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Political Debates Strengthen Our Democracy

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

August 28, 2014

In the United States and in Montana, the proper functioning of our democratic form of government requires an active and informed participation by the electorate.

Broad “participation” is essential to the American democratic election formula. That is why GOP efforts at suppressing the vote across the nation, the subject of my commentary last month, is not just reprehensible, but also detrimental to the proper functioning of our system.

In addition to broad participation, the idea of an “informed” electorate is equally essential to the proper functioning of our government and to the free elections which are the hallmark of our process. Informing the electorate is the dual responsibility of the news media and the candidates. The news media provide the primary communication vehicle while the candidates are responsible for providing real information about themselves, their records, and their positions on important issues to voters.

The nexus of this responsibility, the crossroad where candidates and the news media come together, finds its best and most effective vehicle to be political campaign debates.

Our national and state history is replete with examples of political campaign debates informing the electorate and enhancing and strengthening our democratic system.

Historically, the seven Illinois senatorial debates between Abraham Lincoln and Steven Douglas set the standard for the value of candidate debates revealing essential truths to the electorate. While many people attended those debates in person, the newspapers of the time were the primary vehicle by which voters learned of what was said.

That speaks to the critical role the news media play in disseminating truth directly to the voters, a recognition of the role of the press seen by the Founding Fathers when they wrote and adopted the First Amendment of the US Constitution that recognized both freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

On September 26, 1960, we entered a new era of political discourse with the first-ever televised presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. An unheard of 60 percent of adults nationwide tuned in as the debate was brought into the living rooms of more than 65 million people. Three more debates between the two followed and the die was cast, though through the years candidates have manipulated the debate concept and have even refused to participate, depending upon what was to their political advantage.

Having one big audience, as in the Kennedy-Nixon example, is not always possible. In places like Montana, where we are spread so widely and there is no dominant media outlet, the number of

debates can replace the idea of one big audience. Here, the best blend is to reach a large audience using the media AND a large number of debates to geographically cover the state.

In 1980, former Governor Ted Schwinden and then State Senator Jack Ramirez of Billings participated in twenty-five (25) debates including one in Jordan, Montana, according to Schwinden's filmed reflections last year.

In 1992, Governor Marc Racicot and former State Representative Dorothy Bradley engaged in thirty-five (35) debates according to Bradley recently. In fact, she said that "the 'word' was that if 2 people stopped in the street to change a tire we would stop and have a debate."

However, the debate schedule in Montana this year is rather sparse. Some candidates look at debates as being about them and their political advantage rather than about the voters. They want to be elected with voters only seeing 30-second advertisements advancing the candidate's "spin" rather than candidates, through debates, revealing themselves, their record and their positions to the voters.

With open seats for Senate and Congress, this is an important time for the citizens to be able to make informed decisions on their future representatives. Because those elected in 2014 are likely to be in positions of responsibility for many years to come, to deny the voters the ability to make an informed choice by limiting debate opportunities weakens our democratic processes and is an insult to the voters.

Voters can take charge of this situation by taking the position that if a candidate is unwilling to engage in multiple debates before the people, sponsored by the news media, then that candidate has proven himself or herself unworthy of getting a scratch in the voting booth.

And the news media of Montana can not only fulfill its responsibility by hosting debates, but can take candidates to task for their refusal to participate. Only when there is a political price to pay for not participating will some candidates actually be willing to expose themselves fully to the electorate.

If the result of these efforts is more debates, our democratic processes will be strengthened.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, looking forward to many candidate debates between now and November.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.