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POST** POLITICS

If Teachers Moderated Presidential Debates

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Could we please have teachers moderate the debates? They might not be perfect, but they would be better.

The debate on foreign policy last week was particularly troubling. Now I'm not suggesting that the teacher should grade the candidates, but would it have been too much to ask Bob Schieffer, the moderator, to cut a candidate off when he ignored the question that was asked. In a polite but firm teacher voice, he could have said, "I'm noticing that you are not answering the question -- let's see if your classmate, I mean your opponent, has an answer." Like any good student (and I think they were good students once) they would learn. Or Mr. Schieffer could say, "I gave you two minutes and, despite reminders, you've now talked for six minutes, so you'll have to skip a turn." Again, you'd only need to do it once and they'd learn.

Mostly, I'd like a moderator with a backbone: someone who didn't just let two candidates share canned remarks that were often only loosely connected to the facts. Good teachers care if facts are accurate -- they aren't happy just because students are talking. They don't wait till after the class is over to say, "Let's see what the fact checkers say. Was the statement 59 million people heard 30 minutes ago accurate?"

Actually, it would be great if they borrowed a page from the NFL. Suppose each candidate had a little red flag in their pocket and when their opponent said something they thought was incorrect they could throw it on the floor. First, the camera would focus on the flag. Then maybe a bell would sound and the camera would pan to the fact check booth. We'd go to commercial, which the networks would like, and when we came back, we'd have an answer. If the candidate caught their competitor lying (say, three Pinocchios) then they'd get the flag back -- that excitement alone would boost ratings.

And this statement takes on added importance because today, Mitt Romney's campaign has decided to air two ads that highlight two statements that the fact checkers have repeatedly said are very misleading. For example, he's airing an ad blaming Obama because our Navy is smaller today than it was in 1917 when, in fact, that was also true during every year of the Bush presidency. The size of the Navy has been static since 2000.

But here's the point. In the age of unlimited spending on commercials, it's already difficult to know what to believe. And social media adds new complexities. In a recent study of youth ages 15-25, we found that 45% got their news at least once a week from family and friends through twitter or Facebook. That is basically the same percent that gets its news via newspapers and magazines online and off combined. And when we asked youth if they needed help judging the credibility of this information, 84% said, "Yes."

The free flow of information and perspectives is fundamentally important. It significantly expands our access to ideas -- but it also comes with challenges. Part of what's needed are supports for youth and all of us to be better critical consumers *and* thoughtful producers of the information environment. It's clear that we can't rely solely on experts to guide us.

Debates could complement these efforts. And if the moderators held candidates accountable in real time, that would help a great deal. Of course, it would help if candidates worried more about telling the truth, but in the heat of a campaign, many candidates will mislead as long as it is allowed to work. And listening to misleading statements countered with misleading statements is not the best way to decide who should guide the world's most powerful democracy.

In short, if we want debates to be educative, they should be run by teachers. As Sheiffer succinctly put it, "We all love teachers."

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