Three Presidential Debates: Little Guidance for Voters

So many important issues were not discussed. Much of the blame goes to the moderators.

October 21, 2016 By AIDS United

In a perfect world, presidential debates would serve as a forum for candidates to share their vision for America's future and provide voters with a blueprint their respective administrations would take. Prioritizing policy over personality, each candidate would aim to educate and inspire the American people, explaining their positions on a wide range of issues in a comprehensive yet accessible fashion. For their part, the moderators would play a role that combined the best aspects of the journalist, the master of ceremonies and the shepherd. Their job would not be to prompt sensational and surface-level responses from the candidates, but instead to ensure that they addressed issues grounded firmly in substance. It would be the responsibility of the moderators to hold the candidates' feet to the fire, actively rejecting the temptation to focus on tabloid fodder and scandal at the expense of detailed examinations of the feasibility and efficacy of their policy proposals. This would help the audience to be informed voters.

We do not live in a perfect world. If you had any delusions about this, the final of the most substance-free trilogy of presidential debates in recent American history should have disabused you of them. If the goal of these debates was to entertain potential voters and get them to tune in, then it was certainly a success. If the goal was to better inform the American public about the candidates' policies and facilitate dialogue around the direction of this country with regards to issue like health care, drug policy, climate change, entitlement reform, and many others, it was an abject failure. For every minute of discussion around Mr. Trump's and Secretary Clinton's campaign platforms, there seemed to always be two more focused on allegations of impropriety. To someone unacquainted with American politics, it would have appeared that the most pressing issues to the wellbeing of our nation were one candidate's e-mail server and the other's "temperament."

It is easy enough to pin the blame for this at times vulgar spectacle on the presidential candidates themselves, but much of the fault for these unproductive debates lies with the moderators. A large part of the reason why so many important issues were left undiscussed was because the moderators either failed to keep the candidates on topic or because they never brought them up in the first place. It says a lot that health care received more coverage during the debates than many other domestic policy issues given that it wasn't so much as mentioned during the 1st debate and was all but ignored in the 3rd. Aside from a 9 minute discussion during the 2nd

debate, the candidates' health care policies were conspicuous only by their absence.

As far as the discussion of HIV policy was concerned, this election's debates continued a disturbing trend of omission that goes back to the 2004 vice presidential debate, which was the last one to feature an HIV-specific question. In both the 2nd and the 3rd debates, HIV was mentioned solely by Secretary Clinton to extoll the work of the Clinton Foundation in helping provide antiretroviral drugs to people living with HIV in developing nations in an attempt to dispel allegations of impropriety. While it was disappointing that HIV was all but omitted from the debate, it shouldn't have come as much of a shock as, after well over a year of campaigning, Mr. Trump still has no formal or informal stated HIV policy.

Syringe services programs and harm reduction were not brought up during the debates, but that wasn't for an absence of any mention of issues related to substance use. During the final debate, Donald Trump broke into a monologue on drug policy after being asked by moderator Chris Wallace about immigration, using the influx of heroin into America from Mexico as justification for building his proposed border wall and pledging to aggressively target drug lords who he referred to as "some bad hombres" and kick them out of the country. Those comments and his remarks at a speech in New Hampshire earlier in the week where he advocated for increasing mandatory minimums for serious drug offenders suggest a pervasive law and order approach that omits the need for increased treatment, prevention and harm reduction.

Health care, HIV, and drug policy advocates were not alone in their more or less fruitless search for a national platform at presidential debates. The disappointment and frustration experienced by them was not unique, but it was representative of the failure of the debate moderators and candidates to keep the discussion centered on the issues enough to give voters a solid understanding of their plans for the country's future. Regardless of who wins on November 8th, these debates will be seen as a serious failure by America's two major political parties and by America's media to give voters the opportunity to be informed voters. The stakes in this election are too high to have such a failure.

To learn more about the presidential candidates' views and their party's platforms as they relate to HIV, click here.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/three-presidential-debates-little-guidance-voters