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## Trump is right about the debates: It's time to dump the moderator

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Following blistering criticism of Matt Lauer's interviews of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump during the recent Commander-in-Chief forum, and after Trump has slammed debate moderators like Megyn Kelly, Trump is now calling for removing the moderator at the upcoming presidential debate. While this may seem to like a non-starter, Trump is absolutely right. The debate format needs to be radically revamped and the first change should be dumping the moderators.

The criticism of Lauer and Kelly shows the assumed role of moderators and panelists is not to ask tough questions or to hold candidates feet to the fire but instead to serve as the easy excuse for a poor performance. Much as with sore losers in sports, a stumbling debate performance is somehow blamed on the ref.

Every election sees post-debate spin focused on whether the moderators were fair — witness how CNN's Candy Crowley was blasted in 2012 for correcting Mitt Romney's assertions about when President Obama called the attack on the diplomatic compound in Libya an "act of terror."

It's not like moderated debates have a long and glorious history. In fact, no-moderator debates are the traditional model. Consider the debates that set the standard for American politics — the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates for the Illinois Senate seat. The two candidates were on stage alone, each presenting their best arguments without any potential or perceived bailout from a journalist.

We can't really go back to the Lincoln-Douglas format, which provided for one candidate speaking for an hour, the other getting a 90 minute reply, and the first candidate then delivering a half-hour rebuttal. Thanks to our modern attention span, we can't handle much more than five minutes of one candidate who we disagree with talking, so the format would need an overhaul.

But we could shuttle back and forth between the candidates, allowing for an exciting and potentially illuminating volley. The debate can have set topics, with each candidate receiving a set amount of time for each question. The other candidate would then respond. The debate would continue like this for two hours.

This format would have the added benefit of allowing for an equitable division of time. Moderators may be tasked with making sure neither candidate goes over, but in the end, they do a very poor job of preventing one candidate or the other from extending their speaking time.

Without a moderator, the microphone could simply shut off at the set time. This would also prevent a regular and annoying form of gamesmanship as the candidates try to interrupt each other to throw someone off.

Occasionally, as Al Gore found out during his signing tactic in 2000, this behavior can backfire, but candidates still love using it. Just situating the candidates at a large enough distance apart would prevent any attempt to shout an out-of-turn response.

A no-moderator debate may also remove the fake “town-hall” debates that theoretically allow undecideds — who are rarely undecided — from getting involved. Even having a set question isn’t needed. Just give them each enough time and the candidates can choose the issues. Their opponent is certain to bring up whatever hot button issue can cause the most damage.

It is not like moderators do that good of a job in making sure questions are answered — candidates have a long history of sidestepping even the most challenging issues without any lasting danger.

The moderators that are supposed to handle the debates aren’t incompetent, biased or weak. It’s that they will never do what the partisan viewing public that makes up the vast majority of the audience wants — attack the other candidate’s positions and reveal them to be a mendacious liar who didn’t have the courage answer the hard question.

Instead they just serve as distractions and easy scapegoats to prevent voters from getting a good look at the candidates in a highly stressful situation. The answer is simple — get rid of the moderators and let the candidates go after each other.

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