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The Debate Debate

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So, uh: Does anyone else have debate fatigue?

We sure have had a lot of these things so far. And they're early. For a little context, consider this: Bill Clinton didn't even formally enter the race for President until October of 1991; Republican Fred Thompson, expected to be a serious contender for the nomination next year, still isn't in.

And yet we seem to have a new debate just about every week, if not more frequently – this week has brought us two, with the Logo debate about gay and lesbian issues and the AFL-CIO debate on MSNBC, both featuring Democrats. Master of understatement Newt Gingrich, complaining that the campaign season is now much too long, recently said the debates have become “almost unendurable” -- “a cross between ‘The Bachelor,’ ‘American Idol’ and ‘Who’s Smarter than a Fifth-Grader.’”

Is there a better way to do this? The ratings for the debates have been relatively high this time around, but the key word there is “relatively” – even the much-hyped YouTube debate, certainly the most publicized debate thus far, only attracted 2,622,000 viewers, and Tuesday's debate attracted less than a million. There are legitimate concerns emerging that we may be getting too an overkill point: **As Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, told the Times: “Most of us worry that doing all this so early on will wear out the electorate.”**

Count me among those getting worn out – and I'm a political junkie, for heaven's sake. Part of the problem is that the debates generally don't allow candidates to get much past their sound bites; when you've got 10 candidates onstage, a whole host of topics to get to, and an hour and a half to work with, it's simply not possible. This week's debates were actually somewhat better because they were focused on specific issues. Structuring these early debates this way – which allows viewers to selectively tune in to get a detailed discussion of the issues they are interested in – actually makes a lot more sense than keeping things general.

On Wednesday night's "Daily Show," in fact, Democratic candidate Joe Biden made that very case. "We should have a 90-minute debate on nothing but Iraq, and a 90-minute debate on nothing but what's going on with our energy problem," he said. Biden then made a joke about the fact that he -- known to many as "long-talking Biden" -- actually stays within the 1-minute time limit for debate responses. The reason? "I realize nobody's listening."