

Throughout recent years in the political sphere, we have seen an extreme focus on political candidates' backgrounds. Instead of policies and programs, the spotlight is on who the candidates are friends with, their economic histories, potential character flaws, and anything else deemed relevant to their candidacy by the other side. This was showcased in the televised debates of the presidential elections of both 2016 and 2020, where the conversation on platforms was often limited due to arguments on personal character. While debates are helpful to democracy, there must be a shift in focus from politics to policy and updates to the debate system for them to remain important and relevant to the democratic process.

The debates themselves are managed by the Commission on Presidential Debates. This private, nonpartisan organization's primary mission is to "ensure, for the benefit of the American electorate, that general election debates are held every four years between and among the leading candidates for the offices of President and Vice President of the United States". This organization is not controlled by a political party nor does it endorse candidates or parties. The CPD has sponsored general election presidential debates every election since 1988 after its formation to ensure that the voting public has the opportunity to see the leading candidates debate since debates are not required in the Constitution.

For each debate, the Federal Election Commission requires a debate sponsor to make candidate selection decisions based on pre-existing criteria. The 2020 debate criteria "to receive an invitation to debate, a candidate must: (i) be Constitutionally eligible to hold the office of President of the United States; (ii) appear on a sufficient number of state ballots to have a mathematical chance of winning a majority vote in the Electoral College; (iii) have a level of support of at least 15 percent of the national electorate, as determined by five national public

opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results at the time of the determination."

This criteria influences what candidates are able to participate and often leaves out non-major party options due to the 15 percent criteria. The criteria of having at least 15 percent of support is often argued because a debate is a potential opportunity for a third-party candidate to gain more exposure and support. Without the platform of a televised and publicized debate, the third candidate must work harder to gain the representation that the other candidates receive from being affiliated with a major party.

With the specific criteria having to be met to attain an invite to participate in a debate, the conversations that occur during the debate have no criteria to meet. Debates should be a time that voters can learn more details on a candidate's platform and plans if they win. The televised debates should act as supplemental information to individual voter's own personal research on topics and candidates. In addition to being an opportunity for voters to learn, debates are also a perfect chance for candidates to broadcast their name, platform, beliefs, and plans to the entire country via television. Rather than visiting numerous different cities and relying solely on word of mouth and news coverage, the debate draws the attention of the nation and focuses on the election, unlike any other opportunity. However, this is not always the case, but the best-case scenario. 11 million fewer people tuned into the debate between President Donald Trump and President-Elect Joe Biden than in the 2016 debate between Trump and Hilary Clinton. Viewers treated the debate as an opportunity to make fun of the candidates. For example, memes immediately filled the internet after the fly was seen on Vice President Mike Pence's head. Instead of actively listening to both sides, viewers used the debate to find more reasons to support the candidate they were already planning on voting for. John Sides for Washington

Monthly put it perfectly, stating “the debates occur late in the campaign, long after the vast majority of voters have arrived at a decision. Moreover, the debates tend to attract viewers who have an abiding interest in politics and are mostly party loyalists. Instead of the debates affecting who they will vote for, their party loyalty affects who they believe won the debates. For example, in a CNN poll after one of the 2008 debates, 85 percent of Democrats thought that Obama had won, but only 16 percent of Republicans agreed.”

Rather than using the debates to highlight the positive aspects of their campaigns, candidates often use debates to point out issues within the other side’s argument. The 2020 debate was described as a “dumpster fire” and a “trainwreck” after the 90 minutes were filled with constant interruptions and multiple cheap shots at one another. One example was President Trump’s comment on Biden’s son Hunter’s drug use, to which Biden responded with “My son, my son, my son — like a lot people, like a lot of people you know at home — had a drug problem.” Biden said. “He’s overtaken it, he’s fixed it, he’s worked on it. And I’m proud of him. I’m proud of my son.” While this comment shows the character of President-elect Biden, the debate was no place to air dirty laundry as his son’s drug use had nothing to do with the election.

Instead of personal attacks, the televised debates should focus on the policy side of the election. Debate topics should showcase each candidate’s plans for the country’s economy, COVID 19 response, and the Supreme Court. This shift in focus from politics to policy would create the proper environment for further discussion and discourse that is needed for a democracy to properly function.

To improve the presidential debate system, a few changes can be made. In addition to issues with the content, there are problems with merely viewing the debate. Since many impoverished Americans do not have access to cable television, this group of voters often miss

televised debates. Many do not have televisions to watch first hand or smartphones to watch news or recaps of important parts of the event. Instead, they must rely on word of mouth to gain knowledge of the debates and candidate platform information. Another change can be made to make the debates more impactful to voters. This could be achieved by having the debates take place earlier in the year. Having the debates earlier would provide a springboard for voters to start their own personal research on each candidate and their platform. Currently, by the time the televised debates happen, voters already have their minds made up and know which candidate they will support.

Finally, format changes can be made to the debate itself. As 2020 has been a strange year, this was evident during the election with no town hall style debate because of President Trump's COVID 19 diagnosis. This should not be the new standard of the debate system. Instead, there should be a town hall debate for each election. This format provides an excellent opportunity for voters to ask specific questions they really want to know and gain information to base their voting choice on. Another option to adjust the typical style of debate is to allow the national party organizations to create questions for the opposite party. This would create the discussion that the opposite party wants and allow for information that may not be a priority for the opposite side to be shared.

In addition to changing the source of the questions, more pressure needs to be on actually answering the questions. Today it seems like most of the questions are bounced around and never answered, leaving the viewers no more informed than they were before watching. Clear questions should be asked and candidates should not deflect but should answer each completely. A final way to improve the presidential debate system is to keep the normal 90 minute time block for each debate, but allow a 15-minute block of unstructured and unmoderated

conversation between the candidates. With this format, if a candidate goes off-topic, begins skirting a question, or interrupts the other candidate during the structured portion they should be muted. This will force a conversation on the actual questions and policies, rather than political differences and personal attacks.

Overall, debates remain an important part of our electoral system. They offer opportunities for voters to learn about the political policies and platform each candidate believes in. With a shift in focus to policy and a few changes to improve the debate format, the presidential debate will be even more useful to voters as they try to understand each candidate and their platform while making their decision on who to vote for in the election.