

Alaska Debate Commission Proposal

The Problem

Debates are an important venue for voters to gain information about candidates. However, debates between Alaskan candidates for federal and statewide office are sporadic in nature. Recent election cycles have seen candidates picking and choosing debates before audiences most likely to be favorable to their message and, in some cases, refusing to debate their opponents at all.

The situation in Alaska was similar on a national level until the 1980s. Debate participation and scheduling was dictated by the interests of the particular candidates. While both John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon agreed to three televised presidential debates in 1960, that experience was not duplicated for 16 years as candidates avoided debates. In 1980, presidential candidates avoided debates they did not want to participate in, although one debate was held at the very end of the campaign.

The standardization of debates occurred after the creation of the presidential debate commission in 1987. The commission organized debates independent of the campaigns and gained such prestige within the electoral process that candidates were unable to avoid participation. Since that time, all major party candidates have participated. In 1992, a third party candidate participated as well.

The Proposal

Alaskans need a Alaska Debates Commission to sponsor and organize statewide debates in each general election cycle. The debate commission would be responsible for producing a series of debates each election cycle involving candidates for statewide and federal office in Alaska – governor, U.S. Senator, and U.S. House. The commission would work with educational institutions and media organizations to establish venues for debates as well as media coverage.

The existence of a debate commission would regularize debates each cycle and place decisions about debate place, time and manner in the hands of an independent organization rather than campaign or party organizations that have an interest in such matters. The debate commission would pre-schedule debates, even before general election candidates were chosen, and invite candidates and media organizations to participate.

The commission should have the following functions:

1. Form partnerships with educational institutions throughout the state to secure appropriate venues and audiences for debates, as well as to sponsor educational activities related to debates and elections.
2. Coordinate with news organizations and broadcasters to provide live coverage of scheduled debates across the state.
3. Schedule and announce debate dates and venues well in advance of the conclusion of party nomination processes.
4. Select moderators or press panels from among local journalists or academics.
5. Create a system for voter input in question construction.
6. Determine the rules for the debate such as format, response length, rebuttals, etc.

The commission should have the following guidelines:

1. Be multi-partisan. Candidates from all existing registered political parties in Alaska should have potential access to debate participation.

2. Set thresholds for participation allowing voters to have a meaningful exchange between viable candidates. The thresholds should be high enough to include viable candidates but low enough to admit candidates who may have a significant chance of acquiring public support.
3. Rotate debate venues across the state to increase public participation, as well as highlight regional issues throughout the state.
4. Schedule sufficient debates for each race in each election cycle. This should not preclude the candidates from scheduling additional debates. However, this would guarantee there were at least an adequate number of debates.

Structure

The debate commission could have two co-chairs – one from each major party. These individuals would be responsible for supervising the production and scheduling of each debate in each election cycle and working with education partners and media affiliates on debate logistics and media coverage. The chairs also coordinate with candidate campaigns and party organizations. In addition, they identify corporate and individual sponsors for each debate cycle.

In addition, there should be a seven member board of directors consisting of business, media, academic, and community leaders. The board should not include current political officeholders. Ideally, the board also should include at least one representative of a minor party as well as two individuals who are unaffiliated with any political party.

Also, the commission should identify--and eventually hire--a part-time executive director and temporary staff responsible for working with the chair in implementing debate commission policy.

Media Affiliates

Debates needed to be broadly available to Alaska audiences in order to achieve the goal of enhancing voter information and decision-making. The commission should designate media affiliates who partner with the commission to facilitate online, television and radio coverage of debates.