What Romney Must Do to Win the Debate

How crucial will next week's presidential debate be for [Mitt Romney](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Mitt+Romney)? Well, there seems to be near-universal consensus that it represents his last, best shot at turning around the race.

Amazingly, it isn't just pundits saying this – but also Mr. Romney’s own advisers, who, rather than lowering expectations, have been [telling reporters](http://washingtonexaminer.com/romney-sees-debates-as-breakpoint/article/2508845#.UGJnMBx7Hf4) that the debate will, indeed, shake things up, while [predicting a win](http://www.buzzfeed.com/zekejmiller/how-mitt-romney-is-losing-the-debate-expectations) for their candidate. (How's that for pressure?)

Of course, [historical evidence](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/septemberoctober_2012/ten_miles_square/do_presidential_debates_really039413.php) shows that debates seldom affect the outcome of presidential elections. Even the most memorable debate moments wound up having little to no impact on the polls.

On the other hand, as Democratic strategist [Bob Shrum](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Bob+Shrum) [points out](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/09/25/how-mitt-romney-can-win-the-first-debate-with-obama.html) in [The Daily Beast](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/The+Daily+Beast), history also shows that "in the first debate, against an incumbent president, a challenger tends to win." In fact, it's happened five of the past six times (the exception being [Bob Dole](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Bob+Dole), who failed to score a win against [President Bill Clinton](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Bill+Clinton)).

If Romney can win his first debate against [President Obama](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Barack+Obama) and move the polls even a point or two back in his direction, it would certainly help. So what does Romney need to do when he faces off against the president on Oct. 3? Here’s a quick Decoder cheat sheet:

**Be specific.** One of Romney’s biggest problems in this campaign is that voters still don’t seem to have a clear grasp of how he would fix the economy. Although Romney has released, at different stages, a 59-point plan and, more recently, a five-point plan, he’s come under fire for skipping key specifics – such as how he would pay for his proposed tax cuts. If Romney could present voters with a few new details that go beyond broadly outlined concepts and platitudes, it might go a long way toward convincing them that he, not Mr. Obama, would be the best man suited to the economic task at hand.

**Be surprising.** Because he’s currently losing, Romney has to find a way to “win” the debate outright – which means a solid, “safe” performance won’t be enough. He needs to leave a big impression on viewers, and make clear that Obama is more vulnerable than it seemed. To do that, he probably has to pursue a line of attack that catches Obama off guard (and hope that he wins the subsequent exchange). Because Romney can’t afford to alienate any swing voters, it's also critical that whatever attack he launches seems fair – so, nothing personal. If it's an area where the press might actually side with Romney, that would help, too. And if he can find a way to sink the knife in with a smile, so much the better.

**Be self-deprecating.** Remember [Ronald Reagan](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Ronald+Reagan) saying he wouldn’t hold his opponent’s youth and inexperience against him? A line like that can go a long way toward undercutting a supposed weakness, while at the same time, showing viewers that the candidate has a sense of humor. There's a long list of things Romney could poke fun at about himself, from his taxes to his stiff demeanor to his dog. If he can pull it off, it could give him a new way to connect with voters – another area where he has struggled.

As we said, it may not be enough to catapult Romney into the lead. But if it can give him even a tiny bump in the polls, then he’d go into the next debate with momentum and the sense that Obama may be in trouble. That’s a position he’d certainly like to be in.