

# Campaign “Debates” and Expecting Civility??

2012

Thomas A. Burns, PhD.

Chiloquin, Oregon

Who are we kidding? In the first Presidential debate of 2012, who was the most civil? Barack Obama, while Mitt Romney was allowed to “carry on” and not abide by the expected rules. And who lost that debate? Obama! So, now we have a Vice Presidential debate, and look who was the more civil – Paul Ryan, and who was it that carried on and dominated and now gets credit for reinvigorating the Democrats – Joe Biden.

Clearly civility does not win in our campaign debates as currently practiced!!  
Why??

Because these events do not even resemble true debates. Almost none of the rules that apply to formal debating, where among many other things civility is required, are honored in these campaign “debates.”

Our national primary and election campaign debates are events that resemble true debates about as much as “reality” TV captures real life. True debates are won on the basis of the relative merits of the substantive arguments. Our campaign “debates” are media SHOWS where the candidates are all about Impression with only a commitment to a gloss of Substance. Civility reigns where substance is the primary issue. Civility all but disappears when impression reigns and producing zingers and sound bites and playing to the camera are central. Unfortunately, our campaign “debates” are all about making a “good” impression for a public that is so defined by media that it does not even realize that these events are much more about drama and impression management than they are about information passing.

If we want civility, we cannot give our debate events over to the media. The media is all about show, about highlighting the sensational. It seeks out the extremes where the sensational is accommodated. The media is bored by the relatively calm and civil center where most of us dwell. There is no murder, rape, fire, or disaster to make events “news.” So, the media cares little for the ordinary events where citizens or politicians do normal and expectedly good things, as important as these normal, good things are collectively. Instead, from the media we get a picture of what is happening as if the sensational extremes represent the norm. Just look at what our Congress has become as it finds itself more and more defined by and playing to the media: a paralyzed show of the uncompromising extremes! And to match, we have a public that has joined

in this Impressionistic fiasco and lost sight of its own civil center where compromise is the norm.

If we want civility almost anywhere in our modern lives, I suggest that we have to withdraw from the characterization of our reality as it has come to be defined by the show oriented, sensational media. We have to let go of the mediated filter and look to the normative center where, as “boring” as it may be, the real substance of real life is located. If we discard the media filter in general, then maybe we can expect our debates to be less show and impression management and more about communicating real information on differing perspectives on public policy.

I am not holding my breath, but we can do more than decry the current uncivil situation that we have permitted to arise throughout our political domain. We can at least understand the underlying problem and appreciate how important the consequences are.