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Palli: Presidential candidates should focus on the facts

By: Rohith Palli - October 17th, 2012

“My study is better than your study” can sometimes be the start of a productive conversation.

But in this year’s presidential election, that hasn’t been the case.

Perhaps the most emblematic instance occurred during the first presidential debate, when Gov. Mitt Romney responded to President Barack Obama — who had quoted a study in opposition to Romney’s position — with this argument: “Now, you cite a study. There are six other studies that looked at the study you describe and say it’s completely wrong. I saw a study that came out today that said you’re going to raise taxes by 3[,000 dollars] to \$4,000 on — on middle-income families. There are all these studies out there.”

Well, that’s helpful.

This attitude is dangerous and undermines the wealth of information that academic and intellectual — read: “think tank” — studies provide to inform public policy. If “there are all these studies out there,” Romney’s job, in conjunction with his staff, is to dig through them to find the truth. Two contradicting studies can’t both be right; the key is to analyze assumptions and methodologies involved in each study and see which one, if either — or any — is directly applicable to the situation.

In other words, disagreements of this sort warrant a legitimate discussion of validity rather than simply throwing hands in the air and quitting.

The key insight here is that not all studies are made equal. One or two studies cannot simply destroy a consensus. Although they’re often conflated in popular literature, a peer-reviewed scientific study is starkly different from a study from the Cato Institute — a conservative think tank — or a study from the Center for American Progress — a liberal think tank. The latter institutions have an explicitly partisan bias in their presentation of issues, whereas academics are merely trying to get at the truth.

There is also a key difference between the nonpartisan, service-oriented Congressional Budget Office and the think tanks above. A study by the CBO might have flaws that can and should be pointed out, but with only a first approximation, it is simply irresponsible to claim that a CBO finding can be canceled out by a Cato Institute finding.

We can look at this and point out that Romney is a presidential candidate, not a budget expert, so he should not be expected to understand the details of these studies. This

argument is indeed relevant for peripheral issues in this campaign — Do candidates need to know detailed descriptions of corn yields? — but both sides seem to be staking the election on their economic plan, largely based on a vision for the national budget. If they think that voters are going to entrust them with the presidency because of a budgetary vision, they are obliged to understand the nuances of accounting and economic theory that go into evaluating such ideas, alongside explaining to the American people, in detail, why their vision is correct.

This means that they should understand in full what their budget and their opponent's budget entails. Next time, rather than throwing his hands in the air, I urge Mr. Romney to respond by describing why the study President Obama cites is methodologically or otherwise flawed and give expert evaluation of his position. Don't just throw studies around.

This happened on a deeper level two weeks ago, and a presidential and vice presidential debate later it has gone largely unnoticed; this silence is discouraging because it indicates a lack awareness of these issues in the public domain.

Encouragingly though, in a vacuum of truth telling or detailed analysis from politicians, a large crop of "fact-checkers" of varied repute have emerged. Disturbingly, each campaign has a group of fact-checkers that disseminate the same partisan, exaggerated or spun facts that all the other public relations people do. Fact-checking in the media, however, can be quite good. Furthermore, news organizations such as the Washington Post have dedicated fact-checking units.

Efforts by these organizations, and many others, to find the truth in the interests of the public are laudable and important, but should be unnecessary. A functional democracy requires discriminating officials. It is important that the American people, individuals that have experience distinguishing between competing claims on truth, demand that political leaders discuss the facts frankly and openly.