

A Presidential Debate Is Wasted Time

by Rowland Chen



Imagine landing a job as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company simply by having a ninety-minute argument with another job hopeful. The board of directors and human resources do not receive much information about you and your qualifications from observing how you behave in an artificial situation. Granted, skill at debate is one requirement of a chief executive, but much more information is needed to judge qualifications, intelligence, and fitness for the top executive job of any organization.

Ordinarily, job candidates undergo several steps of screening by an organization with the typical final step being an interview with the hiring manager. And who is the hiring manager for the President of the United States job? Why, it is you and I.

Consider the Democratic primary debates earlier this year. Twenty-three candidates took part in at least one debate, each candidate clamoring for sound bites. Imagine twenty-three job candidates locked in a room vying for a single job in the private sector. Effective or ineffective? The recent first presidential debate fell flat on the candidate-discovery dimension and simply became entertainment. You decide if the debate was drama, comedy, or tragedy.

Instead of having presidential debates, I suggest we conduct a POTUS job interview for each candidate in the upcoming 2020 election. A non-partisan interviewer would probe deeply into knowledge of the United States Constitution, the role of the president, and the role of our country on the global stage. The interview would also include case studies during which an interviewee is asked what his response would be in critical and realistic scenarios.

Here is how the proposed interview process might work. A non-partisan interviewer conducts the interviews that are broadcast live. The two candidates are interviewed one right after the other. Neither knows the interview questions beforehand. While one candidate is interviewed, the other sits in an isolated sound-proof booth listening to music. After candidate # 1 is interviewed, he goes into the sound-proof booth. Candidate #2 is then interviewed. Each candidate is asked the same set of questions. Viewers have an opportunity to listen to and observe each candidate's verbal responses and body language. Much more can be learned about a candidate's qualifications for the job of leading the free world in a thoughtful interview than in an emotionally-charged debate.

The POTUS interview process probably would not work in a virtual format due to the all-access, view-only requirement and the need for confidentiality of the interview questions. An honor system among the candidates might work, but this poses a high risk of rule-breaking and questions leaking during the interview of candidate #1. Besides, as most job candidates do, they prepare responses to potential interview questions beforehand.

As a hiring manager, would you hire someone whom you have not interviewed? We the people are the hiring managers for the President of the United States. We have the right and responsibility to put candidates through a normal recruiting process before voting.