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October 27, 2011

A better way to do early primary political debates

By Jared Rhoads

Thus far this campaign season, there have been nine major debates among the GOP candidates for President. Seven of these debates were billed as featuring essentially the full panel of candidates, while two were smaller-scale events in which just five candidates participated. Of the larger debates, all but one—the June 13th debate at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, NH—featured at least eight candidates on stage. That's a lot of candidates at once.

There is certainly something appealing about having a large group of candidates undergo what is essentially a simultaneous interview. We shouldn't stop having them altogether, but by now the format has become rather tiresome. Candidates are given little time to answer important questions, and often they aren't all asked the same question. Some candidates regularly go fifteen or twenty minutes in between giving a response. And then there are the meaningless "lightning round" gimmicks, like "Chocolate or vanilla?" and "If you had your own reality TV show, what would it be?" Why are we wasting their time and ours?

For early-season primary debates when the number of candidates is still unmanageably large, debate organizers should consider some alternative formats. Why not break up the field of nine candidates into small groups of three to four candidates, randomly assigned, and hold a series of debates on consecutive nights at the same venue?

Splitting up the candidates would be easy. If at a given point there are nine candidates in the field, randomly split them into three groups of three. Eight candidates? Split them into two groups of four. Six candidates left? Split them into two groups of three. (Or do three randomly-selected head-to-head debates. We don't need to cover every head-to-head combination; quality camera time is what counts.)

In this format, candidates would not as easily be able to evade difficult questions by thanking the organizers or backtracking to earlier comments from other candidates, as they do now. Fewer answers would sound like prepared sound bites. Upstart candidates would be welcomed rather than resented for "crowding the stage." They would get more time to square off against frontrunners, while at the same time, frontrunner candidates wouldn't have to worry about being ganged up on by eight other candidates at once.

Most importantly, audiences would get to hear longer answers—and possibly some better ideas. Americans might finally get to hear *why* a candidate subscribes to his particular positions when he is given four minutes to answer a question instead of forty seconds. That sort of discussion of fundamental principles is what is needed early in the primary season, when hot-button concrete issues are likely to change before the election anyway.

To me, *that* would be worthwhile television.