikely to faze or influence the 40 million plus viewers expected to tune into the first Bush-Kerry debate. For them the debates may not be decisive, but they are nevertheless an important, crucial part of electing a president.

No need to debate that!