

**SLATE**

✱ CAN'T SHAKE IT LOOSE

POLITICS

## Democrats Can Only Lose Debates Now

Or at the very least, they can't "win," and their lack of awareness of this explains one of the biggest problems with our current politics.

BY LUKE WINKIE

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Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by USA Today Network via Reuters Connect, Mark Makela/Getty Images, and Nate Smallwood/Getty Images.

I didn't even know Marco Rubio was taking his reelection efforts seriously until this past Tuesday, when the senator stood for a debate against Val Demings, the Democratic congresswoman from central Florida who is trying to take his seat. The polling in the race has Rubio with a comfortable, if not insurmountable lead; consistently about 4 or 5 percentage points ahead. Rubio is certainly close to being in the clear, but if you were only analyzing the race by the temperament of the debate highlights that poured through my

timeline during the rivalry's big night, you'd believe it was Demings who was cruising to victory.

"Val Demings absolutely humiliated Marco Rubio in tonight's debate," wrote the Democrat consultant Adam Parkhomenko, embedding a particularly charged exchange over Rubio's Second Amendment record. "Retweet and make sure everyone sees this."

"Marco Rubio is stumbling, nervous, and jumpy as hell right now," added a former Jon Ossoff operative. "It's because he's never faced a debate opponent like Val Demings."

"At tonight's debate, Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio's Democratic challenger Val Demings publicly scolds him," chimed in the reliably peppy Occupy Democrats feed. "RT TO THANK VAL!"

Sure, members of the party are always going to rep long-shot Senate candidates, particularly as November approaches. (See also: the oodles of cash donated to Mitch McConnell's opponent, Amy McGrath, who went on to lose the general by double digits.) But there was something about the confidence of Rubio's failure that got me thinking about the outsize importance Democrats keep putting on the debate trail—despite the dwindling evidence that they have any relevance to the electorate.

The Demings-Rubio showdown occurred in the thick of midterms campaigning, when dozens of other congressional hopefuls are squaring off in America's most enduring form of political showmanship. Tim Ryan, a U.S. representative, and J.D. Vance, a grievance-bound author, took to the stage a few weeks earlier for a pair of debates, where Ryan received the same breathy adulation from Democratic boosters. ("Last debate Tim Ryan emasculated J.D. Vance. Now he's just pounded him into the ground," wrote neocon-turned-never Trumper columnist Jennifer Rubin. "Hard to imagine a better performance.") The same goes for Herschel Walker and Raphael Warnock, when the former engineered a virtuosic viral moment by producing an honorary police badge from behind the podium, earning him some delightful reprimanding from the moderator. ("He got hit harder in that debate than he ever did on the football field," said frequent #resistance poster Scott Dworkin.) John Fetterman debates Mehmet Oz tonight, which, judging by the tone of that competition so far, is likely to generate plenty of similar online chest-pounding, even if the subtext of that debate will be an assessment of Fetterman's recovery post-stroke.

There's a world in which these exaggerated pronouncements are nothing more than another reminder of how we talk online now, and how endlessly annoying political discourse has become. But I also think the billowy debate propaganda seems to be a vestige of

something else entirely. Mainly, an attempt to manifest a long-gone fantasy where American politics still operated in the way it once did, as if we were all emotionally stunted back in a land that stopped existing sometime around 2015.

Don't get me wrong—it is satisfying to watch the worst people in the world under pressure. We are not living in a political environment where the cruelest and most recalcitrant actors on the psychotic right are routinely castigated in public, and the debate promenade certainly does serve that function. It's genuinely energizing to see how someone like Marco Rubio has grown no more comfortable under television lights in the almost-decade since his historic water bottle-chugging meltdown, and as someone who has a vested interest in the future of liberal democracy, I have a weakness for the red-meat highlights that orbit around social media when he fumbles a town hall question.

But anyone who still believes that a debate performance casts residue on electoral prospects—who trusts that an entrenched, exponentially more unhinged Republican base will suddenly see the light after a caustic Tim Ryan riposte—is hoodwinking themselves. Debates are not a conversion tool, and they haven't been for a long time. There is little evidence that these recent rave reviews are indicative of a shift in Democrat prospects come November. If anything, according to FiveThirtyEight's rolling data, it appears that the modest lead the incumbent party held in the Senate is closing quickly, while the House is becoming a lost cause.

Trust me when I say I understand the appeal of the debate clips that catch fire in #Resistance circles. I too would prefer to live in a world where congressional deliberation served as a real inflection point of a campaign—it would mean there is still a currency in objective truth and that information still takes precedence over frothy rage. But there is a stubborn, obdurate belief within the Biden contingency that, eventually, Republicans will snap out of the MAGA stupor and become profoundly aware of the cruelty and chaos wreaked by the Trump years. They will stare at hands in disgust, like J. Robert Oppenheimer after witnessing the Trinity test, and pledge themselves to a life of repentance. A debate seems like the prime venue for such a righteous triumph; surely, in front of neutral observers, where you are forced to 'fess up to the wide array of documentation showing that you've paid for abortions despite being staunchly pro-life, Americans can then see Herschel Walker for the spiteful charlatan that he is.

This will not happen, and that's partly because this isn't what happens in a debate anymore. The directives of the parties are splintering off into elementally different directions, to the point that the pure aesthetic presentation of a debate as a concept has become increasingly incoherent in plenty of sections of the culture. A stuffy ritual of formalized political

performance appeals to a segment of the citizenry that is pro-institution, pro-democracy, and pro-civility. The Republicans, meanwhile, have given up on all of those ideas—to the point that election conspiracy theories have almost become a de facto requirement for anyone in the GOP to ascend the midterm primaries. It is already clear which Americans are prepared to be swayed by a debate, and they do not belong to the voters recruited by the Trump insurgency.

We already have the precedent for this. According to every traditional metric—the panels of those mythical swing voters courted by CNN and NBC, and the earnest analysis published by the New York Times and the Washington Post—Trump has lost nearly every debate he's ever participated in. Dan Pfeiffer, the Obama administration alumnus and *Pod Save America* host, went as far to say that the former president's first clash with Hillary Clinton was the worst political recital submitted "in 40 years." (He was ostensibly referring to Nixon's sweat-soaked showing in the 1960 election, which, in retrospect, can be considered the last debate to have any tangible impact on a presidential cycle.) We all know what happened afterward. Trump innervated a class of first-time white male voters and took advantage of the GOP's geographical leverage to land himself, with a thud, in the White House, supported by plenty of people who probably liked what they saw in those debates despite its incoherence, or maybe thanks to it, if they watched it at all. The debates themselves started to matter less than the president's desire to mock the entire concept—he frequently threatened to boycott the debates during the 2020 rotation, before having his hand forced by his COVID diagnosis. If Trump wins the nomination in 2024, it wouldn't shock anyone should he decide to eliminate the events entirely. It's a tack that's already trickling down to his underlings; after all, last Sunday, Raphael Warnock debated an empty chair when Herschel Walker didn't bother to show up.

Perhaps that's for the best. Republicans should never dictate the terms of engagement, but if we are to live in a post-debate world, hopefully it'll force Democrats to abdicate whatever beleaguered, malignant faith they were still placing in two lecterns and a sea of bullet points. Party advocates will no longer lean on the belief that the discrepancy in the partisan visions is self-evident as long as you tune into CNN at 8 p.m. on a Tuesday evening, and progressive strategists will no longer rely on a truly anodyne form of messaging to get their point of view across to the public. Instead, a debate-free political schedule should burnish an impetus to meet people where they are. The Democrats could abandon their self-created fiction for good, and embrace the reality that everyone but the party itself seems to understand: The GOP cannot be defanged with diction; we cannot manufacture a treachery, Sorkin-ish magic bullet that will suddenly break the spell. No, in 2022, they can only be defeated. ■

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