



**Ohio Senate
Local Government and Elections Committee
FY2022-2023 State Budget - House Bill 110
Proponent Testimony
Dan Moulthrop, The City Club of Cleveland**

Chair Gavarone, Vice Chair O'Brien, and Ranking Member Maharath, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony this morning on an Amendment for House Bill 110, on behalf of The Ohio Debate Commission. I am Dan Moulthrop, CEO of The City Club of Cleveland and Board President of the Ohio Debate Commission.

As the chief executive of one of the nation's oldest and most renowned free speech forums, my job in many ways is democracy. The City Club of Cleveland exists for fomenting debate and finding common ground--the nuts and bolts of how we make decisions in a representative democracy.

And while the amount of civic discourse may be at an historic level, the candidate debate--one of our most cherished tools of democracy and voter education since at least the celebrated Lincoln-Douglas debate of 1858--has been in danger for multiple election cycles.

There has been no agreed upon authority, no shared sense of what the best practices are, and no clear idea among the various stakeholders and civic groups as to what debates ought to look like or strive to accomplish. With that in mind, the City Club used seed funding from the Gund Foundation to research this problem and look at how other states were responding to the same concern.

We learned that three states--Utah, Washington, and our neighbor, Indiana - each created a collaboration of media, academic and civic organizations. These statewide debate commissions provide nonpartisan events that show respect for candidates who step into the arena, and for the citizens in need of meaningful content about the candidates. Collectively, they have put on more than 75 debates and have never had a candidate withdraw or not appear.



Respectfully, we would like to note that the Utah Debate Commission, which has received state funding since 2017, successfully put on 12 debates in 2020, including being co-host for the Vice Presidential debate.

Following our research, we convened more than 55 leaders of civic, media and academic organizations, plus highly regarded scholars such as Professors Paul Beck and Herb Asher, formed a pilot project called the Ohio Debate Commission and successfully put on two debates in October 2018--the last of three gubernatorial debates and the first of three U.S. Senate debates. These events were broadcast live throughout Ohio on commercial and public radio and television, as well a livestream. The feed was made free to any and all outlets interested.

In early 2020, we spun off the Ohio Debate Commission into its own independent 501(c)(3) and, despite the pandemic, put on the only public event, virtually, with all four Ohio Supreme Court candidates. That was also shared across the state.

Debates play as critical a role today as they did in 1858. Debates bring us together as voters and unite us to hear and watch candidates outline their views. This is no small role in an era of divisiveness. Debates provide voter learning and an opportunity to gain information that cannot be gleaned from news stories, advertising or campaign trail comments. Lastly, most voters don't have the time to follow campaigns day in and day out. Debates connect voters in a direct way that can bridge that gap.

John C. Green, Director Emeritus of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron has said, "Well-planned debates with skilled moderators give voters a perspective on the candidates and their positions that stump speeches, editorial board interviews, and political advertisements simply cannot."

Here in Ohio, we have built a resource that benefits Ohio voters and, with your support of this Amendment, can continue to benefit us all as we lift up both those people who seek public service, and the voters whose support they hope to earn.



Candidate debates are in the best interest of democracy, the best interests of political parties, the best interests of candidates, and the best interests of Ohio voters. Through the Ohio Debate Commission, strengthened with the adoption of this Amendment's funding request, we can continue on this path to providing trustworthy, high-quality, reliable engagement between Ohio's candidates and voters.

I will close by noting that these are very difficult, very challenging times for democracy and democratic institutions. I believe that the responsibility to strengthen democracy is a shared one. It's not just the work of our elected representatives--all of you--it is our work, shared work, the work of citizens and civil society institutions, of block clubs and universities, of Rotary clubs and all the associations that so impressed Alexander de Tocqueville centuries ago. The answer to the challenges facing our republic lie in the bedrock of democracy itself: our founding democratic values of engagement and debate, of informing citizens and preparing them to participate in a government that derives its power from their consent. Ensuring support for statewide candidate debates that engage the public would be a strong way to illustrate those values.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for the leadership demonstrated by this committee's consideration of this Amendment. I am available to provide more comments or testimony at your request.