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Senate, governor's races suggest election debate dead

Political experts say face-to-face discourse is a victim of the 'sound bite' culture

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By Carol Cain, Detroit Free Press Columnist



U.S. Rep. Gary Peters, D-Mich., and former secretary of state Terri Lynn Land, a Republican.
(Photo: Detroit Free Press)

Republican U.S. Senate candidate Terri Lynn Land took her seat on the "Michigan Matters" set Thursday for an interview about the issues.

Her opponent, U.S. Rep. Gary Peters, did the same seven days later.

And that is as close as the two candidates got in this election. (That show airs 11:30 am today on CBS 62 WWJ-TV).

Despite weeks of verbal ping pong, the conversations between Team Land and Team Peters over debates ended without one. The two candidates pointed fingers at each other when I

asked why.

There also wasn't any debate between Gov. Rick Snyder and former U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer. Yes, there was a town hall.

Circle 2014 as the year debates morphed into irrelevancy as a path to getting elected in Michigan's two major statewide races.

Which raises the obvious: Does anyone care, and are debates necessary anymore?

"Debates are the victim of the 'sound bite' political culture, which does not permit thoughtful discourse," said Anne Mervenne, codirector of the Michigan Political Leadership Program, which teaches candidates about politics.

"Debates are only a thing of the past when politicians can get away with not having them," said Steve Tobocman, codirector of MPLP. "Candidates are avoiding debates because their political handlers and strategists are telling them to avoid the format. They see the debate as a very uncontrolled environment compared to carefully managed public appearances, television and radio advertising, and direct mail."

With many millions pitching candidates, the future for debates looks cloudy.

"Money and the Internet are killing debates," said Bill Ballenger, longtime political pundit.

"Why should candidates risk being exposed when they commit gaffes or make controversial comments in a debate when they can control their messages with the right amount of money?"

"Debates have never been that important to voters, and the only people whining about the absence of debates this year are the media and political partisans eager to take advantage of their opponents' mistakes," Ballenger added.

Two years ago, front runner U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow and Republican challenger Peter Hoekstra [also did not debate](#).

I suggested then it might be time to consider a statewide debate commission to oversee gubernatorial and U.S. Senate debates as other states have done.

The suggestion went no where. And it doesn't appear any more promising now.

I recently raised it with Bobby Schostak, chairman of Michigan's Republican Party, and Lon Johnson, head of Michigan's Democratic Party, and got tepid responses.

"A debate commission is worth exploring but it's very difficult in a highly charged political environment to find folks that both sides will trust," said John Truscott, Republican strategist. "And that trust factor is crucial to actually getting debates and debate rules on the table."

Carol Cain can be reached at 313-222-6732 or clcain@cbs.com. She is senior producer/host of "Michigan Matters" airing 11:30 a.m. Sundays on CBS 62. See U.S. Senate candidates Terri Lynn Land and Gary Peters on today's show.