



# Republican National Committee

June 1, 2021

Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr.  
Kenneth Wollack  
Co-Chairs  
The Commission on Presidential Debates  
P.O. Box 58247  
Washington, DC 20037

Dear Mr. Fahrenkopf and Mr. Wollack:

As Chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC), I write on behalf of the Republican Party and 74 million Americans who voted for President Donald J. Trump to express our extreme **disappointment in the Commission on Presidential Debates' (CPD) recent performance and our concern about its continued role in hosting presidential debates.** The CPD's repeated missteps and the partisan actions of its Board Members make clear that the organization no longer provides the fair and impartial forum for presidential debates which the law requires and the American people deserve. Unless the CPD adopts significant reforms to ensure that it better fulfills this important, nonpartisan function, the RNC will have no choice but to advise its future nominees against participating in CPD-hosted debates.<sup>1</sup>

First, the CPD's record of significant errors calls the organization's basic competency into question. It is inexcusable and self-defeating, for instance, that the CPD waited to host a single debate until after the start of early voting in eight states, absentee voting in twenty-six states, and uniformed and overseas voting in all fifty states. In doing so, the CPD failed in its most basic function and deprived voters of a meaningful opportunity to hear from the candidates before heading to the polls.

The CPD also has undermined the conditions for fair and impartial debates by making unilateral changes to previously agreed-upon formats and conditions, in some instances without even notifying the candidates. The CPD's decision to switch the October 15 debate to a "virtual" format, without any attempt to accommodate the candidates in-person and suspiciously amidst a growing controversy over its chosen moderator, was a massive disservice to the candidates and all who had helped plan and prepare for that debate. It also deprived the American people of the opportunity to see the candidates on stage together at a critical juncture of the campaign.

Then, when it held the October 22 debate, the CPD made an amateur error that nearly derailed the debate itself. On his walkthrough, President Trump noticed that the CPD had installed plexiglass shields without informing the candidates. Thanks to his background in television, the President realized

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<sup>1</sup> The RNC understands that the party itself has no formal role in the debates process. However, as a practical matter, any conceivable participation criteria established by the CPD would allow for participation by the Republican Party nominee.

that the candidates would see only their reflections once the stage was lit and the debate began. Had it not been caught by the President of the United States, the CPD's unforced error would have caused a surprising and awkward distraction for both candidates once the cameras started to roll.

Furthermore, the CPD's history of vetting and selecting its pool of potential moderators despite obvious conflicts of interest is incomprehensible. It should be obvious, for instance, that no person should serve as a moderator who previously worked for one of the candidates. Nevertheless, the CPD selected Steve Scully as a moderator even though he had once worked for Joe Biden. It came as little surprise to Republicans then when Mr. Scully accidentally revealed that he was seeking advice on how to attack the President from one of his fiercest critics. Mr. Scully then went on to lie and claim that his twitter account had been hacked. The CPD defended Mr. Scully, only for him later to admit that was not true.

Second, the CPD can hardly claim to be nonpartisan, as the law requires, when the majority of its Board of Directors insert themselves into the campaign by making partisan and biased statements opposing one of the candidates. To our knowledge, six of the CPD's ten-member Board of Directors (Sen. John Danforth, Charles Gibson, Rep. Jane Harman, Newton Minow, Richard Parsons, and Sen. Olympia Snowe) have gone on record making disparaging comments about President Trump while serving on the Board. Mr. Minow, in particular, went so far as to ask the five living former Presidents to "lead us to safety" from President Trump, "supply the leadership our country needs" and "lead the nation to explore informal and formal next steps" regarding his ongoing Presidency.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the CPD's Directors would make such comments is appalling, and the CPD's tolerance of this behavior undermines any legitimacy it claims as a nonpartisan organization.

For too long, the CPD has failed to meet its responsibility to presidential candidates and American voters nationwide in providing a neutral forum for candidate debates. What began as a nonpartisan organization fulfilling a critical role in the electoral process has now seemingly transformed into a cushy, multi-million-dollar club with no accountability and little commitment to partisan balance or fairness. This situation is intolerable, and the RNC can no longer give the CPD the benefit of the doubt. The CPD must act now to undertake meaningful reforms and work with stakeholders to restore the faith and legitimacy it has lost.

To this end, the RNC strongly encourages the CPD to:

- Adopt term limits for its Board of Directors, several Members of which have sat on the Board for a decade, with two sitting on the Board since 1996.
- Enact a code of conduct which prohibits CPD officers, directors, and staff from making public comments supporting or opposing any candidate, or otherwise engaging in partisan political activity in connection with the presidential election;
- Enforce meaningful consequences for violating such rules, up to and including removal from the Board of Directors;

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<sup>2</sup> Newton N. Minow, Op-Ed., *To the five former presidents: You can lead us to safety*, WASHINGTON POST, Oct. 6, 2017.

- Commit to hosting at least one debate prior to the start of early voting in any state, and in no case after the deadline for states to mail absentee ballots to uniformed and overseas voters (45 days before the general election);
- Establish transparent criteria for selecting moderators, disqualifying individuals from consideration who have an appearance of bias due to personal, professional, or partisan factors;
- Enact a transparent code of conduct for moderators, to include guidelines for appropriate interactions with the candidates during the debates; and
- Impose penalties for violating such guidelines, to include suspending their employer network from participating in future debates.

Our sincere hope is that the CPD accepts this criticism and works to correct its mistakes. If not, the RNC will have no choice but to advise future Republican candidates against participating in CPD-hosted debates, and the RNC will look for other options for its candidates to debate the issues before the American people in a neutral and nonpartisan forum.

We respectfully ask that the CPD respond to this letter, in writing, by July 31, 2021 to advise regarding its willingness to undertake these much-needed reforms.

Sincerely,



Ronna McDaniel  
Chairman, Republican National Committee