

Why Political Debates Matter

By Michael F. Curtin

For the first time in nearly two generations, Ohioans will be unable to witness the candidates for top statewide offices engage in public debate.

This should be deeply troubling to voters of all political persuasions.

Newton N. Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, perhaps best explained the case for debates in an October 2012 column published in *The New York Times*.

“They are one place in the modern campaign – perhaps the only place – where the voter is treated with respect,” Minow wrote. “They are the one time when the major candidates appear together side by side under conditions they do not control. They are a relief from the nasty commercials that dominate the campaign . . .”

In classrooms throughout Ohio and the nation, grade-school and high-school students are encouraged to debate because debates sharpen reading, researching, writing and thinking skills.

For officeholders and candidates, agreeing to engage in debates is the highest form of acknowledging the vital importance of accountability and transparency in our democratic form of government.

Yet, in a historic departure from civic responsibility, four of the five 2014 Republican candidates for statewide executive office (and one Democratic Congressional candidate) have refused to debate their opponents.

“That’s shameful and it furthers the likelihood that the messages heard in this campaign will be from the candidates who have the most money to spend,” editorialized *The Newark Advocate*.

In the race for governor, Gov. John R. Kasich will spend several dollars in TV advertising for each vote he receives on Nov. 4. No complaint, there. That's modern-day campaigning. The supremacy of money continues.

But, at the same time, to flatly refuse debate offers from Ohio's major newspapers, television stations and good-government groups is a show of disrespect – even contempt – for the voter.

"Debates are part of the democratic process," observed Cleveland's WKYC-TV. "The media and voters expect them. Candidates and officeholders get to explain their policies and positions and give the public a chance to see styles and personalities outside the canned 30-second campaign ads."

Without debates, "the big loser will be the public," WKYC-TV concluded.

Over the decades, new ways of campaigning develop and eventually become the norm. We can only hope that 2014 does not mark a turning point in Ohio politics, and that refusing to debate becomes routine.

Columbus native Michael F. Curtin is currently a Democratic Representative (first elected 2012) from the 17th Ohio House District (west and south sides of Columbus). He had a 38-year journalism career with the Columbus Dispatch, most devoted to coverage of local and state government and politics. Mr. Curtin is author of *The Ohio Politics Almanac*, first and second editions (KSU Press). Finally, he is a licensed umpire, Ohio High School Athletic Association (baseball and fastpitch softball).