Debates, Debates, and More Debates
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Americans love to argue. And if we can?t find a good argument the next best thing is to watch someone else having one. It is not surprising then that formal political debates have become such a fixture of American politics.

Indeed, candidate debates have assumed legendary stature in American political lore. Debate traditions pervade much of our political history. From colonial times to the Civil War debates were the very warp and woof of politics--and virtually essential cultural activities in the communities in which they were held.

Often 18th and 19th century candidates would appear on a platform, unaided by any moderator or by debate rules or time limitations, and ask each other questions. Sometimes these debates lasted hours, and huge throngs of people would attend them. They were social events. And they were hugely popular.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates were seminal. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas engaged in seven marathon US Senate debates--each lasted four hours--across Illinois in 1858. In the end, the Illinois legislature reelected Douglas, but the press coverage of the debates thrust Lincoln into national prominence. Perhaps more than any other factor, they put him into the running for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination.

In the 20th century, television debates became a regular feature of presidential campaigns. The earliest was the 1948 Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver face off on TV during the Florida primary. But it was the celebrated 1960 Kennedy-Nixon meeting that made debates virtually synonymous with modern political campaigning. And following suit candidates seeking state and local offices have been engaging in them ever since as well.

The current Pennsylvania gubernatorial election is typical of contemporary campaigning. Democrat Ed Rendell and Republican Mike Fisher have now agreed to seven formal debates as well as numerous other face-to-face encounters. Altogether the two candidates for governor have gone mano a mano enough times that the ?boys on the bus? can easily finish the sentences for them.

So, candidate debates are ubiquitous in the contemporary American campaign. And they have an impressive historical pedigree as well. But the great attention given to them--and the considerable resources devoted to them--raises a fundamental question: Do debates matter? Are they really important?

The prevailing mythology of American elections is that debates are important and often decisive. The Kennedy-Nixon debates, for example, are memorialized as turning events in that campaign that brought Kennedy come from behind to victory. The 1976 Ford-Carter debates are similarly remembered as decisive for Carter after President Ford appeared to prematurely liberate Eastern Europe from Soviet control.

In 1980, Jimmy Carter cast his fate when he invoked daughter Amy?s advice on the critical issues confronting the country. Then in the 1984 debates, Walter Mondale?s chances were ended when President Reagan wittily promised to not use Mondale?s age and inexperience against him. In 1988, Mike Dukakis terminated his chances against George Bush when he failed to show emotion when asked about whether he would support the
death penalty if his wife were raped and murdered. And in 1992 George Bush blew it when he glanced at his watch too conspicuously while debating Bill Clinton.

And so it goes. We have been taught to expect debates to be defining moments in the campaign--we expect them to be decisive.

The problem with all this tradition about debates is that there is very little hard evidence to support the view that the debates themselves made the difference. Kennedy in 1960 had already started to move up in the polls before he ever debated Nixon. In 1976, Watergate, the Nixon pardon, and an ongoing recession fatally wounded Ford.

Jimmy Carter in 1980 had the hostages in Iran and economic malaise weighing him down. Four years later Walter Mondale never had a chance against the hugely popular Reagan. Mike Dukakis in 1988 was fading against Bush long before the debates. And George Bush in 1992 ran out of time and policies against Clinton because of the perception the economy was still stagnating. Checking his watch had nothing to do with it.

Yes, some debates do produce moments of high drama, mostly verbal gaffes, misstatements, or less than flattering visual images, but in the end most of them are non-events that produce no or little observable change in the contours of a campaign.

In fact, the evidence suggests that modern debates only rarely determine the outcome of elections. But why should they? There is really no reason they should be decisive.

Certainly debates provide some clues to how well a governor or president might govern. But modern debating skills are mostly unrelated to the skills necessary for leading the nation or a state. A candidate may be a champion debater and a chump leader. Or some candidates could be great leaders but verbally challenged in debate formats. True enough, the great ones seem to have both the qualities to communicate brilliantly with the populace and to govern effectively.

Nor are the formats of modern debates conducive to comprehensive discussions of the issues. In fact, most modern debates have contrived formats, conducive to candidates uttering their well-practiced responses.

Nothing illustrates this better than the first of the formal Pennsylvania governor’s debates, held recently at Penn State and sponsored by IssuesPa. The debate, actually a forum, consisted of general questions, with no follow up, and no real opportunity for the candidates to engage each other. The net result was that differences were not exposed. Fisher and Rendell, the major party candidates, looked to most viewers like Frick and Frack while the third party candidates seemed there to provide little more than comic relief.

Voters themselves probably understand the nature of debates better than the candidates do. Typically debate audiences are small. Viewers are voters with the keenest interest in politics or the party activists themselves. Most actually watch because they have already made up their mind. They are predisposed to one candidate and have their original views reinforced during the debate.

Nor do debates produce shifting voter allegiance or stampedes away from one candidate to another as debate mythology suggests. People with modest interest in politics don’t usually watch them, and are quite content to
avoid them without feeling regret or remorse. To the extent that debates influence average voters, it is often what voters learn in fleeting news stories or word of mouth about the debate rather than in the debate itself that matters.

But to argue that debates are rarely decisive is not to also argue that they are unimportant. Debates are important and they do matter. But they matter differently then what conventional wisdom imparts.

Debates rarely change opinions but they often act powerfully to reinforce and activate pre existing opinion. They make voters comfortable doing what they have already decided to do.

They also serve as reminders that electoral decisions are looming. People watching are stimulated to pay more attention to the campaign. Non-watchers, too, are reminded that an election is nearing and decisions have to be made.

In the end, debates matter not because they make the decision for us--but because they help us to make our own decision. They aren't decisive, but they are important.

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