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How to turn Obama and Romney's faceoff into a real debate

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Wednesday night. Romney vs. Obama. Live. The 28th episode in America's long-running television series — the presidential debates — in which two men go on stage and face off without scripts or teleprompters, and with the ever-present possibility of getting trounced or humiliated. In presidential politics, a debate — a real debate — is a test like no other.

That's why none of us has never seen one. A true debate is just too risky. From 1960 onward, the events called presidential debates have delivered not clashes of rhetorical greatness but the spectacle of two people engaged in dueling job interviews. These interviews unfold side by side in front of the same human resources representative, and the skill needed to land the position is much the same as the one eighth-graders rely on to win spelling bees: the ability to memorize the answers to the questions ahead of time, then repeat them, precisely as learned. Debates? Modern politicians don't partake in debates. Not real ones.

Now, I serve on real debates. I know real debates. Real debaters are friends of mine. And these campaign-season sessions are not real debates. In fact, I would argue in the affirmative for the following proposition: We must change the format of the presidential debates.

Because the format is the problem. While the Commission on Presidential Debates, which stages these events, was criticized this year for booking too few female and minority moderators, and perennially for excluding third-party candidates, the more entrenched issue is the structure of the debates themselves. They are designed to keep the candidates from getting into trouble or embarrassing themselves by looking mean, uninformed or scared. That is a backward priority. A debate is a contest, a competition, a battle. The rules should be calibrated to produce the best contest possible, not to protect the contestants from themselves.

When candidates debate each other, they should debate each other. In a real debate, the participants engage, they grapple, they get into each other's hair (metaphorically, of course). Without that clash of ideas and personalities, there's no point in getting the two sides together on one stage. But in the presidential debates over the years, the rules have bizarrely permitted the candidates to "debate" without actually addressing each other. Some have spent the entire night studiously avoiding eye contact. Their escape mechanism is the moderator, designated as the one person on stage whom both candidates must address, in a weirdly triangulated conversation, as they work through the questions the moderator poses. So it becomes those questions, not the candidates' ideas or personalities, driving the discussion. It feels hollow. It feels forced. There's a simple fix for this: Make these candidates talk to each other.

In February, during a CNN-sponsored Republican primary debate, nearly all the candidates ignored a question put to them by John King. It's an old trick. He had asked each of them to come up with an example of a misconception voters might hold about his candidacy. Rather than answer, most went straight to some favored talking point on America's greatness or [President Obama](#)'s failures, reading from the teleprompters in their heads. When King finally called [Mitt Romney](#) on this, reminding him of the original question, [Romney shot back](#): "You know, you get to ask the questions you want. I get to give the answers I want. Fair enough?"

Both parties do this. But moderators need to break this dodgeball tradition. The answer to Romney's question needs to be "no."

Until candidates figure out how to debate for real without them, we need moderators who are granted authority to enforce the integrity of the debate. That means calling out the participants for ignoring worthy questions, chiding them when they offer assertions in place of arguments, scolding those who resort to personal attacks and interrupting tangents that take the discussion too far off course. Beyond keeping time and asking questions, the moderators have to become umpires.

Traditionally, the presidential debates have been egg-timer events, where often the candidates are given only one or two minutes to answer the moderator's questions — and sometimes a mere 30 seconds for rebuttal. You can't get many words out in 30 seconds — barely as many as you've read in this paragraph so far. These bite-sized intervals are a breeding ground for canned answers. Expanding these limits is the only way we'll get a real give and take in which ideas build on and ricochet off each other. The result can be satisfyingly unpredictable and exhilarating. But an argument needs time to get that far.

In fact, I know I'm dreaming on this, but might there come a day when the presidential candidates would risk taking part in the style of debates I have moderated? About 45 times now, I have witnessed the beauty and the electricity of the Oxford Union-style debate, in a broadcast and live-streamed series called "[Intelligence Squared U.S.](#)" We've modified the classic format but preserved its essence: a full debate devoted to a single topic. That topic is stated as a "motion," usually in sentence form, such as "We have to change the format of the presidential debates."

Imagine what Wednesday night could be like if, instead of working through a bunch of small-bore questions, Obama and Romney had to take sides on a single motion: "Government Is the Problem." Or "The Wealthy Should Shoulder More of the Burden." Or "Marriage Is Between a Man and a Woman."

Those are some big resolutions. And when two people spend 90 minutes taking opposing stands on them and backing up those beliefs, they are forced by the format to go deep, to tell us why they believe what they do, how they arrived at those beliefs, where they may be flexible on them, and where they cannot be. That would be revolutionary. And it would be a real presidential debate.

Who knows? Maybe one day there will be candidates who will see it as politically advantageous to reveal themselves in this way. In the meantime, take note of a meaningful rule change announced this year by the presidential debate commission. For the first time, in the first and third events, the candidates will each get two minutes to respond to the opening question for each 15-minute segment, and then “the moderator will use the balance of the time in the segment for a discussion.” That could mean up to 11 minutes of free-wheeling talk between the candidates. In a 90-minute debate, that could happen six times.

That is not insignificant. And if the candidates use that time not to make speeches or repeat talking points, or to ignore an important question that was just asked, but instead to listen, engage and think in a way the audience can witness, we just might get a presidential debate that deserves the label.

Rebuttals, anyone?

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