

DISCOURSE CORRECTION:

What's wrong with the Presidential debates,
and how to fix them.

An Analytical Study of U.S. Presidential Debates (2004-2020)

INTRODUCTION

Open, constructive debate is the keystone of a functioning democracy, and no debates in America are more visible, or consequential, than those that take place between Presidential candidates.

These campaign contests not only help to form voters' understanding of the candidates' platforms and personalities, they also shape the wider terms of political discourse around the election.

But how well does the format really work? To find out, we watched every presidential debate that took place between 2004 and 2020. There were 14 programs in total, lasting more than 20 hours. We watched all of them – multiple times – and developed specific metrics to assess how effective the moderators were at running smooth and respectful debates, how well the debates covered issues that voters cared about, and how the candidates behaved themselves.

The results, as you will see, were disappointing. Over time, the presidential debates have grown less edifying and more confrontational. Moderators have increasingly struggled to run contests that are substantive and respectful.

Luckily, there are some relatively simple tweaks to the structure, preparation, and technology of the presidential debates that can make big improvements that benefit the candidates, voters, and our democracy at large.

In this report, Discourse Correction, we lay out our findings, data, and recommendations for how to fix what are, in many ways, the single most important and influential debates in the world.

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The Open to Debate Foundation, together with researchers from the Center for the Study of Democracy at Princeton University, conducted an expansive twenty-year survey on the U.S. Presidential Debates in the 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 election cycles to understand the successes and failures of the selected debate formats, how the debates have changed over time, and the value they bring to American voters.

PREFACE

This study was initiated to take a data-driven approach to understanding how the presidential debates are working to inform and educate American voters. Looking at battleground polls leading up to the 2024 election, it has become more critical than ever before for American voters to hear meaningful debates between our presidential candidates. The presidential debates are the most visible and influential of the campaign conversations that Americans see during an election cycle. The importance of debate to the function of democracy and our civic institutions cannot be overstated.

PROCESS SUMMARY

We analyzed how often moderators had to reassert control, how often candidates “crosstalked” over each other or insulted each other, how broad the range of topics covered was, and how well candidates answered questions.

OBJECTIVE

- Identify trends and structures over the prior two decades of presidential debates to assess effectiveness for informed voter decision-making.
- Analyze the structure and conduct of the last two decades of presidential debates in order to identify trends, assess effectiveness, and identify how to improve them.

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LEADING QUESTIONS

1. Do the formats allow candidates to share policy views and display their temperament effectively for voters?
2. Are Moderators effective at drawing out policy views and policy differences between the candidates during the debates?
3. Has candidate behavior changed over time and, if so, how?
4. How effective are debates at covering topics that are important to voters?
5. How can we set up candidates and moderators for success?

KEY FINDINGS

- Moderators have been unsuccessful at controlling the debates. Over time, the number of instances that required the moderator to intervene to regain control increased, growing from one attempt in 2004 to 58 attempts in 2020.
- Personal attacks used to be rare, totaling only six attacks before 2016. After 2016, more than 60 personal attacks were recorded.
- Crosstalk increased over time, jumping from one instance in the first Bush v. Kerry debate in 2004 to 76 instances in the first Biden v. Trump debate in 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Change moderator preparation standards.**
 - Moderators need to be trained and prepared to enforce rules and given more tools to control candidates. Formal debate moderation requires a different set of skills than broadcast journalism.
 - Personal attacks and interruptions should be treated as out of bounds. They should result in a penalty that removes time from the candidate's clock and gives it to the opponent.
- **Empower the moderator.**
 - In a debate, active listening and precision point/counterpoint arguments are fundamental to successful engagement. Moderators are not there to fact check the content but to enforce the rules.
 - Moderators should not tolerate deflection or evasion (when a candidate doesn't answer the question asked) or repetitive talking points.
 - Moderators must ensure the arguments made by each candidate are addressed by the other consistently.
- **Change debate formats.**
 - The debates need to be restructured with expert oversight to navigate complex arguments, hold both sides accountable for their claims, and frame each question fairly for both sides.
 - Expertise in framing questions according to formal debate best practices should be used; not television broadcast standards which are designed for rapid fire, short segments.
 - The contemporary Oxford-style format, which poses a question that candidates answer "yes" or "no" to, will create more structure and present more facts with uninterrupted opening remarks and cross-examination of arguments.
 - Clearly defined, segmented topics elicit more specific responses from candidates and better inform voters.
 - Provide debate questions ahead of time, allowing candidates to prepare with specificity
 - Use survey tools to curate questions from voters. The Town Hall formats yielded better diversity of topics and covered what matters to Americans, not what drives ratings in the newsroom.
- **Implement concrete rules.**
 - Microphones should automatically turn off when a candidate is over time, and should not be live to enable interruptions during speech times.
 - Personal attacks and interruptions should be treated as out of bounds. They should result in a penalty that removes time from the candidate's clock and gives it to the opponent.

RESEARCHERS

Odette Overton holds a Master's in Public Affairs from Princeton University with an emphasis on quantitative analytics. Odette served as a Presidential Fellow at the Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress (CSPC) and is currently the Deputy Research Director at Adam Schiff for Senate.

Uma Menon is a research assistant and student at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs. She served as Operational Vice President for the Princeton Debate Panel; Editor-in-Chief of the Nassau Literary Review; and Research Team Leader for the Princeton Asylum Project.

CONSULTING LEADERSHIP

Clea Conner is the CEO of Open to Debate. As the CEO of Open to Debate, America's premiere forum for debate, Clea is on a mission to restore civility, respect, and intelligence to the public square. Clea has produced more than 200 award-winning public policy programs spanning technology, culture, economics, law, and global affairs, convening the world's most influential voices on the most provocative questions of our time.

Greg Schultz has managed winning political campaigns at the local, state, and national level. His career spans work in county government, the Ohio Governor's Office, and the White House.

Mickey Edwards is a former member of Congress and advisor to Open to Debate. Mickey was a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives representing Oklahoma. Currently at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs, Edwards taught at Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Law School and was a regular commentator for NPR's All Things Considered. He also led a bi-partisan leadership program for elected officials at the Aspen Institute to promote civility in public discussion and reduce partisanship in public office.

Herb Asher is Professor Emeritus at The Ohio State University. He researches and has teaching interests in mass political behavior and research methods, with particular emphasis on campaigns, elections, and public opinion polling. He is the author of *Presidential Elections and American Politics*; *Polling and the Public*; co-author of *American Labor Unions in the Electoral Arena*; *Causal Modeling*; co-author of *Comparative Political Participation*; and co-editor of *Theory Building and Data Analysis in the Social Sciences*.

ACOMPANY Creative Lab Presented the data for visual interpretation and produced the creative layout.

RESEARCH PROCESS INSIGHTS

Given the changing characteristics of each debate, including those associated with the candidates themselves, the research presented several challenges in attempting to define metrics objectively. For example, the researchers considered measuring how much time each candidate received for their responses but concluded that this wouldn't be a helpful metric because there are inherent differences between candidates in terms of speaking style, speed, and conciseness.

Additionally, when it came to determining how many topics were discussed in each debate, the researchers only considered policy issues that were substantially discussed and disregarded off-hand mentions of topics that candidates did not elaborate on. Aside from responses that rose to the definition of a personal attack, personal issues were not counted as a discussion topic.

One of the most challenging metrics to objectively define was determining whether interruptions that rose to the definition of crosstalk was context-dependent or not. Crosstalk was defined as sustained interruptions where candidates spoke over each other two or more times, making it difficult to comprehend. However, because the open discussion format did not allocate specific speaking times to candidates, the researchers observed more interruptions in this format that were not sustained, and thus, were not considered crosstalk.

This research project quantified insights across several metrics, including types of moderator questions, specificity of questions, specificity of candidate responses, incidents of crosstalk, personal attacks, and more. A glossary of definitions was constructed to include all metrics and ensure consistency.

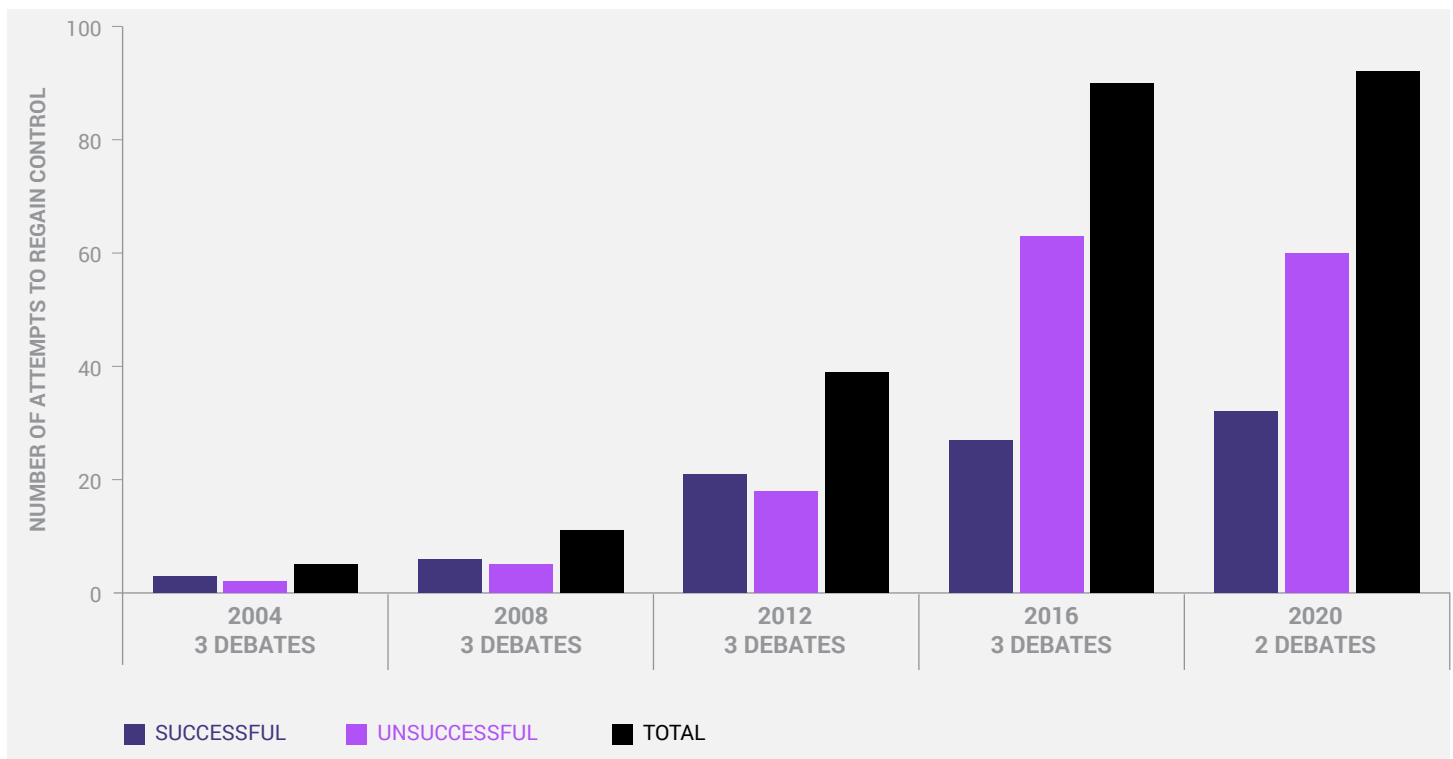
OVERVIEW OF DATA

MODERATOR EFFECTIVENESS

A quality debate requires an effective moderator. The best moderators not only craft clear and challenging questions, they also explain and enforce the rules and decorum of the debate. How effective have moderators been at keeping debates running smoothly and respectfully? We looked at how often moderators had to intervene to regain control over debates, either because candidates had gone over their allotted time or interrupted each other. Here is what we found:

- Over time, the number of instances that required the moderator to intervene to regain control increased, growing from one attempt in 2004 to 58 attempts in 2020.
- Crosstalk has increased significantly over time, with the first 2004 debate containing only one instance, and the first 2020 debate containing 76 instances.
- Personal attacks used to be rare, totaling six personal attacks across nine debates before 2016. Personal attacks increased to 61 after 2016.

MODERATOR ATTEMPT TO REGAIN CONTROL



SUCCESSFUL	UNSUCCESSFUL
Moderator stops crosstalk	Moderator fails to stop crosstalk
Moderator interrupts a candidate who has gone over their allotted time	Moderator fails to stop a candidate who has gone over their allotted time
Moderator grants additional time when a candidate asks for it	Moderator refuses additional time when a candidate asks for it, but candidate continues

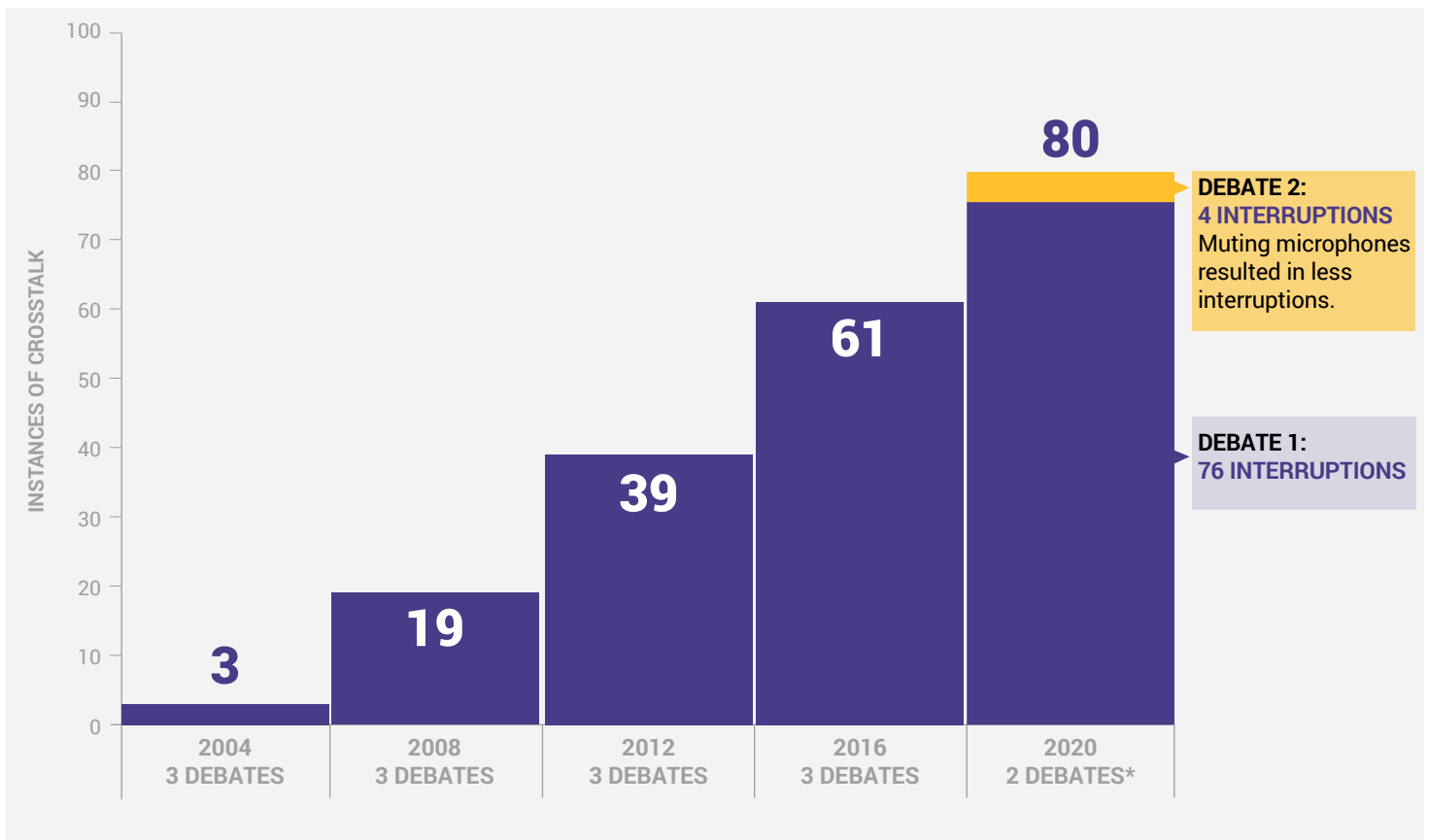
Candidate Decorum

Decorum matters. It's not just important that candidates answer questions, it's also critical that they respect each other's time and refrain from personal attacks, because these behaviors not only distract from the issues, they also set a poor example that filters through the broader political discourse.

To understand better the trends in candidate decorum, we counted the number of times that there was crosstalk – that is, candidates openly interrupting or talking over one another – as well as the frequency of personal attacks. On both scores, it's clear: candidates are behaving badly and it's getting worse.

- At the lowest point, there was only one moderator attempt to regain control, which was in 2004. At the highest point, there were 58 attempts to regain control, which was in 2020.

CROSSTALK TOTALS BY YEAR



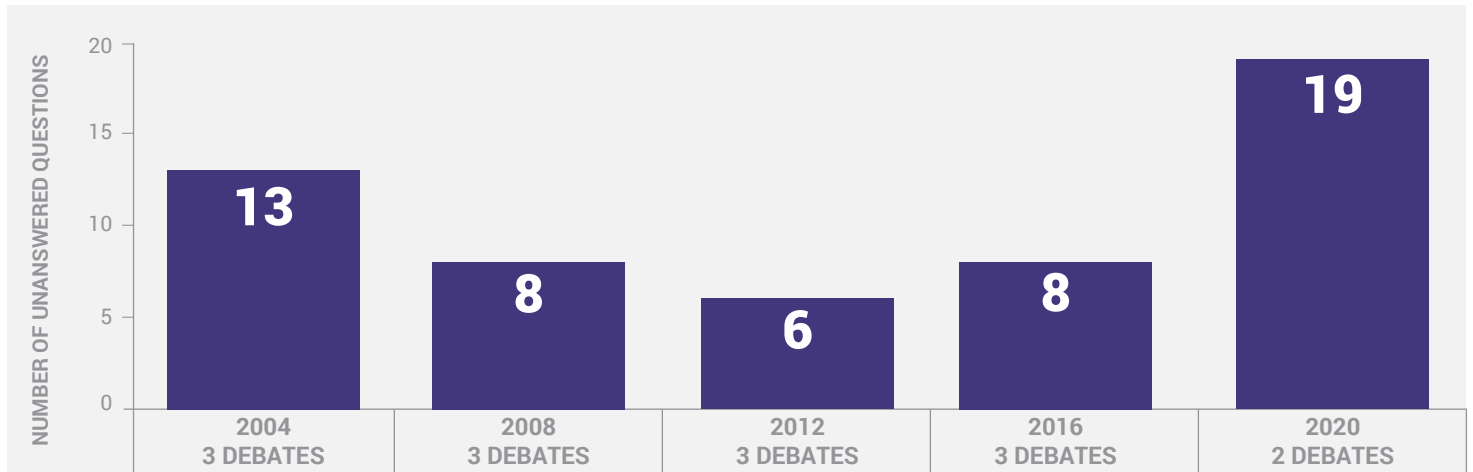
Microphone Muting Works

- Microphones were muted for initial two-minute speeches between Trump and Biden as a result of excessive crosstalk in 2020, resulting in only four instances of crosstalk as opposed to 76 in the first debate.

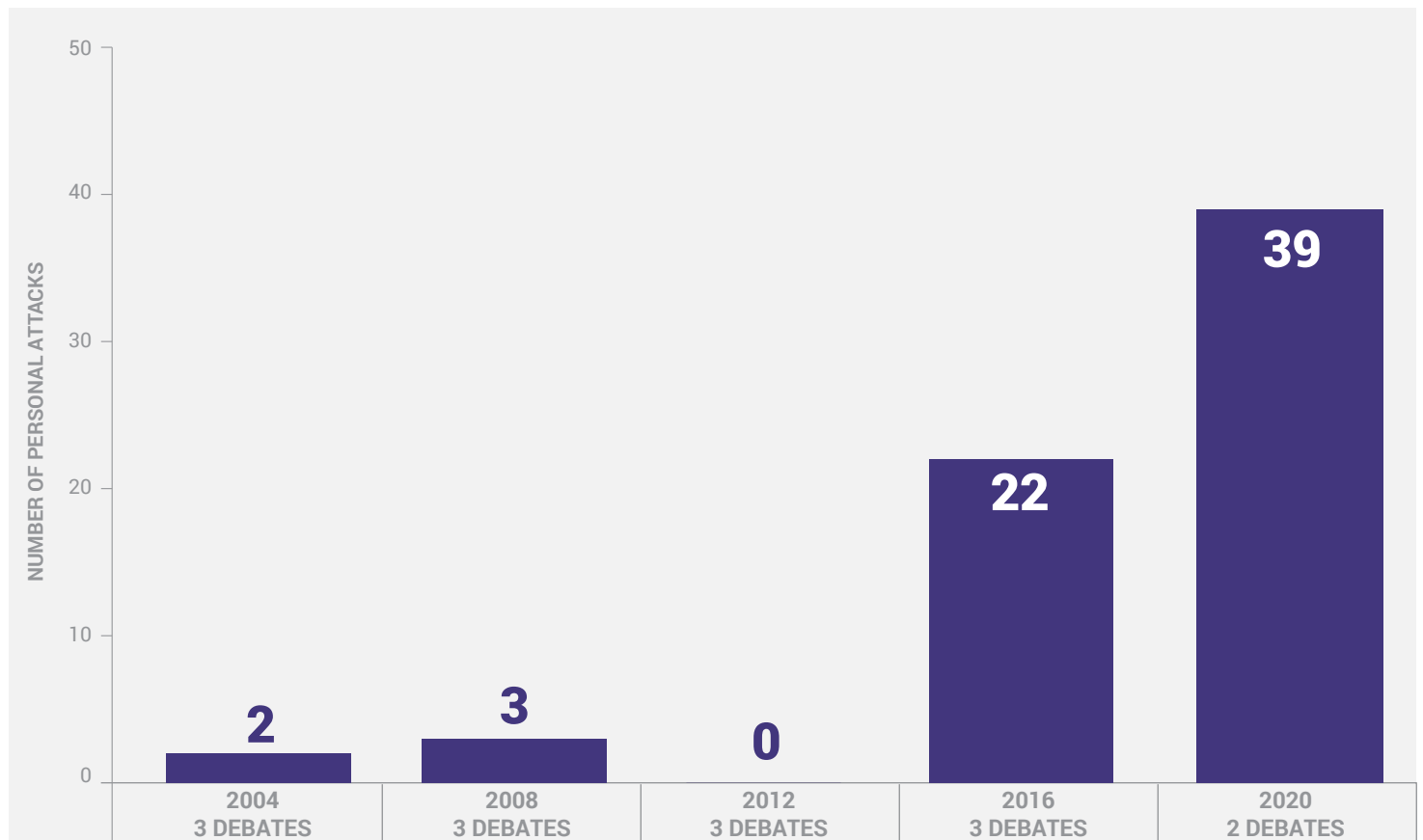
QUESTIONS LEFT UNANSWERED

The point of a debate, ultimately, is for candidates to answer questions and challenge each other's responses so that the public has a clear understanding of the assumptions, intentions, and key differences between the candidates. When questions go unanswered, the debate is failing. We counted how often that happened in the debates, with the most taking place in 2020.

- There was relative consistency in unanswered questions until 2020, where there was an increase despite having fewer debates (total per all debates that year).



PERSONAL ATTACKS BY YEAR



NOTABLE ATTACKS AND INTERRUPTIONS

2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
<p>DEBATE 3:</p> <p>Bush: No record of leadership.</p> <p>Kerry: I believe it was a failure of presidential leadership not to reauthorize the assault weapons ban.</p>	<p>DEBATE 1:</p> <p>McCain: Again, a little bit of naivete there.</p> <p>McCain: I honestly don't believe that Senator Obama has the knowledge or experience and has made the wrong judgments in a number of areas...</p>		<p>DEBATE 1:</p> <p>Trump: I don't know who you were talking to, Secretary Clinton, but you were totally out of control. I said, there's a person with a temperament that's got a problem.</p> <p>DEBATE 3:</p> <p>Trump: Such a nasty woman.</p> <p>Clinton: Donald thinks belittling women makes him bigger. He goes after their dignity, their self-worth, and I don't think there is a woman anywhere who doesn't know what that feels like. So we now know what Donald thinks and what he says and how he acts toward women. That's who Donald is." (Refers to Trump's comments about a female reporter)</p>	<p>DEBATE 2:</p> <p>Trump: We can't lock ourselves up in a basement like Joe does. He has the ability to lock himself up. I don't know, he's obviously made a lot of money, someplace, but he has this thing about living in a basement.</p> <p>Biden: He's a very confused guy, he thinks he's running against somebody else. (In response to Trump referencing Bernie Sanders' policies rather than Biden's)</p>

DEFINING PERSONAL ATTACKS:

- Comments that are personally derogatory about a candidate's character.
- Sustained interruptions where candidates spoke over each other two or more times, making it difficult to comprehend.

EDITORIAL QUALITY

Networks and journalists are missing the editorial mark. Here's how:

- 11 out of 32 legislatively defined policy areas were not substantially discussed across all 14 debates, including topics such as housing, agriculture, and water resources.
- Topic selection and framing are critical elements of successful debates, but this analysis shows that networks and journalists are missing the editorial mark. In total, four debates used the town hall format with audience questions, and these contained a greater diversity of topic areas (i.e. education, gender pay gap) as opposed to moderator-led debates that tend to focus on more hot-button topics (i.e. COVID-19, Supreme Court nominations). Here's why:
 - Journalist-led debates result in more “gotcha” questions with a focus on hot-button issues rather than policy platforms.
 - Prior to 2016, six out of nine debates were devoted specifically to domestic or foreign policy. In 2016 and 2020, the debates were redesigned to address all policy areas. As a result, vital foreign policy and national security issues were glossed over.

COVERED (21/32)		NOT COVERED IN DETAIL (11/32)
Armed Forces and National Security	Foreign Trade and International Finance	Agriculture and Food
Arts/Culture/Religion	Government Operations and Politics	Animals
Civil Rights and Liberties	Health	Emergency Management
Commerce	Immigration	Families
Congress	International Affairs	Housing and Community Development
Crime and Law Enforcement	Labor and Employment	Native Americans
Economics and Public Finance	Law	Public Lands and Natural Resources
Education	Science/Technology/Communications	Social Sciences and History
Energy	Social Welfare	Sports and Recreation
Environmental Protection	Taxation	Transportation and Public Works
Finance and Financial Sector		Water Resources Development

APPENDIX

ABOUT OPEN TO DEBATE

The Open to Debate Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that produces a weekly debate program and podcast broadcast to millions on 400+ NPR stations, dozens of digital networks. We promote informed, open, respectful, and civil dialogue around critical policy issues of the day and use debate to address a fundamental problem in America: the extreme polarization of our nation and our politics. As advocates for the balanced and free exchange of ideas, we are on a mission to safeguard the institution of debate from alarming trends unfolding in the public square, ranging from the deterioration of civil discourse; the proliferation of misinformation; and the erosion of public trust in our institutions.

Our work to address the quality of the presidential debates began in 2012, when we initiated a dialogue with the Commission on Presidential Debates to explore adopting more productive debate formats. In 2016, we took our campaign public with a petition on Change.org that garnered over sixty thousand signatures and with a simple message: it's time to fix the presidential debates.

OPEN TO DEBATE DEFINED METRICS

Candidate Metric	Definition
Opening questions asked directly to candidates	Questions asked at the beginning of the segment or introducing a new topic
Clarity of direct responses	<p>Clarity of responses given to opening questions asked directly to candidates</p> <p>Ranked high, medium, or low depending on whether citizens would be able to know the candidate's policy stance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High: answers question in its entirety and cites specific examples or policy initiatives • Medium: answers question but relies on general principles and values • Low: only partially answers question with no concrete illustrations provided <p>Percentage determined by dividing the number of high, medium, or low clarity direct responses by the total number of direct responses by a candidate</p>
Clarity of responses after moderator asks for a more specific response	<p>Clarity of responses given after the moderator asks a candidate for a more specific response</p> <p>Ranked high, medium, or low depending on whether citizens would be able to know the candidate's policy stance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High: answers question in its entirety and cites specific examples or policy initiatives • Medium: answers question but relies on general principles and values • Low: only partially answers question with no concrete illustrations provided <p>Percentage determined by dividing the number of high, medium, or low clarity responses by the total number of responses to moderator follow-ups for more specificity</p>

Candidate Metric	Definition
<p>Clarity of responses after deflection</p>	<p>Clarity of responses given after the moderator follows up on their question that the candidate deflected</p> <p>Ranked high, medium, or low depending on whether citizens would be able to know the candidate's policy stance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High: answers question in its entirety and cites specific examples or policy initiatives • Medium: answers question but relies on general principles and values • Low: only partially answers question with no concrete illustrations provided <p>Percentage determined by dividing the number of high, medium, or low clarity responses by the total number of responses to moderator follow-ups after a deflection</p>
<p>Clarity of responses after moderator pivots from one candidate to the other candidate</p>	<p>Clarity of responses given after the moderator pivots back from one candidate to the other candidate</p> <p>Ranked high, medium, or low depending on the extent to which the candidate addresses and acknowledges the prior candidate's statement, where they disagree, and why</p> <p>Percentage determined by dividing the number of high, medium, or low clarity responses by the total number of responses to moderator pivots</p>
<p>Unanswered questions</p>	<p>Opening questions, questions asking for more specificity, or questions following up on deflection that did not receive a substantive response</p>
<p>Personal attack</p>	<p>Comments that are personally derogatory about a candidate's character</p>
<p>Crosstalk</p>	<p>Sustained interruptions where candidates spoke over each other two or more times, making it difficult to comprehend</p>

Moderator Metric	Definition
Topics	Categorized using 32 policy areas as defined by the Congressional Research Service Topics were introduced by the moderator, audience, or candidates themselves
SUCCESSFUL moderator attempts to regain control	Moderator stops crosstalk Moderator interrupts a candidate who has gone over their allotted time Moderator grants additional time when a candidate asks for it
UNSUCCESSFUL moderator attempts to regain control	Unsuccessful moderator attempts to regain control Moderator fails to stop crosstalk Moderator fails to stop a candidate who has gone over their allotted time Moderator refuses to give additional time when a candidate asks for it, but the candidate continues to speak
Specificity of the opening moderator/audience questions asked directly to candidates <i>*Depending on the debate format, the moderator and/or the audience members asked questions of the candidates</i>	Specificity of questions asked by the moderator or audience members at the beginning of the segment or when introducing a new topic Ranked high, medium, or low depending on how specific the question posed is about a particular policy area <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High: references a policy position or particular action • Medium: references a challenge within a policy area • Low: only references a policy area Percentage determined by dividing the number of high, medium, or low specificity questions by the total number of opening questions asked by the moderator or the total number of opening questions asked by the audience, respectively
Number of times the moderator asks for a more specific response	Instances where the moderator asks a candidate to provide greater elaboration and specificity on their prior response

Moderator Metric	Definition
Number of times moderator follows up after candidate deflects	Instances where the moderator presents a question again after a candidate fails to answer or provides a low-quality answer
Number of times the moderator pivots back to previous candidate for a response to their opponent	Instances where the moderator solicits a rebuttal or response from one candidate in response to their opponent