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Everyone hates the moderators — so let's just get rid of them

The interlocutors are increasingly just a distraction for partisans, and there's no need for anyone to ask questions anyway. Here's how to run a better debate.

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Presidential debates have gained some new respect in this election, thanks to a marked swing in the polls following President Obama's lackluster performance in the first encounter. Mitt Romney's surge showed that, this year at least, the debates have had a real impact on how voters perceive the candidates.

But because of their format, the debates leave a lot to be desired. The biggest problem is they give both sides an easy excuse for a bumbling or poor result — it's the ref's fault! In all three debates so far, the moderator has been immediately blamed for being either incompetent or biased. For future years, there is an easy solution to this problem: Get rid of the moderator. What purpose does a human questioner serve except as a lightning rod for? Eliminating the job would remove the easy scapegoat. Moreover, it just might make the debates more lively, more unscripted, more hard-hitting — and more useful.

The format we need is one that harks back to the famed 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates. Let the two candidates get on stage alone and duke it out. The original debates between the men, who were fighting for a Senate seat in Illinois, involved one candidate speaking for an hour, his opponent speaking for 90 minutes, and then the first candidate delivering a half-hour rebuttal.

Of course, we'd have to modify the format for current sensibilities. Realistically, modern attention spans wouldn't tolerate having anyone speak for an hour. Besides, the partisan viewership would probably switch channels while its candidate wasn't speaking. Instead, each candidate should get a set amount of time — say two minutes — to make a point. Then, the other candidate would respond. The debate would continue like this, back and forth, for two hours.

How to enforce this two-minute limit? The current moderators do a terrible job at it, but it would be easy without them: The microphone would immediately cut out, offering the candidates no chance to beg for extra time. They would be forced to keep answers concise and follow the rules. There would be no one to tell that the answer was so important that it needed more time.

Switching off the microphones would have one other major benefit: It would prevent the candidates from interrupting each other. Interrupting the other candidate is a common tactic to throw someone off his game. Sometimes it backfires badly (like Al Gore's sighing in 2000), but it works well enough to remain in constant use. Simply keeping the candidates far enough apart on a stage — no reason to have the gimmick of the candidates walking around and sitting on stools — would prevent any attempt to shout out an out-of-turn response.

Who would ask the questions? Certainly not a studio audience. In last week's town-hall-style debate, they served as yet another foil for partisan critics who complained that the undecideds weren't really undecided. And the candidates' responses always start with some version of the insipid "that's a great question." The fact is there's no need for questions at all. The candidates can choose the issues themselves. They will avoid hot-button issues at their own

peril. Even now, with a moderator holding their feet to the fire, candidates simply choose to sidestep questions without much danger. At least the rival will have an official forum to highlight the dodge. Alternatively, the debate could be structured around four two-minute slots dedicated to specific topics that have to be answered, such as taxes, spending, abortion, or foreign policy in Europe or Asia.

The problem with the moderators isn't that they do their job poorly or that the questions are ill conceived. It is that they do not accomplish what commentators and partisans want them to — which is to call out the other candidate as a lying flip-flopper who didn't answer the question. As such, they are easy punching bags and serve to distract voters from actually judging the candidates. Let's just sidestep those problems and let the candidates do the job themselves.

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