*In Defense of the Debates*

By Ruardon C. Butler

Yes, there should absolutely be a law mandating nationally televised debates for U.S. presidential candidates. To say there should not goes against the very idea of American politics and of healthy, respectful discussion about policy and political differences. However, if we are to fully understand *why* this should be, first we need to consider the current state of the debates within American politics.

In today’s America, misinformation runs rampant. Everyone, from the most politically inclined and involved to those who do not even vote has been subject to its pervasiveness. No matter one’s level of intellect, education, party affiliation, or any other factor, it is nearly certain that at some point, that individual has regurgitated disinformation.

However, nowhere is America’s misinformation pandemic more dangerous than on social media. Websites like X and Facebook serve to facilitate a constant echo chamber for one’s beliefs, reinforcing that a person is in the right and the other side, the wrong. It disallows individuals from even considering the other side’s perspective, and leads people to become more extreme and radical, feeling that the other side is incapable of understanding differential beliefs. And within these echo chambers, and without any other voices, Americans have fallen into one of the biggest social crises of the 21st century.

Now more than ever, it would be nice if leading politicians, on both sides, were able to come together and at least unite against this plague. Yet they too have fallen prey to it. Moreover, newer generations of both Democrats and Republicans have not only aided their older comrades in heightening misinformation but have taken it to a level previously thought unfathomable.

Examine the old debates and presidential races (and by old, I mean the election of 2008, between McCain and Obama)--two completely different politicians with two vastly different life stories. And yet, when reviewing the debate clips from 2008, as well as what the candidates said about one another when these sparring matches were over, there was an air of respect, one that seems to be a distant memory today. Where did that go? When a woman at a McCain town hall claimed she could not vote for Obama because he was an “Arab,” McCain politely but firmly took the microphone from her, shaking his head quickly and *dispelling* this attempt at misinformation and fearmongering. He spoke calmly, immediately protecting his adversary and saying that Obama was a decent family man and good person and was simply someone that McCain disagreed with about fundamental political issues (CNN 2015).

Now try imagining Kamala Harris or Donald Trump stopping one of their supporters from making a false claim about their opponent. It is completely unthinkable, and that is because today’s politicians realized it was advantageous to perpetuate it. To many, it seems that it started with Clinton and Trump in 2016, where the debates themselves took a sharp turn away from policy discussion and towards a competition of the best playground insults. And yet within, something else began to surface. A striking amount of disinformation and conspiracy theory thinking in relation to topics like the former Secretary of State’s emails and involvement in a “cover up” of the attack in Benghazi. This was also when we started hearing the term “fake news,” ushered in by Trump himself, the poster boy for false claims. These debates, a time-honored tradition of respectful discussion amongst candidates, were polluted by growing extremism and the ease with which falsehoods could be spread. And despite being the one renowned for spreading said falsehoods, it was Donald Trump who pulled off the upset against an old guard Democratic favorite.

Upon analyzing a study done after the election, it becomes clear just how and why Trump won. Yes, elections are multifaceted, difficult-to-understand events, and there are always numerous reasons why one candidate wins, and another loses. However, as the most digital election yet, and the one with the most impact from social media so far, the statistics are hard to debate against. There were 30 million false stories favoring Trump compared to eight in favor of Clinton. Of everyone who could recall reading a false story, half said they believed them, and while social media was not as dominant as it is today, 14 percent of people said social media was their main source of news for the election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2016). This is pretty damning, all things considered. Social media facilitated rampant falsehoods, and many Americans were easily fooled by them, happy to believe them, or both. Where did so many of these falsehoods that circulated social media originate?

This then brings us to the more recent debates of 2020 and 2024. One may think these election cycles have shown that debates are nearly dead within American politics: that they have been corrupted like social media, borrowing the lies sent around the various sites, and that the debates themselves are nothing more than a circus. Just reviewing the screaming matches of 2020 between Biden and Trump, and the hilariously sad conspiracies (i.e., pets being eaten by immigrants, or the still-pervasive 2020 election denialism) peddled in 2024 makes this obvious. Sure, the debates will still probably happen, but they should not be encouraged, and certainly not mandated.

To abandon something dating back to our birth as a nation is an affront to the very ideals that the nation is built upon. In fact, I would argue that debates are one of the few strengths we have in this war against heightening polarization and misinformation. Yes, it is easy to let the recent debate ruin our perception of these institutions, but one must remember that this is a new phenomenon.

Donald Trump is the main reason for this “new era” of heavily controversial and unacceptable debates, but barring a repeal of the Twenty-second Amendment, he can never debate again. JD Vance has shown similar tendencies to his president (i.e., a knack for direct confrontation of opposition, as well as interrupting moderators and debate opponents). However, it is hard to argue that his combativeness and demeanor is anywhere near that of Trump. Vance, if he runs for the presidency, will likely debate in a style more akin to those of the old Republican guard, like Romney and McCain. This is the best hope for the debates going forward--that with the end of Trump’s presidency, a return to normalcy will follow. Thus, now would be the best time to fully mandate televised presidential debates via congressional legislation.

In this era of strengthening, we would do well to more fervently safeguard the institution of presidential debates. Stricter penalties for interrupting and derailing topics should be included, as well as hard and fast time limits for candidates speaking, all of which if violated could result in candidates losing speaking time. Moreover, I would propose that debates stop being televised by a single news channel. This invites possible bias in the moderators and the possibility for candidates to complain about being unfairly treated. What we should aim for is something where one news channel gets to stream the event, and the rest get to watch and commentate live over said stream, whilst a channel like Fox sends a moderator and CNN sends one as well. This will entice moderators to keep proceedings running smoothly and with as little partisanship from themselves as possible. It is much more possible that these anchors will be more amiable to peace at the podiums if they are subjected to live, nationally televised proceedings, complete with a fellow moderator with a likely different ideology.

To have to mandate that debaters behave cordially and respectfully towards viewers, their opponent(s), and the moderators may seem silly, but such an idea is just more evidence that American politics has fully derailed into a carnival act. This proposed course correction should transcend partisan ideology. Both sides of the aisle seemed aghast at how bloodthirsty candidates have become in recent years. Moreover, if we return to the days of debaters who conduct themselves like Obama and McCain, this can foster greater respect and understanding across ideological boundaries. If constituents and lower-ranking politicians view presidential candidates acting in appropriate ways, it is likely others will begin to change their demeanor. In fact, I would argue that this new debate culture of interrupting and chaos-causing has only served to embolden political polarization, specifically in Congress. If our future candidates are bound to rules of cordiality to those around them while on live television, I believe this positive example may be echoed throughout the nation, and in some part at least, begin healing America’s pandemic of misinformation and polarization.

In summary, Congress should pass legislation requiring nationally televised presidential debates, including rules and regulations to keep these debates respectful, truthful, informative, and beneficial to reducing and reversing the perverse effects of misinformation on our nation. America, despite claiming perfection throughout its history, has never been a flawless democracy. From our very inception, and especially into the modern day, we have constantly been climbing the mountain of freedom and liberty, always seeming so very close to the “ideal” nation of our aspirations. Yet ironically, we are people who constantly look back on our past for answers. We rarely seek new answers and ideas, and we cling to a document that is 250 years old. Our constant yearning for the past has often inhibited our progress towards what we are really seeking, whatever that may be. So, it is admittedly ironic that the current political polarization, misinformation campaigns, and debate fragility might all be fixed, or at least mended, by looking *back* to the past. The debate decency of our recent past is a “history” worth venerating. And today we are at the precipice of a grand opportunity to heal serious damage, cause little harm, and advance our goals of progress, liberty, and most importantly, unity.

References

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