

Moderator Should Control Debate – by Whatever Means Necessary

By DAVID KLEMENT

As an opinion page editor for 30 years and a policy center director for 10, I moderated in excess of 75 candidate debates for local and state offices in Manatee, Sarasota and Pinellas counties. These debates were presented on auditorium stages before large audiences, on live TV without audiences, and in informal town-hall settings with no stage.

Not once in all of those years of moderating did I allow a candidate to hijack the debate as totally as Chris Wallace did in Tuesday night's (Sept. 29) presidential debate. You didn't have to be a Joe Biden partisan to be insulted by the total lack of respect shown by President Donald Trump toward the rules, his opponent and the audience watching at home.

Give Wallace a little credit for trying – but not much. He repeatedly admonished Trump to stop interrupting former Vice President Biden. But Trump continued to ignore Wallace's requests and cut off Biden repeatedly, from the opening question to the final one, denying the Democratic challenger his two minutes of response time after time after time.

What else could Wallace have done? For starters, be much more assertive. He should have raised his voice as loudly as necessary to interrupt the president every time he talked out of turn – as soon as he opened his mouth, not after 30 seconds of stealing Biden's time.

Disrespectful to the President of the United States? Not any more disrespectful than that president was being to his hosts and to the American people watching at home. I almost turned the TV off after 20 minutes of this harangue, as I'm sure millions of less-engaged citizens did. It was difficult to stomach.

On the third time Wallace had to shout down the president, he should have warned Trump that he was violating the debate rules and would not be allowed to continue to do so.

If Trump persisted, Wallace should have asked the sound technicians to cut off Trump's mic. That may not have stopped the president's tirades to Biden, but at least the TV audience would have been spared the agony of enduring them. One or two mic silences might have been enough to stop the president's bullying attacks when he saw they wouldn't be tolerated. If Trump persisted, Wallace should simply have pulled the plug. Debate over, good night.

In my debate moderating career, I experienced a couple of attempts at hijacking the conversation – none even close to as egregious as Tuesday night's performance by Trump. In the most memorable, masterminded by an incumbent member of Congress, I verbally admonished the candidate that he needed to respect the rules and cease interrupting. He complied. When his supporters in the audience (it was a town-hall format) stood to shout questions without being recognized, I alerted Security to be prepared to remove people from the auditorium if they failed to respect the rules. They quickly settled down.

It also would have been effective to instruct the TV camera operators to shift the focus to Wallace and away from the candidates when the moderator issued his warnings. The candidates have TV screens in front of them; once Trump saw the camera was off him and on the moderator, he might have toned down his disruptive behavior. I fault the debate sponsors, the Commission on Presidential Debates, for failing to foresee the need for such strategies.

In fact, there were very few shifts of camera angles during the entire 90-plus minutes of this shout-fest. Wallace was seldom shown on screen. At many previous debates the camera focus has shifted repeatedly from candidates to moderator (or panelists in events where several people questioned the candidates). I believe the questioners are an important aspect of debates; putting them on camera adds to the tension.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, civil discourse was a theme I pursued at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee campus. The college's Institute for Public Policy & Leadership which I headed presented a series of forums emphasizing civility in political debates and published a number of papers promoting that concept. How quaint such efforts seem in today's chaotic political climate, where two men seeking the highest office in the land cannot conduct a civil debate about the issues facing America's voters in this election.

Imagine that: A conversation about the issues. Wonder what that would be like?

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