

Campaigning has not been effective

The presidential campaign is heading into the homestretch with Republican candidate George Bush ahead, however tentatively, by every measure. Tonight is the final debate between the two opponents and it appears crucial that Dukakis score a decisive victory.

The much-maligned debates — or dual press conferences or whatever you want to call them — appear to be playing a vital role. Now is a good time to look at their effectiveness, as well as the progress of the campaign.

Despite the highly structured format, the debates have proven their worth by letting us see the players up close. George “a thousand points of light” Bush fumbled over his every word while trying to evoke the romantic imagery of Reagan.

Michael Dukakis squirmed under questions about his passionless demeanor. Lloyd Bentsen managed to remain avuncular, even when reduced to defending his controversial \$10,000 breakfast program. Dan Quayle hammered away at that “liberal governor” regardless of the questions, but he stumbled whenever an unexpected zinger came his way.

But most significantly, all four men seemed as programmed as robots. They mechanically spat out answers that were painfully rehearsed. If anyone had managed to just *appear* natural, he would have walked away the winner.

Instead, Dukakis settled for a technical victory while letting his opponent come across as more warm and human. That left the race up to their media consultants.

Bush’s political machine seems to be winning, if

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only by default. The Dukakis camp can’t seem to do anything right. When the vice-presidential debates provided them with more momentum than they’d seen since the primaries, they goofed.

The nightly news showed no pictures of an ebullient Duke on the move. Instead, they played and replayed the painful gaffe of Dukakis beating his jingoistic chest in an Italian-owned car factory. It was a photo opportunity no reporter could resist showing — with their own sarcastic comments tacked onto the end, of course.

But the Bush advisers have little to be proud of. They’ve proven very effective at painting the Massachusetts governor into a corner, but don’t know when to stop.

The Pledge-of-Allegiance issue was hammered into the ground until even ardent supporters groaned at the mere mention of it. Now they appear to be doing the same with the prison furlough rap.

In an age when the entire country will know all sides of the story within a week, candidates should strike quickly and move on. Bush is allowed to kick at a dead dog long after curious bystanders have walked away, while Dukakis merely trots out new, highly detailed programs to show how smart he is — not realizing good policy is not always good politics.

Michael Giltz is a writer for Applause and has tons of ambition.