

Debates should be more than sound bites

P politico.com/story/2008/10/debates-should-be-more-than-sound-bites-014133



At the Sept. 26 debate, presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama were allowed by moderator Jim Lehrer to challenge each other directly.

Presidential debates are among the most watched broadcasts on TV, rarely surpassed by programming other than the Super Bowl and the most hotly contested NFL conference championships. Given their popularity and importance, it is a shame that the debates, which promise so much, deliver so little.

Perhaps organizers could design a debate format that, even more than the one used throughout the 2008 campaign, gives the pretense of seriousness while diminishing the candidates for the highest office in the land and choking the flow of critical information to voters. But debate organizers would have to apply their minds and summon reserves of inventiveness.

This year's presidential debates — along with the vice presidential debate, the endless primary debates and virtually all such debates in recent memory — are variations on a common format: The candidates are limited to short answers, with few opportunities to elaborate on their ideas or respond to their opponents. They face and address not each other but a moderator or panel drawn from the media. The moderator or panel chooses and asks the questions, asks follow-ups, keeps candidates to their time and, in town-hall-style debates, serves as a buffer not only between the candidates but also between the candidates and the audience.

The system inflates the significance of the media, makes the candidates look small and weak, and squanders an excellent opportunity for the public to learn about the candidates' positions and their capacity for reasoned discussion.

In 2003, the Debate Advisory Standards Project published "The Debate Book," an extensive effort to establish "fair and commonly accepted guidelines" for political debates at the state and local level, drawing key lessons from presidential debates. The advisory group found that 71 percent of voters believe debate rules should "give candidates more time to explain their views on complex issues." Voters, particularly undecided voters, were turned off by the spectacle of candidates having to jump from one difficult policy question to another while compressing their answers into 30-to-90-second sound bites.

Nonetheless, debate organizers seem wedded to the idea that the number of topics in a debate should expand while the time to answer them shrinks. Not one of 11 alternative debate formats outlined in "The Debate Book" allowed a candidate to speak for longer than three minutes at a time. None of the two-candidate debate formats allotted more than 12 minutes for both to discuss a topic.

Many experts believe that media panels are ineffective, not least due to long-winded questions designed to provoke gaffes, corner candidates or simply show off the journalist's brilliance. Inexplicably, moderators are still considered indispensable.

To provide voters — especially undecideds — a higher-quality discussion on the leading issues, presidential debates should increase the time devoted to discrete topics, eliminate moderators and panels, and enable candidates to challenge each other directly. (John McCain and Barack Obama were allowed to question and challenge each other in the first debate, but they tended to address moderator Jim Lehrer instead. Lehrer's repeated and often unheeded appeals for them to talk to one another only emphasized that direct exchange between candidates is hampered rather than helped by the presence of a moderator.)

Here's one way to do it: Put both candidates at an oval table, half-facing each other and half-facing a single, stationary camera. The 90-minute debate would be divided into four 20-minute blocks, each devoted to a single issue — such as the economy, health care, terrorism

or education.

One minute would be given for one of the candidates, as determined by a coin toss, to pose a question at the start of the debate; the candidates would then alternate questions for the next three rounds.

Instead of a moderator, a clock of the sort used in chess would be placed between the two candidates. Once Candidate A finished his questions, he would press the clock, which would turn off his microphone and activate Candidate B's. Candidate B could use whatever part of his 10 minutes he wished to answer. When he finished, he would hit the clock, tossing the issue back to Candidate A, and so forth, giving each candidate 10 minutes to make his case and challenge his opponent.

The debate would continue in this manner through four rounds, ending with the candidates each delivering a three-minute concluding statement.

Such a format makes the candidates the main attraction. It gives them time to lay out their positions and to probe an opponent's positions. It allows the public to get a sense of the candidates' preparation on the issues and their ability to think on their feet.

It even has the potential to generate enough excitement and drama to catapult the presidential debates beyond the Super Bowl in the ratings.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Emily Messner is a research associate at the Hoover Institution.