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## Presidential Debates or Political Theatre?

Presidential debates have been televised throughout our nation since 1960. (Murse, 2017) That first debate being between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. This was the first time in our nations history a presidential debate was televised. It gave a new platform for many Americans to get a closer look at who would be leading their country. The format of this debate was straightforward, Nixon and Kennedy were each provided eight-minute opening statements, two and half minutes for questions and rebuttals, and three minutes for a closing statement (Murse, 2017). Many historians believe that this televised debate contributed to Nixon's loss against Kennedy, when the citizens saw Nixon's sweaty and sickly appearance, they were more inclined to view Kennedy as the better candidate (Murse, 2017). Presidential debates have been in our country for a long time. They have informed millions of Americans about our candidates and provide an effective platform to advertise elections. However, is our debate system today serving the purpose of informing citizens about what our presidential candidates represent? Are the debates making our citizens more knowledgeable about who their potential future chief diplomat is? Or do these debates serve more as a form of political theatre? (Rowland, 2013). I argue the latter. I will cover what our current presidential debates provide for our political system, why our debates act as political theatre (Rowland, 2013) rather than informing citizens on key issues, and I will conclude with providing a potential solution to our nations debate structure.

Presidential debates today do have several positive aspects. For starters, the reach of these debates is monumental. In the 2016 presidential debates more than 165 million Americans

tuned in to at least one of the debates (Salant, 2016). The ability to get ahold of that many citizens provides a window of opportunity to inspire voter interest. It has the potential to spark more political activism within the American people. In an article written by Dr. Benjamin Knoll; he discusses the aspect of quick thinking in debates. Knoll states, “Modern presidential debates also provide one of the few indicators as to how the candidates might respond under pressure. Whereas the vast majority of modern campaign events are scripted and edited affairs, debates require candidates to be able to think on their feet and be able to respond to unanticipated events.” (Knoll, 2012). In other words, we get to see candidates pushed out of their comfort zone. They are faced with questions that they must answer efficiently and clearly, which can reveal true character. In a study conducted by Benoit, W.L., Hansen, G. J., & Verser, R. M. They conducted a metanalysis regarding debates and found several important functions. The study states, “Presidential debates serve other important functions besides conversion of partisans, they can help undecided voters make a decision. Additionally, debates can increase viewers confidence in their vote choice.” The study goes on to state, “this process results in increased turnout of that candidates’ supporters on election day.” (Benoit, Hansen, Verser, 2003) This goes back to the statement made earlier. Debates can lead to greater political activism. It provides a way to sway the opinions of nonpartisan citizens. Our political debates can be effective in the ways just mentioned. However, there are many flaws found within the debate system.

These positive aspects that can come from these debates are wasted if the very format of the debates is faulty. Debates today do not allow for candidates to adequately address important issues and share their campaign mission. Moderators usually allow only four or five minutes on any given topic (Knoll, 2012) that does not come close to the amount of time candidates deserve to effectively communicate the entirety of their stance on a particular issue. Knoll addresses this

best when he states, “This type of format rewards candidates for speaking in overly-simplistic sound-bites and punishes them if for thoughtful, nuanced discussion of the issues. Thus, the advantage often goes to the candidate whose staff can write the best “one-liners.” (Null, 2012) In other words, this debate structure does not allow for the expansion of citizen knowledge. It only provides a platform for candidates to throw out their best one liner slogans in order to capture the hearts and minds of voters. In Null’s paper he addresses the points brought up in a book titled *The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*, written by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and David S. Birdsell. Nell states, “Jamieson and Birdsell explain that presidential debates aren’t really “debates” in the traditional sense of the word. The current moderator-focused format discourages candidates from engaging each other meaningfully, and instead allows them to focus their answers on the moderator and the wider public. Thus, modern debates are more like “joint press conferences” than actual “debates.” The idea of political debates serving as “political theatre” was brought up by Robert Rowland when discussing the debate outcome between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Rowland states, “Conventional wisdom declared Mitt Romney the decisive winner of the first 2012 presidential debate, creating a momentum that appeared at the time could possibly allow Romney to capture the presidency. This shift in the campaign narrative occurred despite the fact that President Obama committed no obvious gaffes and, based on a careful argumentative analysis, Obama was the superior debater in terms of making strong claims, citing evidence, and responding to arguments of the other side. Public response to this debate indicates a change in how audiences process presidential debates away from a focus on content of the arguments toward a greater focus on debates as political theater.” In other words, the public opinion outcome of this debate sided with Romney even though studies showed Obama presented more fact and policy driven responses to questions. Romney

may have had the better one liner, but most people turned a blind eye to Obama's responses that cited evidence and detail. In the prior paragraph the point was made that debates have the ability to persuade nonpartisan citizens to choose a side and vote. Nonpartisan citizens participating in elections would in turn influence outcomes of elections. Even if debates influenced nonpartisan Americans to choose a side and vote, the numbers would still suggest that in recent elections debates have not influenced election outcome. Data gathered by Dante Chinni from NBC news proves this. Dante states, "according to the numbers, the debates have done little to change the fundamental structure of recent presidential races. Looking at pre-debate NBC News/Wall Street Journal presidential polls and the final election results since 1992, there is only one campaign where the debate may have made a serious difference — 2000. In every other case, the candidate that led going into the debates wound up winning on Election Day." (Dante, 2016). Although the data shows that recent debates have had no effect on election outcome Dante states that debates are still important as it gives a chance to hold candidates "feet above the fire" (Dante, 2016). I agree with this, although the way our nation conducts debates now is not doing the most for the citizens. A study was conducted on the 2016 presidential debates regarding the language choices used by the candidates. The study states, "An RM (reality monitoring) algorithm was used with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software to code candidates' language. RM scores were significantly higher in fact-checked truth statements than in lies, and debate language in the 2016 primaries was as deceptive as fact-checked lies." (Bond et al., 2017). In other words, the language used in the presidential debates in 2016 such as 'Lying ted', 'Crooked Hillary', 'Deceptive Donald' are all examples of language designed to be deceptive towards viewers. (Bond et al., 2017).

Getting rid of presidential debates is not the correct solution to this issue. Debates do serve important functions for our election process. However, there are different roads we can go down in order to maximize information we can acquire from these debates. Our current debates do not allow for meaningful and in-depth policy discussion. The typical five-minute response times given to candidates to answer incredibly complex questions has them resorting to personal attacks and rehearsed remarks. A change to an oxford style debate is a popular solution to the “political theatre” we have today. An article written by Intelligence Squared U.S outlines what an oxford style debate would look like. The article states, “Here’s how it would work: Sharply framed resolutions — for instance, “give undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship” or “the United States intervenes abroad too often” — are devised for one side to support and the other to oppose. The Democrat and Republican each start with an opening statement that they deliver without interruption. Then the contenders address and rebut the best arguments their opponent has made. The moderator’s role is simple, but vital: to ensure that the candidates actually debate each other—that they respect the process, respond to points made, refute or concede as necessary, and honor time limits. The debate ends with two-minute closing arguments, a final opportunity to sway the audience.” (Intelligence Squared U.S. publish date unknown). The article goes on to discuss how this would have been a gamechanger in the 2016 debate. The personal attacks would have not been the main force when poking holes in their opponent’s credibility for president, they would have instead had to address and give rebuttals on their opponents’ policy. (Intelligence Squared U.S. publish date unknown). An oxford style debate would, “force the candidates to respond to intense questions, marshal relevant facts, and expose weaknesses in their opponents’ arguments. Memorized talking points could not be disguised as answers.” (Intelligence Squared U.S. publish date unknown). Intelligence Squared U.S

associated their oxford style debate change with a petition, which gained 64,222 signatures before its closing.

In conclusion, Debates are a good way to put candidates in the spotlight and see how they react under stressful situations. However, our current debate style doesn't allow citizens the opportunity to truly understand a candidate's stance on issues. As the short time frame allowed to answer questions results in rushed responses only concerned with making a bold statement that will make a lasting impression. That was proven with the debate results from the Romney / Obama debate. The deceptive language used in the 2016 election debates is another example of the "political theatre" nature. The debates were filled with personal attacks and ignored key important policy issues. An oxford style debate structure would permit greater attention towards country issues and help eliminate the crutch of rehearsed talking points and personal attack. I hope the format of our debates change so that in the future the American people can award attention to policy and detail rather than favoring impudent behavior.

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