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**Class 2026**

**Well-Informed Citizens and Televised Presidential Debates: A Legislative Necessity?**

**Introduction**

A well-informed electorate is the basis of a functioning democracy as it allows citizens to make educated decisions about their leaders and policies. In the United States, presidential debates have played an important role in informing voters about the candidates’ proposed policies, character, and the way that they plan to lead if they step into office. However, the current system defers debate organization to private negotiations between candidates and political parties. This has led to inconsistencies in debate formats, accessibility issues, and occasional cancellations. This raises an interesting question: Should Congress enact a law requiring nationally televised debates for party nominees? I believe that Congress should legislate mandatory presidential debates with specific requirements to ensure transparency and fairness for the public. Additionally, the current system’s effectiveness is evaluated in ensuring a well-informed electorate and its limitations.

**The importance of Presidential Debates in a Democracy**

Presidential debates serve as a way and a platform for candidates to articulate their policies, while responding to critiques, and engage in discourse on national and global issues (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). These debates provide voters with direct comparisons between candidates, which helps them to assess the differences in policy positions, leadership, and problem-solving skills (Benoit, 2013). They also offer a unique opportunity for candidates to be scrutinized under public pressure, revealing their ability to think quickly and handle unexpected situations in current environments (McKinney & Carlin, 2004).

Beyond voter education, presidential debates have historically shaped election outcomes. Landmark televised appearances such as the historic Nixon-Kennedy debates in 1960 demonstrate the power that television has in influencing public perception of candidates (Kraus, 2000). A more recent example of this influence is the debate between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012, which showed the public how “performance” in a debate could shift public opinion and alter the momentum of a campaign (Holan, 2012). Given their significance, the ensuring of all major candidates’ participation in structures and accessible debates seems essential for maintaining an informed electorate in a democracy.

**The Case for Legislating Mandatory Presidential Debates**

Even with obvious importance to the public for receiving an unbiased outlet for information, presidential debates are currently governed by the private Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), which is a bipartisan organization that negotiates terms with candidates. This has led to issues such as the candidates refusing to participate in debates, the debate format favoring a certain candidate, or even a lack of accessibility for a third-party candidate (Smith & Vavreck, 2020). To address these challenges, Congress should enact legislation requiring nationally televised debates with specific provisions. As this seems like a harsh response to this occurrence, a democratic avenue for information should not be having negotiations behind closed doors.

The first suggestion for fixing this issue is mandatory participation. This would include a federal law mandating that all major-party nominees, and candidates who meet a reasonable polling threshold such as 15 percent in national polls, must participate in at least three debates before the general election. This requirement would prevent the leading candidates from avoiding debates to control media narratives like what was encountered in the 2024 Republican primaries when Donald Trump refused to participate in debates (Bacon, 2023). In these primaries, there was a good deal of bias in portraying information and quite a bit of one-sided influx of relaying that information. With the federal law being enacted, the possibility of refusing to participate in the regulated debate would be eliminated.

Other than that, nonpartisan oversight would be another way to eliminate any remaining partiality. Rather than leaving debate organizations to privately run commissions, the debates should be overseen by an independent, nonpartisan body that is established by Congress. This body would set uniform rules that would ensure a fair moderation and prevent political influence from determining the debate formats. The debates should also be inclusive of all parties that can participate, which should not only include the two major opposing parties.

An equitable format and accessibility to the debates is the next suggestion. Debates should be structured to allow equal speaking time and diverse questions being asked by journalists, as well as citizens. Various formats like debates in town hall or policy-focused debates would be beneficial for the public to remain informed on the ideas promulgated by the various party nominees. Moreover, they should be accessible via multiple streaming platforms like television, radio, or online streaming. This would accommodate individuals who are unable to be present, individuals with disabilities, as well as those who want to be well informed in the comfort of their own homes (Nielsen, 2016).

Finally, penalties for not complying should be included as a safety precaution. To ensure compliance with the newly enacted law, penalties could be imposed on candidates who refuse to debate under the novel legislation, which will likely include format revision. These could include restrictions on public funding for campaigns or reduced access to federal advertising resources, or even potentially not being a candidate for not complying.

**Evaluating the Current System of Debate Organization**

The current model, where debates are organized through negotiations between candidates and the CPD, has led to inconsistencies in participation and effectiveness. While some debates have been informative and had a suitable structure, others have suffered from poor moderation, biased questioning, and candidates outright refusing to participate.

One major flaw to the current system is that candidates can opt out of debates with barely any consequences. For instance, in 2020, current President Donald Trump initially refused to participate in a virtual debate against Joe Biden and said he had concerns about the format (Collinson, 2020). On a similar note, in the 2024 Republican primaries, Trump declined all debates and argued that he had an incomparable lead in the polls (Bacon, 2023). This absence led voters to not having a direct comparison between the candidates and stopped them from being able to make informed decisions.

Another issue is the exclusion of third-party candidates, who often struggle to meet the CPD’s arbitrary polling thresholds (Smith & Vavreck, 2020). Such exclusion limits voter exposure to alternative viewpoints and reinforces the two-party system, which potentially disenfranchises a segment of the electorate. This exclusion can lead to less support from voters from third parties because they cannot receive a well-rounded vision of who they support.

The effectiveness of debates in educating the public varies a lot. Some debates, like the 2008 Obama-McCain debates, provided substantive policy discussions, while others like the 2020 Trump-Biden chaotic debate, were marked by interruptions and personal attacks (Peters, 2020). These two opposites of debates, show that the structure and format need to have work done so that they project a more structured way for the U.S. electorate to get educated on the ideas of the politicians that the people plan to support.

The media plays a significant role in shaping the public’s perception of presidential debates and their preparedness to see what they will see on television. News networks frame post-debate analyses and selective “soundbites” (a short clip of the speech that is extracted to summarize the larger point of the content) through influence of how debates are perceived by the public (Iyengar, 1991). Additionally, social media platforms now amplify certain moments, sometimes simultaneously distorting the substance of the debate by prioritizing viral clips over policy discussions (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). These factors all highlight the need for nonpartisan oversight so that balanced media coverage of these debates is ensured. It is a critical point of democracy that each vote and each voter, therefore, is not biased and able to form a decision of what that individual wants to support and who he or she wants to back. It is valuable that the voters have a resource of media where they can find “true” information regarding nominees and candidates. That would include a newspaper or online news outlet that will have a neutral tone and critical overviews of what has occurred in those debates. This will assist voters in getting information about body language, policy proposals, and valuable information set forth to the public even when they do not have the opportunity to watch the debate itself or want additional information before or after the debate, which is unbiased.

**Why Mandatory Debates Have Not Been Implemented Yet**

Despite the apparent benefits set forth of mandatory presidential debates, Congress has not yet passed legislation requiring them. Several factors contribute to this lack of action.

Political resistance and candidate strategy are essential factors that help to explain the status quo. Many politicians prefer to control their campaign strategies without the interference of the government. Leading candidates often view debates as a risk to their polling position rather than an opportunity to increase their numbers. If they already hold a strong lead in the polls, they may avoid debates to prevent giving their opponents a platform where they can become challenged (Hasen, 2022).

There is also a First Amendment concern. Opponents argue that mandatory debates could violate the First Amendment by compelling candidates to speak in a format they may not endorse. They contend that participation in debates should remain a voluntary component of political campaigns (Smith & Vavreck, 2020). However, this could be challenged as it is a decision for office pursuers to be exposed in front of the entire population and must adhere to certain structured laws/rules. Most of these structures might have a point of concern for many candidates but still need to be followed. Therefore, if this is a point of concern for candidates, this could possibly pose a warning sign for those interested in voting for this person. Are the candidates scared of showing their “real side” or maybe have something to hide?

Bipartisan control over debates might also be a reason why this law has not been passed yet. The CPD, which is controlled by the two major parties, has little incentive to introduce a system that could disrupt their dominance. Third-party candidates remain largely excluded because Democrats and Republicans maintain control over debate inclusion criteria (Smith & Vavreck, 2020). However, this bipartisan rulership should concern voters and those who create the format for the debates because this is not what a democracy should represent. People who want to remain informed and want to vote should not stay discouraged from being “outvoted” because of the popularity that remains within the Democrats and Republicans. This might also switch based on the popularity that third parties may gain through this inclusive approach.

Finally, an alternative campaign strategy is put forth. With the rise of social media and targeted advertising, candidates can communicate directly with voters without engaging in debates. Many campaigns focus on social media engagement, rallies, and controlled media appearances to shape public opinion (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). This can be beneficial for some voters, while also deeply hurting them and others. If voters only follow one nominee/candidate, they may receive very biased and often one-sided information that will impede their final informed decision. This is why they should follow all candidates that they are interested in and really follow a neutral toned news outlet, which will in conclusion assist them in receiving all the unbiased information they are seeking.

**Conclusion**

Ensuring that a well-informed electorate exists is an important part of the future health of American democracy, and presidential debates play a critical role in achieving this novel goal. The current system of privately negotiated debates has led to severe inconsistencies in participation of candidates, accessibility to information, and effectiveness of the facts relayed to the public. Congress can strengthen the integrity of presidential debates by enacting legislation that ensures participation. As such an approach would establish nonpartisan oversight for debates and guarantee that people have access to information they are interested in receiving, members of the legislative branch will possibly achieve higher numbers of voters and generate more trust within the system. While concerns about free speech and government intervention already exist, they can be decreased through careful policy design that aims to improve the future of the United States. Ultimately, a standardized and fair mandatory debate system would enhance voter education, while contributing to a more informed electorate with unbiased information.

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