The state of campaign rhetoric

By Al Gini
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Now that the national political conventions are over, the candidates are out pressing the flesh delivering speeches tailored to the particular audiences they're addressing. And, of course, television and radio ads are everywhere, each of them are crafted to make their guy look and sound more presidential than the other guy.

Although the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune show President Obama with a projected lead of 49 percent to Gov. Romney's 45 percent, and although a recent Pew poll shows President Obama at eight points ahead, many political pundits still think the final outcome could go either way. Even though Gov. Romney was recently criticized for his "47 percent will vote for Obama" comments, both sides are trying very hard not to offend any segment of the electorate; instead of offering details and policy, they wrap themselves in the flag and paint big pictures about the promise and future of America.

Whether you are a Democrat or Republican, you’ve got to admit that both candidates “stump speeches” are not speeches at all. Instead of logical, well-researched arguments, the candidates offer a series of sharp, short, memorable zingers, which they hope will motivate audiences to vote for them. President Obama used to talk about “hope” but this time around, his refrain is “Moving Forward” and “We Can’t Go Back.” Gov. Romney preaches that “Business is a Good Thing,” “Entrepreneurs Built America” and, harkening back to the Reagan/Carter election, “Ask yourself are you better off today than you were four years ago?”

OK, so “stump speeches” and sound bites too often degenerate into a series of pious, pithy platitudes. But what about the three upcoming debates in October? Can we as voters look forward to a real dialogue on the issues? Based on previous debates, I frankly doubt it. It seems to me that no matter what the question, both candidates will try to turn it in a way that best fits their particular agenda without offering a list of detailed and specific promises. The main goal of these events for the candidates is not to argue or debate, but to avoid any glaring mistakes and to present themselves well. Bona figura, good form, is the operative goal, not substance and depth.

I know that it is unreasonable to expect anything resembling the iconic Lincoln-Douglas debates, but I am convinced that politics, at every level, should be an exercise in ideas and reasoning, and the ideas that come out on top are the ones that have the best reasons on their side. Sadly, too much of our political dialogue resembles nothing more than posturing and puffery. As a voter, I for one think we deserve more.

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