

Should a Presidential Debate Moderator Play Fact Checker?

The first of the 2020 presidential debates is less than a month away, with President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden scheduled to face off at Case Western Reserve University [after Notre Dame withdrew](#) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Biden seems more than willing to face off against Trump, despite Nancy Pelosi's [call to cancel the debates](#).

Yes, the Speaker of the House argued that the debates should not occur, because according to her, Trump has not "comported himself in a way that... has any association with the truth." Biden's debate participation would "legitimize" the sitting president of the United States.

"I wouldn't legitimize a conversation with him, nor a debate in terms of the presidency of the United States," Pelosi said at the end of August.

Biden, to his credit, has rejected calls to cancel the debates.

"I'm gonna debate him," [Biden said](#) on MSNBC's *Andrea Mitchell Reports*, "I'm gonna be a fact-checker on the floor while I'm debating him."

Biden also stated that he had been advised by many people, including some unnamed prominent Republicans, that he should not debate Trump unless a fact checker was part of the debate process. Again, Biden seems to have dismissed this call, adopting Chris Wallace's position on fact-checking moderators. Leading up to his hosting of the third 2016 presidential debate, [Wallace said](#):

"I do not believe it is my job to be a truth squad. It's up to the other person to catch them on that. ... I don't view my role as truth squading and I think that is a step too far. If people want to do it after the debate, fine, it's not my role."

Wallace's [widely acclaimed approach](#) runs in stark contrast to Candy Crowley's [infamous performance](#) in 2012, in which she was more the focus of the debate than either candidate.

Wallace's approach is also blatantly opposed to that [suggested by Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin](#). She provides moderators with 18 questions to throw at Trump, some of which are full paragraph statements, with a question only tacked on the end. For example:

"Before the pandemic hit, the economy under your presidency created fewer jobs on average per month than during the last three years of the Obama administration. All three of his final years in office beat your best year of growth. Why do you say you inherited a bad economy?"

Such a statement/question is problematic in a debate because it selectively chooses facts. When one considers the full range of Obama's presidency, we get a different picture.

The first year of Obama's presidency was the worst of the recession, and the entirety of his presidency saw average job gains at [roughly 110,000 per month](#). Meanwhile, the first three years of Trump's presidency saw an average monthly gain of 182,000 jobs. As Rubin's own employers at *The Washington Post* [put it in August 2019](#), "job growth remains surprisingly robust, especially given how many baby boomers are retiring and how many business owners complain they can't find more workers." In 2020, the economy added 214,000 jobs in January and 251,000 jobs in February prior to the cratering caused by state and local government-mandated COVID-19 shutdowns, costing millions of Americans their jobs.

There are also many more ways of measuring an economy than mere job creation. Again, as [The Washington Post's own analysis](#) showed last year, compared to the economy during the Obama administration, Trump's pre-COVID economy saw lower unemployment rates, a higher average middle-class income, and higher average wages, among other metrics.

This is why Chris Wallace's approach to debates works, and why it is the only one that works. If a moderator turns fact checker in the midst of a debate, who will fact check them? Moderators do carry a certain weight of authority, as Crowley's bullying of Mitt Romney in 2012 showed.

During an interview, *reporters* are supposed to ask tough questions, though hopefully they will do so without the ideological bias that Rubin exhibits. Wallace has more than proven himself as a reporter capable of asking tough questions of both sides. He has asked very tough questions of Trump in interview format, and his interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin earned him [Fox News' first ever nomination](#) for a News and Documentary Emmy.

But Wallace the *moderator* and Joe Biden the candidate both know that it is Biden's role to call into question the things Trump says. Wallace should continue his practice of probing *both* candidates on the issues, not attacking one candidate or the other as his fellow journalists might prefer.

The media can and will fact check candidates after the debates, [as they always do](#). Journalists' biases will likely show through then, but Wallace, like Lehrer before him, would best serve himself and the American people by continuing to draw a line between journalists and moderators, and by not giving into the allure of taking the spotlight from Biden and Trump.

In these debates the candidates are both on trial. The moderator ought only to serve as impartial judge, while the

American voting public serves as the jury.

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