



May 15, 2024

Dear Commission on Presidential Debates,

President Joe Biden believes the interests of the American people are best served by presidential debates that offer timely and relevant information to help inform voters before they make their choices – and that allow a head-to-head comparison of the two candidates with a chance of winning the election. To that end, President Biden recently said he intends to debate former President Donald Trump in 2024, and intends to debate him twice. Vice President Harris also plans to debate her eventual opponent. For his part, Donald Trump has announced that he is prepared to have these debates “anytime, anywhere.”

The purpose of this letter is to provide notice that the President will not be participating in the Commission on Presidential Debates’ announced debates in 2024 and plans to participate in debates hosted by news organizations.

There are a number of reasons why the years-long Presidential Commission model for these debates is out of step with changes in the structure of our elections and the interests of voters. The reasons for this include:

First: The Commission’s schedule has debates that begin *after* the American people have a chance to cast their vote early, and doesn’t conclude until after tens of millions of Americans will have already voted. The Commission’s failure, yet again, to schedule debates that will be meaningful to all voters – not just those who cast their ballots late in the fall or on Election Day – underscores the serious limitations of its outdated approach.

Second: The Commission’s model of building huge spectacles with large audiences at great expense simply isn’t necessary or conducive to good debates. The debates should be conducted for the benefit of the American voters, watching on television and at home – not as entertainment for an in-person audience with raucous or disruptive partisans and donors, who consume valuable debate time with noisy spectacles of approval or jeering. As was the case with the original televised debates in 1960, a television studio with just the candidates and moderators is a better, more cost-efficient way to proceed: focused solely on the interests of voters.

Third: The Commission includes rules that candidates were called upon to follow, and yet it was unable or unwilling to enforce the rules in the 2020 debates. The result was far from—indeed entirely inconsistent with—the orderly and informative process the voters deserved in 2020 and should be able to expect in 2024.

We are advising you now of this decision, months in advance of the dates you announced you are planning for, to enable you to avoid incurring further production, and other, expenses on the assumption that the Democratic nominee, President Biden, will participate. For the reasons stated above, he will not.

The above describes what we will not do; but to facilitate the establishment of debates, let me be clear about our intentions. We believe the first debate should be in late June, after Donald Trump's New York criminal trial is likely to be over and after President Biden returns from meeting with world leaders at the G7 Summit. It should be hosted by any broadcast organization that hosted a Republican Primary debate in 2016 in which Donald Trump participated, and a Democratic primary debate in 2020 in which President Biden participated – so neither campaign can assert that the sponsoring organization is obviously unacceptable: if both candidates have previously debated on their airwaves, then neither could object to such venue. The debates should be one-on-one, allowing voters to compare the only two candidates with any statistical chance of prevailing in the Electoral College – and not squandering debate time on candidates with no prospect of becoming President. The moderator(s) should be selected by the broadcast host from among their regular personnel, so as to avoid a “ringer” or partisan. There should be firm time limits for answers, and alternate turns to speak – so that the time is evenly divided and we have an exchange of views, not a spectacle of mutual interruption. A candidate's microphone should only be active when it is his turn to speak, to promote adherence to the rules and orderly proceedings.

We believe the Vice-Presidential debate should be in late July, after the Republican National Convention, with the same basic parameters as the presidential debate outlined above.

A second presidential debate should be held in early September at the start of the fall campaign season, early enough to influence early voting, but not so late as to require the candidates to leave the campaign trail in the critical late September and October period.

As Donald Trump has said he will debate “anytime, anywhere,” we hope both campaigns can quickly accept broadcast media debate invitations on the parameters above. Americans need a debate on the issues – not a tedious debate about debates.

Sincerely,

Jen O'Malley Dillon
Biden for President Campaign Chair