

HB 101

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I am in full support of this legislation as an expert in debate and rhetoric. The reason is simple: Election debates are meant to inform the public not only about the issues but encourage them to participate in the democratic process of voting. Restricting debate to the two major national parties discourages participation among citizens and reduces education about the scope, scale, and diversity of issues facing the citizenry.

In my recent book on Presidential debates, I argued that there are many reasons to be critical of the standard model of election debates designed by the Commission on Presidential Debates and picked up almost whole by all media outlets in all levels of campaigning. This model was designed primarily with the wants of the Democratic and Republican party in mind, not voters, not citizens, and not democracy. Newton K. Minow, the architect of the Commission on Presidential Debates, says this plainly many times in his book with Craig LeMay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*. His primary motive for his design was fear the Democrats and Republicans wouldn't participate.

The standard of having all registered candidates eligible to participate in Maryland statewide election debates will help solve one of the most pressing threats to American democracy: lack of participation in elections. This is partially fueled by a lack of access to diverse political positions. A multiparty debate model would offer several alternative political positions on different issues meaning a number of alternative ways for Maryland citizens to see themselves participating in statewide politics. Even if they don't agree with any of the positions represented by the candidates during the debate, they will be encouraged to share their views with others after seeing that there is space in the election for myriad positions not just two parties. In my book, I argue that viewer approach to the debates will help increase voter participation simply by seeing a place for themselves on the stage.

Debates work by creating space for the explanation of the reasons of disagreement on issues. These reasons are articulated to an audience, the viewers, in hopes of gaining their agreement. These appeals are special. Different than a campaign ad or public speech, these timed, focused utterances allow us to see more than just the policy option, but also how the candidate sees us, what they think moves us, and what they think we can understand and believe. In these cases, audiences often pay attention to what is deflected rather than just what is selected by a candidate.

There might be some concern that this law would create a cacophony, an unintelligible stew of political opinions from several candidates. This does not deter the Democratic and Republican national parties from holding primary debates to help select their Presidential candidates at convention, nor is it a problem for moderators or for the media to report on the central positions of the candidates. If anything, it garners more attention among citizens as they lean in, curious about the diverse pool of candidates, encouraging their attention.

Another objection might be that irrelevant political positions will be given too much time at the expense of issues that truly matter. As a democracy, Maryland has the obligation to allow citizens and voters to determine what issues matter, not candidates, parties, or broadcasters. Furthermore, if Maryland continues the tradition of using journalists as moderators in election debates, moderators will be of a professional caliber and will know what issues citizens care about and frame their questions appropriately. The risk of a candidate hijacking a debate to speak about a narrow or non-issue is more than rare. This bill will help single-issue or minority voters feel that they have a place in Maryland politics to see their candidate speak on stage about the issue that matters most to them. The best example of this is one you will immediately know – the New York State Governor’s debate where The Rent Is Too Damn High party nominee Jimmy McMillen gave many New Yorkers hope, energy, and a space to speak up about an issue that has now become mainstream in New York politics – affordability.

Maryland citizens will benefit from this policy but in addition Americans could benefit as well. If this becomes law for the mid-term election all eyes will be on Maryland to see how this new debate format works and most importantly how citizens and the media respond to the new model. This could become the basis for a broader model of debating – distinct from the Commission Model – that each state could adapt to their own particular needs. Maryland has an opportunity to lead the nation in effective, educational, and democratic election debate by passing this legislation.

