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The election debate, vital tool in the political campaign

By Fernando Straface | For LA NACION (Argentina)

Almost no one objects that pre-election debates improve the quality of democracy. They provide the possibility of more direct contact between the public and candidates, require parties to improve the quality of their proposals and push leaders to study and discuss topics in greater detail.

The dynamics of verbal exchange, contrast and rebuttal regarding public policy visions and approaches add depth to the world of information from which voters decide on the formation of the government.

But as with children and broccoli, which has so many vitamins and positive properties, generally Argentine candidates manage to avoid it. But why? And above all, how can this reality be changed?

First, there is the issue of incentives for the candidates.

When one candidate has a lead in the polls, and even more so if that candidate is the incumbent and therefore has exposure through official and scarcely regulated publicity available at their discretion, little reason will be seen to debate.

Debating would involve risking the advantage in exchange for exposure that the incumbent already has through other means, while it would increase exposure for opponents who otherwise would not have such a chance. "Why run the risk?" ask the incumbent's political strategists.

Second, our political culture does not offer incentives to counter to this basic instinct.

Argentine society does not reward those who succeed in a debate, nor does it punish those who avoid debating.

Since the famous "empty chair" of Carlos Menem in 1989, various candidates have refused to debate without significant cost to their electorate.

THE KEY IS TO DEMAND

The challenge is to get Argentine society to demand from the political system a culture and practice of pre-election debates that strengthens democracy. How do we reach this point in a context as antagonistic that which our country is experiencing?

(Informal translation from the Spanish)

A platform is required to allow political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, universities, unions, entrepreneurs, religious leaders and the media to articulate their demand for pre-election debates and collaborate on their implementation.

In the United States, where some of the most crucial and famous debates in world politics take place, there is a Commission on Presidential Debates that helps coordinate the process.

The commission's diversity, representativeness and legitimacy are essential in order for parties to agree to participate in the debates.

In an atmosphere of political polarization like that in Argentina, not only the parties and candidates, but the media themselves are participants in negotiations on the location and organization of the debates.

This situation requires making the electoral debate an institution inherent in every election.

Chile, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and, for more than 30 years the United States, have succeeded in establishing debates as indispensable components of the election campaign for all candidates and voters.

STRATEGIC POLICY

To reach a strategic policy debate, parties must consolidate their proposals into coherent ideologies, which can be transmitted to the public and debated with other political forces.

Training and internal party discussion between elections help contribute to this goal.

Finally, agreement on this framework of rules should be independent of the political environment or individuals involved.

The commitment to debate must be free from tactical-situational calculations. A public agreement, under a "veil of ignorance" about the future [where all parties are equals], could be an instrument for commitment on the part of political forces.

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