



Our Presidential Debates Have a Democracy Problem

New Data from TIME'S UP Shows Women, People of Color and Especially Women of Color are Wildly Underrepresented as Debate Moderators, with Trendlines Moving in the Wrong Direction on Racial Representation

Today's voters are more diverse than ever before. In fact, women are consistently [a solid majority](#) of voters casting their ballots, and for the first time ever people of color are projected to account for [one-third of voters](#) nationwide.

But for many years, the issues of central concern to women, people of color and especially women of color have been relegated to secondary status in the political conversation. For example, the nonprofit research consortium The Women's Debate analyzed 700 questions spanning 21 debates in the 2016 primary cycle and found that [only six questions](#) about issues that disparately affect women and were not about abortion or Planned Parenthood were asked of the candidates. Importantly, all six of these questions were asked by women moderators.

In addition, at a time when issues of race took center stage and race relations [dipped to a troubling low point](#) in the 2016 election cycle, candidates were rarely asked by debate moderators about the issues and concerns central to people of color. During the first and second Republican primary debates of 2016, Republican candidates were asked [only one question](#) about the

The Questions Moderators Must Ask about Women and Work

In the 21 debates held in the 2016 cycle, moderates asked candidates an average of 33 questions per debate. Here are just *four questions* TIME'S UP wants to see the moderators ask the candidates:

1. **Do you think we've gone far enough to address sexual harassment? What have you done and what will you do to ensure that work is safe, fair and dignified for women of all kinds?**
2. **What is your plan to work with business to close the pay and opportunity gap for women, in particular women of color, LGBTQ women and working mothers?**
3. **Do you believe that the United States should have mandatory paid family and medical leave and, if so, what is your proposal to make it happen?**
4. **How will you assure that families who need it have access to safe, affordable child care?**

transformational Black Lives Matter movement, and Democrats were asked only [a single question](#) about the Black Lives Matter movement at their first debate, as well. In response, Black Lives Matter issued a statement [asking for more in-depth questions](#) about the issues that catalyzed Black Lives Matter in the first place.

Why the Moderators Matter

Throughout history, presidential debates have been an indispensable forum for voters to determine where the candidates stand. When it comes to the presidential debates this cycle, much attention has been paid to [who will be able to stand at the candidate lecterns](#). But an often overlooked factor is equally important: who sits at the moderators' table.

Debate moderators hold an enormous amount of power when it comes to how debates are conducted, what questions are asked, and which issues are considered central to each election. Debate moderators relay voters' concerns and interests, bridge the gap between the people and the politicians, and vet our next president.

On May 31, 2019, the Democratic National Committee took an historic positive step forward by requiring at least [one woman moderator](#) at each presidential debate. Original research from TIME'S UP shows why this policy matters, but must be only the beginning.

TIME'S UP Analysis: Women, People of Color and Especially Women of Color are Wildly Underrepresented as Debate Moderators — and Representation of People of Color at the Moderator's Table Has Only Gotten Worse in Recent Years

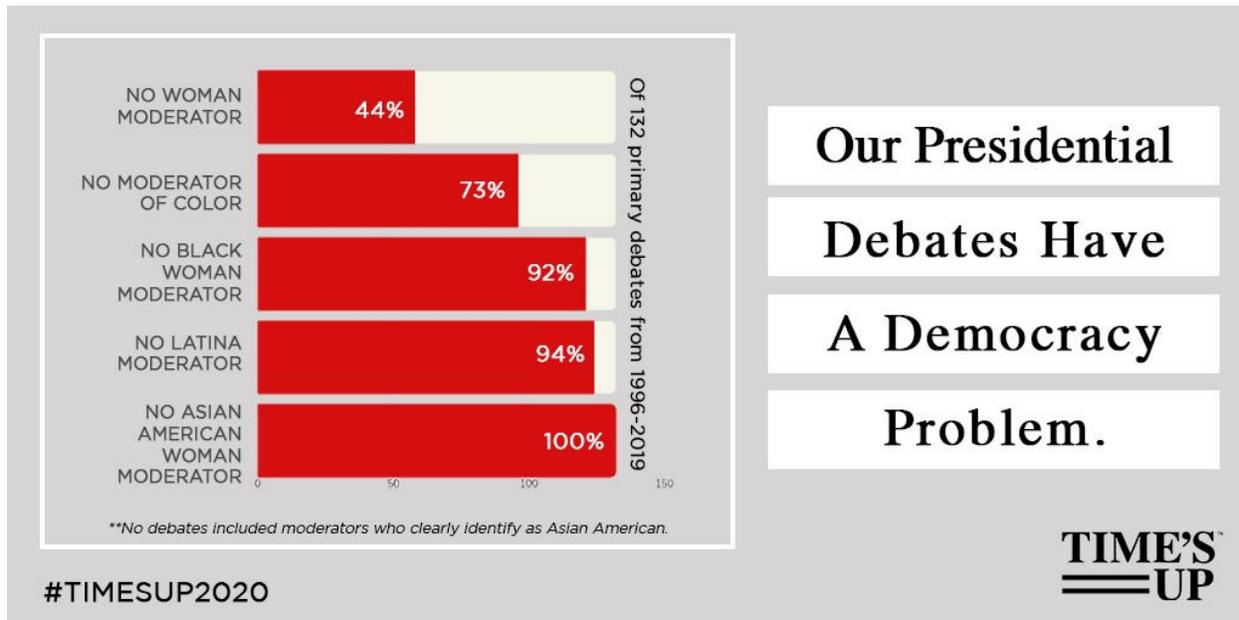
Methodology

TIME'S UP analyzed 132 primary debates from 1996 to the present. We sourced our data from two online databases compiled by the [American Presidency Project](#) and the [University of Virginia Center for Policy Research](#). The two datasets included primary debates, undercard debates, radio debates, and a few town halls and forums. Because moderators play a critical part in shaping all of these public-facing conversations where candidates share their views, we integrated each of these varying types of debates into our analysis. Notably, a number of forums have had more diverse moderator panels than most debates. If we removed forums from our analysis, then the gender and racial gap in moderators would be even more pronounced.

To collect our moderator data, we combed through transcripts of each debate and recorded each moderator’s name, race, and gender. In some cases, debates featured one “moderator” and several “panelists,” while other debates were run by multiple “moderators.” For our analysis, we grouped “moderators” and “panelists” together, as both play a role in defining the terms and tenor of a debate.

Of course, race and gender are complex and personal aspects of individual identity. Whenever possible, TIME’S UP relied on publicly available news articles or interviews where moderators discussed how they identified themselves. Accordingly, some moderators fall into multiple categories. For example, [Soledad O’Brien](#) identifies as a Black woman and as a Latina woman, so she is included in both categories in our analysis. Additionally, our analysis found only one moderator who may be Asian American, but he has not publicly discussed his race or ethnicity. To avoid inaccurately representing his identity, we did not highlight him in our analysis.

Findings



Fifty-eight debates (44 percent) included no moderators who are women. For comparison, only six debates (5 percent) included zero male moderators.

- When women did moderate debates, they were often in the minority. Remarkably, while no debates featured more than two female moderators, 20 debates included more than two male moderators.

Ninety-six debates (73 percent) included no moderators who are people of color. Meanwhile, only 9 debates (less than 7 percent) were run by all-Black or Latinx panels.

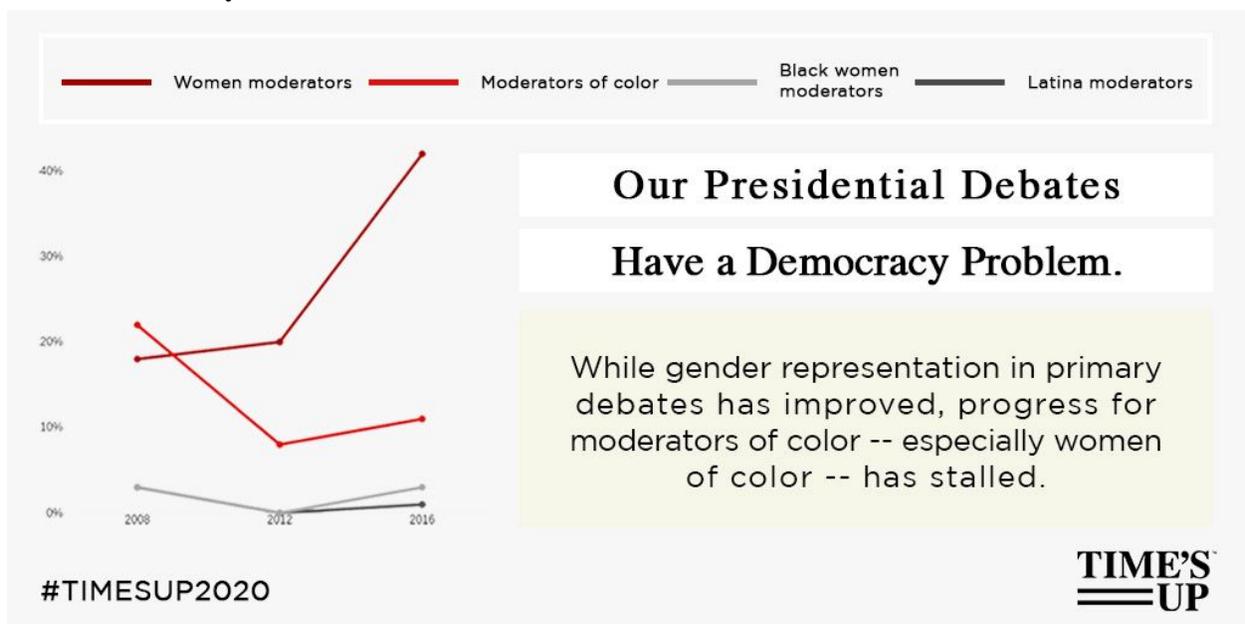
- Only 26 debates included at least one Black moderator (20 percent of debates), and only 11 percent of moderators were Black.

- A mere 15 debates (11 percent of debates) included at least one Latinx moderator, and only 7 percent of all moderators were Latinx.
- No debates included moderators who clearly identify as Asian American.

Only 11 debates (8 percent) included a Black woman moderator, and a mere 8 debates (6 percent) had a Latina moderator.

- Some of these debates included multiple women of color or women of color who identify as both Black and Latina. So, to be clear, 114 debates — 86 percent of our total dataset — had no women of color in their moderating panels.

Despite intentions to do better in recent years, gender diversity among moderators has improved, but racial diversity has not.



- When it comes to gender diversity, things have been trending up. In 2008, 18 percent of moderators were women. In 2012, 20 percent. In 2016, that percentage jumped to 42 percent.
- Racial equity, though, has not taken the same upward trajectory. Black or Latinx moderators made up 22 percent of the field in 2008, but only 8 percent in 2012 and only 11 percent in 2016.
- Black and Latina women have not been more equally represented, either. Three percent of moderators were Black women in 2008, and only 1 percent in 2016. Latina women made up 3 percent of moderators in both 2008 and 2016. In the 2012 election cycle, not one Black or Latina woman moderated a debate.
- In both cases, the numbers do not match up to today's voter base, which is more than half women and more than one-third people of color.

Networks should make sure their debates are inclusive and relevant, starting with who sits at the moderators' table and including what questions are asked of the candidates. No longer can our shared history be written by people who do not represent *the* people.