

The debate liberals have been hoping for

By [Robert D. Francis](#)

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Jamelle Bouie recently [lamented](#) that liberals continually fall into the trap of focusing on crafting good policy arguments, while what wins debates (and even elections) are appeals to ideals and principles. This common refrain among progressives echoes sociologist [George Lakoff's work](#) on Democrats' seeming failure to grasp the difference between messaging and framing.

I thought of Bouie and Lakeoff over the weekend when Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney made headlines by announcing Wisconsin congressman Paul Ryan, chair of the House Budget Committee, as his running mate. Some have called the pick a [game changer](#), using a phrase now inextricably linked to the last GOP vice presidential nominee, Sarah Palin.

That might be where the comparison ends. In 2008, some very public gaffes led to real doubt about Palin's ability to handle even routine policy questions. Not so with Ryan. I can see the congressman stumping the "gotcha" media before they stump him. This time around, the vice presidential debate is circled on calendars because it portends to be a toe-to-toe intellectual affair (assuming Vice President Biden holds up his end of the deal). While Palin was sequestered from the media, I can imagine the Romney camp trotting out Ryan with gleeful abandon.

While it may seem natural to compare Ryan with Palin or Biden, the more apt comparison is between Ryan and President Obama. They seem to share a love for reasoned debate and a belief in the power of persuasion. Jake Sherman and John Bresnahan [characterize](#) Ryan as believing that "if he could talk with every confused reporter, or misguided opponent, one-on-one he could bring them around to his view." Sound familiar, Mr. President?

[Explainer-in-Chief](#) Obama may have in Ryan an equally wonkish debate partner—though with a totally opposing deck of PowerPoint slides.

After a GOP primary season that appealed to some of the worst in political discourse, it seems to me that we should welcome the debate that the selection of Ryan

portends. For liberals who complain that conservatives distort their arguments or abandon policy altogether in favor of God, guns and gays, you've just been handed a vice presidential pick who is all budget wonk. [Substance and style](#). Enjoy.

With the selection of Ryan, Romney signals his hope that the country has an appetite for a [serious conversation](#) about the economy and the drivers of our federal debt, something progressives—desperate for an “adult conversation” about public policy themselves—should welcome. In fact, [Obama himself](#) asked for such a conversation on the budget last year. (Notably, [some](#) don't think Ryan's Medicare plan deserves an adult conversation.)

Of course, it's doubtful that such a discussion can materialize in the midst of a campaign. But there will at least be the opportunity for each side to define itself—and, unfortunately, each other. Team Obama has already been [hammering Ryan](#). But I wonder if we all wouldn't be better served by giving Obama and Ryan what they might really want in their heart of hearts: a policy wonk-off on a national stage.

America needs to have a serious conversation about its fiscal future, but so many factors work against this actually taking place. Let's suspend all campaign spending—inside and outside—and line up a series of Obama-Ryan debates. Then progressives can get the debate they want: just the facts (or at least each side's version of them...).

Obviously this isn't going to happen. Romney's people aren't going to give Ryan top billing. (And if others share my enthusiasm for such a prospect, that might not be a good sign for Romney.) But a person can dream.