

Debatable **by Dan Jacoby**

Last night's Democratic mayoral debate was not all that interesting.

"Interesting" is the standard euphemism for "uninteresting". Last night's debate was even less than that. Candidates were all busy, and generally successful, making the statements they went in to the debate to make. Freddy Ferrer's aim was to "look mayoral". Gifford Miller tried to offset his youth by touting his experience. Anthony Weiner staked out his support for the middle class. C. Virginia Fields seemed to spend her time making sure she didn't lose.

The problem was that the four of them appeared to be Lilliputians compared to Michael Bloomberg's Gulliver.

There are two root causes for this problem. One is that none of the Democratic challengers was willing to take a real chance. Each of them was just trying not to make a major mistake (and at least one of them may have been unsuccessful). Someone has to stand out as the candidate who can compete with Mr. One-Hundred-Million-Dollars.

The other cause is the format. It wasn't, by any legitimate definition, a debate. "There will be a 90-second answer, followed by three 60-second responses, followed by a 30-second rebuttal" – followed by any uncommitted viewer falling asleep. Meanwhile, the candidates could make any claims they wanted, and nobody could challenge them.

I have two dictionaries. Both of them list "argument" as a synonym for "debate". But the candidates didn't get to argue with each other. The voters need a forum where they can see candidates going head to head, arguing about their differences, challenging each other's claims.

So I propose a radically different format.

There are four candidates. With four candidates, there are six different possible pairings (A/B, A/C, A/D, B/C, B/D, and C/D). Take one full day, and set up six one-hour debates, each in a studio with the two candidates and a moderator. The moderator's job is just to make sure that each candidate gets roughly equal time, and to interject questions where appropriate.

Let's go even further. Have a different moderator for each debate, and make sure that no moderator, no candidate, and no staffer, sees or hears what happened in any previous debates. Tape all the debates, and show them several times in different sequences. This way, all the candidates know that referring to an earlier debate won't succeed, so that each debate stands by itself.

This format gives each candidate three chances to distinguish his or her record, policies, style, etc. It also gives the audience a full opportunity to compare and contrast all the candidates – several opportunities, actually.

In future races, with three candidates there would be three debates. With five candidates there would be ten debates, so they would probably be spread over two days. With six candidates there would have to be fifteen debates, which is a bit much, so this format probably wouldn't work.

Then again, it might. It's a debatable point.