

*The concept of  
political equality is  
not frozen in time.*

*Rather, it is a  
dynamic idea shaped  
by the evolution of a  
nation's values, laws,  
and technology.*

*Historically,  
political equality  
has been most  
closely associated  
with the right  
to vote.*

## ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

# BROADCASTING AND POLITICAL EQUALITY, 1977

## *Media and Politics*

*The Communications Act of 1937 required that broadcasters treat political candidates in an evenhanded manner. To some extent, this country had always waged its political campaigns in the media, but when the Founding Fathers protected the people's right to know with the First Amendment, they did not anticipate the power of television. How can the broadcast industry protect political equality by ensuring that voters receive the information they need about the candidates? And what is this information?*

*Since this essay was written in 1976, we have seen the role the media plays in political campaigns grow more powerful. How well is that power used? This essay set forth many still pertinent issues, including equal broadcast time for candidates, the character issue, and the trust or lack of trust the public has in the media.*

*Who could envision that Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton would appear on 60 Minutes in 1992 in response to accusations of marital infidelity? How should political debates be structured so that each candidate is given an equal opportunity to speak? How partisan should television be? These were important questions that the Markle Foundation was asking in 1976; they are still being asked today.*

The televised debates between candidates Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford were the high points of the 1976 presidential campaign. In a brief 90-minute period, anyone with a television set could scrutinize the appearance of the candidates, see how they reacted to questioning, and compare one candidate with the other. For almost everyone, the televised debates provided an opportunity to make a more direct assessment of the candidates than could be provided by any other means. The opportunity was not lost. At least 90 million people watched each debate. Both Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford credit the debates as being important and perhaps vital to their campaigns.

