Watching the Democratic presidential hopefuls spar on stage in July, there are reasons to be disappointed.

On both evenings it again was clear that these at best are pseudo policy debates. As someone who has taught communication for 45 years, the current television debate format doesn’t permit a rigorous and thorough clash of different ideas. Sixty-second soundbites and lightning-round responses are not arguments.

Worse, it made little sense for the candidates (especially in the first debate), prompted by the moderators, to get lost in the weeds regarding who has the best policy to solve a problem or who occupies which political lane: moderate, progressive, etc. Presidents are not always people with the best or even fully developed policies entering office.
Effective presidents — presidents of anything — often are those who recognize, advance and facilitate the great ideas of others. This is why it is appropriate to pick proven leaders with profound experiences of success at implementation — not just people with big ideas.

The question that should have been asked, but wasn’t, is: Which candidate has the best chance of working with a Congress that may be controlled by a different political party to get their proposals adopted?

To be fair, most of these candidates have good ideas, but it's debatable whether their policies would find a sympathetic audience in Congress if one of these Democrats is sworn into office in 2021. Voters want to know who actually will get the job done — and on Tuesday we didn’t get a clear answer to this important question.

These debates were disappointing for other reasons—not the least of which was the fact that the candidates, especially on the second evening, spent more time attacking President Barack Obama than the current occupant of the White House. That may come back to haunt them in the general election.

In addition, the candidate attacks on each other provided another example of how politicians continually live in fear of and ineffectively respond to the “gotcha” moment—those occasions when their political opponents or pundits accuse them of a contradiction in statement or behavior.

Whether the issue was criminal justice, gun control, bussing, or healthcare, we saw evidence of this tendency in the debates. And it transcended the ideological leanings of candidates; whether it was Vice President Joe Biden or Senators Kamala Harris or Cory Booker, the rhetorical response to charges of contradiction was problematic.

The question is: Are alleged contradictions inherently a vice or might they be a virtue?

For my entire academic life in Iowa and Texas, I have taught a class in argumentation. My students learn what I learned as a student at the University of Iowa--that what initially appears to be a contradiction is not always a fallacy. It is
spurious only if nothing significant has transpired between the first statement or action and the second. If nothing has changed circumstantially, it may indeed be a fallacy; conversely, if we believe there have been important developments in the intervening period of time, then what appears to be a contradiction could actually be a reasonable evolution of thought—perhaps showing one’s intellectual maturation and openness to persuasion.

I wonder, therefore, why the Democrats on stage who were accused of contradictions didn’t simply say: “Time and circumstances are substantially different now than when I first said or did this. Don’t Americans want leaders who adapt, learn and are willing to change their mind, especially in a quickly evolving world? Wouldn’t clinging to all prior beliefs be a sign of dogmatism—an undesirable trait for those in government?” Politicians—and all of us—should understand that what often seems like a vulnerability or weakness may turn out to be a strength.

Unfortunately, it is doubtful whether the format for future debates will change. Moreover, I am not sanguine that the Democratic presidential hopefuls will avoid getting lost in the weeds regarding policy differences or that they will learn how more effectively to deal with allegations of contradiction.

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