

POLITICS IN PRINT

*Unlike TV attack ads,
this old-style debate
doesn't insult voters*

By JOHN CONNOLLY

Over 200 years ago, the "Federalist Papers" and "Anti-Federalist Papers" engaged Americans in a substantive dialogue that ultimately led to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The views of James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay triumphed in this 10-month print debate that appeared in our country's early newspapers.

Fast forward to 1994 in California and consider the nature of today's political dialogue as we brace ourselves for the upcoming gubernatorial and senatorial races.

Conventional wisdom stresses that a candidate's message be simple and focused, resulting in a vast array of brief sound bites that typically bombard citizens in major campaigns. Instilling fear of an opponent with a TV attack ad has become today's dominant electoral strategy. Unconcerned with citizens' plummeting participation at the polls, modern strategists freely insult our intelligence with their all-consuming reliance on the superficial.

Away from politics as usual

To move away from politics as usual and to re-introduce a very old political process that will encourage thoughtful deliberation, California's gubernatorial and senatorial candidates should initiate a modern print debate.

In a print debate today, a candidate would pay to have a magazine-size insert of four to eight pages, challenging an opponent to respond in kind, distributed throughout the state.

This "challenge document" could contain arguments along with photographs, maps and/or graphs that support the candidate's positions.

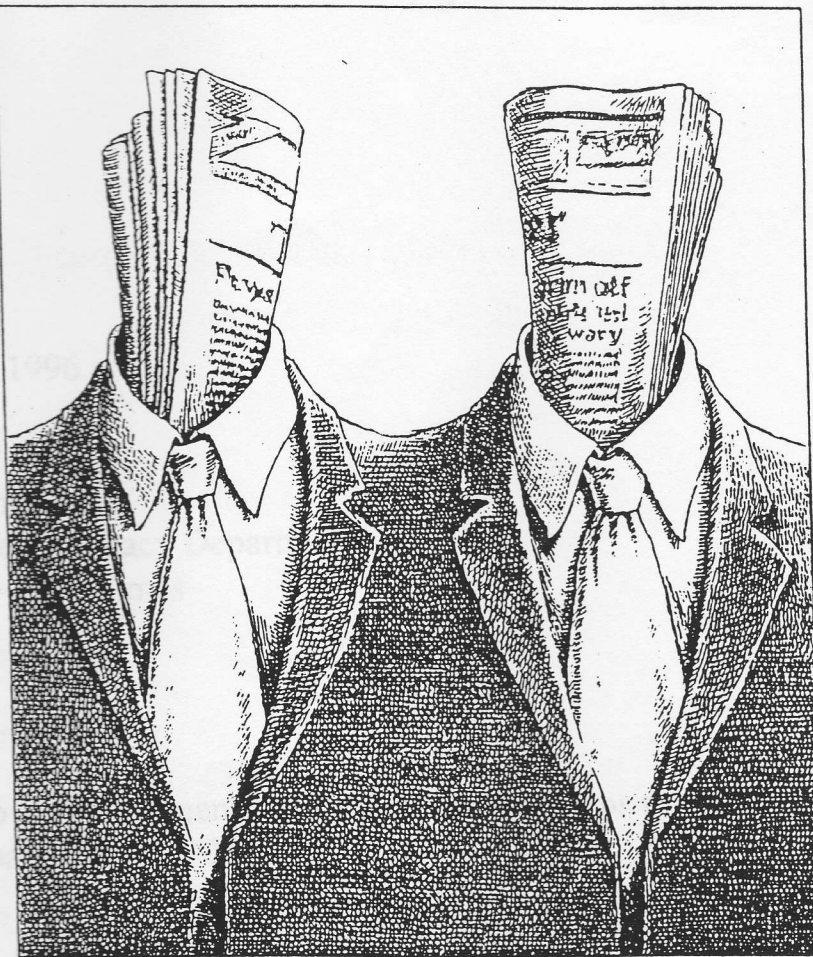
A candidate's first step to advance the print debate could be to call on a neutral organization, such as the League of Women Voters or a university political science department, to create equitable terms and parameters for this process. Once recognized standards are established for the print debate, any of the candidates could initiate it.

One of that challenger's motives would be to influence the undecided middle of the body politic whether or not this challenge was met. The opponent's motive to respond in kind would include heading off a shift of momentum in the polls.

Were two candidates to agree to a print debate, at least four documents would be needed: the initial document, the response, the rebuttal and the response to the rebuttal.

The interval between documents could be one week. Just as journalists report on campaign developments today, the print debate would stimulate a larger media process — evening news, radio talk shows and general coverage in daily papers — that would heighten the public's expecta-

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tions for the arrival of the challenge documents.

Unlike a televised debate, a challenger could proceed with a print debate whether or not an opponent agrees to it. As those documents were distributed, that candidate would undoubtedly stress the superficial approach of the opponent who refused to meet this challenge.

Emphasizing content

Whereas the electronic media tend to emphasize personality, the print media

A published "challenge" debate would increase accountability and offer candidates a more substantive way to explore complex issues.

tend to emphasize content. While televised debates encourage brief exchanges, the print debate is better suited for exploring complex issues and presenting comprehensive arguments.

Neither opinion page face-offs nor voter pamphlets allow for the extensive and substantive rebuttals that are inherent in the print debate process. Previous attempts by newspapers and magazines to air opposing views will be perceived by the public as fundamentally different from this approach.

The print debate would increase the ac-

countability of leaders because citizens would come to possess a more permanent historical record of a campaign than is currently available.

Although a print debate cannot guarantee adherence to stated principles, it would exert a more sustained influence than traditional campaign promises. Where a candidate foresees the need for future flexibility by not committing to an issue, those reasons could be spelled out within the challenge document.

Skeptics might anticipate bland and vague statements throughout a challenge document. Yet if a candidate proceeds with such a strategy, an opponent might employ a specific and forthright approach that may render the former as shallow and inept.

The newspaper or magazine chosen would undoubtedly invest extensive efforts in making those issues more widely available than normal.

A new form of direct news

Although publishers would seem to benefit from the print debate, its emergence would diminish the aggregate influence of journalists because readers would have access to a new form of direct news.

One cannot expect campaign media strategists to favor a print debate because this process may evolve in ways that would diminish their influence and income.

Yet for citizens of California who have grown accustomed to campaigns that produce far more heat than light, the print debate will constitute a welcome departure from politics as usual.

Furthermore, the first California candidates to advance this process may set events into motion that would lead to a national print debate among presidential candidates in 1996.

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