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Anniversary Of Lincoln-Douglas Debates Highlights Pointlessness Of Today's Political Rhetoric

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DURHAM, N.H. - On Aug. 21, 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas kicked off the first of seven historic debates in their campaign for the Illinois seat in the U.S. Senate. Now 150 years later, much has changed in how political candidates discuss the issues, and not for the better, according to a University of New Hampshire professor who studies political rhetoric and persuasion.

According to James Farrell, associate professor of communication at UNH, modern political debates are controlled by journalists, time constraints, and positions formed by sophisticated polling data. The intense, three-hour debates between Lincoln and Douglas would never happen today, Farrell says, because the candidates are too carefully managed, and the attention span of Americans and the production requirements of television, which insists on treating politics like a sporting event, wouldn't permit it.

"They are joint news conferences with the side purpose of trying to make the opponent look bad in some fashion. If you think about the values that 'win' debates, they are the things that make for bad government - instant, short and snappy answers to enormously complex questions given mainly with an eye toward replays on the news and good 'spin' in the post-debate analysis," Farrell says.

Instead, Americans should support a deliberative process that allows candidates to admit, for example, when they need to consult with advisors and weigh various options before commenting about an important issue.

"When have you ever heard a candidate say, 'you know, my opponent has a very good idea about how to deal with this problem. I think we should do what he suggests'? We would want a president to do this if it was right for the country, but we award 'debating' points to those candidates who are witty in disparaging their opponent, and who never show any hint of compromise or inconsistency," he says.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates defined the terms of the American struggle to deal with slavery

in the late 1850s. In each debate, the candidates spoke at length, without any questions from journalists or interruptions by a moderator. They took turns speaking, with the first speaker addressing a live audience for about 45 minutes on the single topic of slavery. The opposing candidate offered a rebuttal of an hour or so. The man who spoke first then followed with a 15-minute rejoinder.

"The Lincoln-Douglas debates are complete with moral, historical, legal, and political arguments. They are thorough and sharp-witted, revealing of the candidates' talents, positions and thinking in ways contemporary debates cannot approach," Farrell says.

While Douglas narrowly won the election for the U.S. Senate seat, the exposure Lincoln gained from the hugely popular debates launched him to national prominence, which played a large part in him capturing the presidency in 1860.

Although today's political rhetoric bears little resemblance to that of the 1850s, the Lincoln-Douglas debates still can teach us about the art of political persuasion, such as how public moral and legal argument can help Americans define the issues and see the significance of the consequences of political decisions with moral components to them.

Farrell says Americans also can learn a lot about the expectations citizens had about the abilities of candidates for office -- could they reason well? Could they articulate convincing positions eloquently? Could they think on their feet?

As for Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama, Farrell says both are skilled in the politics of the day. However, this should not be taken as evidence of eloquence, as both rely heavily on aspects of politics that didn't matter in Lincoln's day: polling, television, sound bites, special interest pandering, contrived photo opportunities, advertising, and huge amounts of money, especially corporate money.

"All these factors have helped to make old-fashioned reasoned argument -- the kind that anticipates an informed and interested audience -- obsolete," Farrell says. "I don't entirely blame the candidates; we are getting what we crave. Who wants to listen to three hours of debate on abortion or the Iraq War when we can have Rush Limbaugh or Jon Stewart tell us what's going on?"

"Neither Obama or McCain is even within a country mile of Abraham Lincoln or Stephen Douglas as a skilled rhetor," he says.

