

Department of Political Science
2306 West Hall
1500 N. Patterson St.
Valdosta, GA 31698-0001
USA
Voice: 229.333.5771
FAX: 229.333.5910

<https://www.valdosta.edu/colleges/arts-sciences/political-science/>

HB 101 FAV

Dr. Bernard Tamas, Ph.D., Professor of Political Science at Valdosta State University
(1500 N. Patterson St. Valdosta, GA 31698; bitamas@valdosta.edu)

DATE: February 4, 2026

BILL NUMBER: House Bill 101

COMMITTEE: House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee

POSITION: Favorable

Testimony of Dr. Bernard Tamas, Ph.D., Professor Political Science, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA for HB 101 – Public Broadcasters - Debate for Candidates for Statewide Office - Required Participants

To Chair [Melissa Wells], Vice Chair [Kenneth Kerr], and Members of the Committee:

My name is Bernard Tamas, and I am a professor and scholar at Valdosta State University in Georgia, specializing in issues related to elections, democracy, and American third parties. I am writing to strongly urge a **favorable report** on House Bill 101.

Introduction:

I am the author of a comprehensive book on US third parties, called, [The Demise and Rebirth of American Third Parties](#) (Routledge 2018), and several [journal articles](#) on elections and democracy. I am also a frequent commentator to and expert resource for a wide range of national and international news media outlets on issues related to American elections, including specifically on the role of third parties. Additionally, I am a Senior Fellow (2025) at the [Electoral Integrity Project](#), co-Chapter Leader of the [Georgia Chapter](#) of the [Scholars Strategy Network](#), and an Associate Editor of [The Social Science Journal](#).

Issue/Problem:

Media outlets, including PBS, generally choose which candidates for elected office should be included in a televised debate based on preset criteria that are meant to indicate

whether the candidate is likely to win the election. Besides being largely arbitrary, this winnowing down the debate to candidates who are presumed likely to win has two critical problems:

1. Within the United States, televised debates are very unlikely to impact which candidate ultimately wins the election (unless the debate is held less than a week before election day.)
2. By focusing only on candidates who may have a realistic chance of winning, Maryland is missing the opportunity to promote and provide a specific public good: increasing the public's knowledge by exposing them to a much wider range of viewpoints and policy platforms.

Solution:

Require PBS to invite all candidates who have achieved ballot access to participate in any of the candidate races in Maryland's statewide races. This would achieve the following:

- Expose citizens to a wider range of views on policies that impact Maryland: The State of Maryland has a compelling and foundational interest in ensuring that its citizens are fully informed before exercising their right to vote. By limiting debates to a subset of candidates based on arbitrary polling or fundraising metrics, these institutions are inadvertently narrowing the "marketplace of ideas" that a healthy democracy requires to thrive.
- Neutrality in the use of public funding: Because publicly funded television stations are supported by taxpayer dollars, they have an increased obligation to remain neutral gatekeepers of political discourse. Utilizing state resources to provide a platform for only *some* legally qualified candidates while excluding others can create either the appearance — or the reality — of a state-sanctioned preference and gatekeeping. To maintain public confidence in state-funded institutions, it is vital that the criteria for participation be objective and inclusive. And the most objective standard that is available is ballot certification.
- Strengthening Democratic Legitimacy and Trust: With declining trust in US political institutions, the transparency of the electoral process is paramount. When Maryland voters see a crowded ballot on Election Day but only two of those names making it to their television screens during the "official" debate, it can lead to the perception that the system may be "rigged" against outsiders. Levelling the playing-field and allowing all ballot-qualified candidates onto the debate stage reinforces the legitimacy of the democratic process by demonstrating that the state values fairness, and is not complicit in maintaining a "Democratic-Republican Duopoly".

Why Broadcasted Debates Rarely Impact Election Outcomes:

It is understandable that candidates and their campaigns see televised debates as an opportunity to improve their chances of winning, and that including third-party and independent candidates could hurt the strategies of the two main parties. *But, most political science research suggests that these debates have little to no impact on election outcomes.*

1. Debates rarely change the preferences of voters: Historically, even when the debate causes a shift in preferences, those shifts are short-lived. Within a week or

- two, voter preferences return to where they were before the debate. Unless a debate is held just as voting is about to begin (e.g., the Reagan-Carter debate in 1980) or if a candidate performs remarkably and demonstrably poorly (e.g., the Trump-Biden debate in 2024), the impact is minor.
2. This is even more true of debates for statewide races: In non-presidential elections, candidate debates are generally viewed only by highly engaged voters. These voters are also the ones that are the least likely to change their candidate preferences based solely on the content of the debate.
 3. This is especially true in current politics: Political scientists have produced overwhelming evidence that since 2000, American voters have become “calcified”, meaning that they rarely shift their political preferences, despite new information being made available about candidates (including from debates). There are very few *true* independents in the US anymore, and most self-proclaimed independents usually lean either Democratic or Republican. Additionally, political science research finds that Democratic and Republican partisans rarely vote for candidates for the other party.

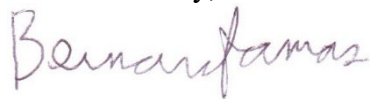
Would Having Many Participants Hurt the Quality of Debates?

Maryland’s statewide races tend to have a small number of third-party and/or independent candidates. The 2022 gubernatorial race had only three. The 2022 and 2024 senatorial races had none and one, respectively. So, a debate with five or fewer participants should be relatively easy for the debate organizers to moderate, while keeping the candidates’ statements and interactions adequately focused and interesting for viewers.

Conclusion:

Opening the Maryland election debates on PBS to all candidates on the ballot would therefore provide clear public benefits without producing any negative costs or downsides. For these reasons, I strongly and respectfully request a **favorable report** on House Bill 101.

Yours sincerely,



Bernard Tamas, Ph.D.
Professor of Political Science
bitamas@valdosta.edu