

The Case for Debates: Civil Discourse in Less-Than-Civil Times

Representatives from 12 countries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South America and the Caribbean, met in Washington last summer to share experiences in organizing and staging political debates. The meeting had its genesis in years of interaction between these bodies and two Washington-based entities – the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) – organizations that have been approached over the years for technical advice in light of the U.S.’s widely-viewed presidential and vice presidential debates. Such advice has always been freely given and has resulted in a loose fraternity of national debate organizers with a deep and sustained interest in the democratic process.

Participants in the meeting – from Burundi, Colombia, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Jamaica, Lebanon, Nigeria, Peru, Uganda, Ukraine, United States, and Romania – had managed debates in a range of political environments including parliamentary and presidential systems. Some were first-time debate sponsors and others were veterans of multiple debates. After three days of lively information-sharing, there was consensus that while the factors contributing to the successful staging of political debates are constant -- even though conditions on the ground may vary widely -- the rationale for political debates is often taken for granted. But it shouldn’t be: a culture of formal political debate deserves to be institutionalized in many more countries.

Even in the most stable democracies, public political discourse in the electronic age can be a rough-and-tumble undertaking. Very rarely, though, is it a potential life-and-death issue. Not so in the case of many newly-emerging democracies, many in transition from generations of one-party politics, strong-man rule, or tribal or ethnic dominance that shut out many citizens from political participation. In some, only the outward manifestations have changed: incumbents still routinely deny or impede political opponents’ access to the media or use the security apparatus to stifle dissenting views. While those who make the choice to support winners can expect to be rewarded, those who dare to support the (inevitably) losing side(s) are all too often punished by being denied access to public programs and benefits – or worse!

Civil society organizations have been at the forefront of efforts to move away from such political norms into democracy that is more participatory. One avenue gaining currency is the encouragement of would-be officeholders to enunciate and defend their platforms through participation in political debates, at both the local and national levels. The premise is that the electorate has both the right and responsibility to choose its public stewards on the basis of information on the policies and plans of contenders in an environment free of perceived (or real) intimidation.

Political debates, properly conducted, facilitate the examination of issues that are of interest to an electorate. Unlike political rallies, debates constitute a convenient platform for candidates to address issues so that viewers and listeners are able to compare positions. Similarly, properly managed debates provide less room for candidates to distort their opponents’ positions as misrepresentations can be challenged on the spot.

Granted, political debates are only one component of good governance. If governance mechanisms and practices are deficient throughout the entire political and administrative

infrastructure, the utility of debates will be marginal. But even in such cases, the institutionalization of debates still has value for at least one reason: face-to-face debates broadcast nationwide are typically characterized by a public display of civility. It is rare for even the bitterest of opponents to display animus in full view of an audience that comprises more than partisan supporters. In many emerging democracies, such simple courtesies cannot be taken for granted. Political hostilities, whether overtly or tacitly stoked by political competitors, have resulted in the death or displacement of untold thousands well into this 21st century. Would civil exchanges and a handshake between these political leaders have saved one life? Resulted in one less refugee? Inspired one more person to have faith in the democratic process? There is every reason to believe that the institutionalized display of civility that debates represent can make a difference.

The fact that millions of viewers outside the United States watch its presidential and vice-presidential debates is only partly due to the U.S. role in international affairs. Arguably it may also be that the sight of competing candidates sharing the same stage, interacting with civility and attempting to persuade an electorate to choose among competing visions remains a highly desired -- and attainable -- dream.

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