

**House Finance Committee  
April 14, 2021  
Testimony of Jill Zimon  
Executive Director, Ohio Debate Commission**

Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, and Ranking Member Crawley, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on behalf of the Ohio Debate Commission. We respectfully seek your support for funding through an Amendment to House Bill 110.

The Ohio Debate Commission is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization whose mission is to foster fair, non-partisan, substantive debates to encourage participation in our democracy. Our vision is of a strong Ohio, with well-informed voters and highly qualified public servants, candidates, and elected officials. Although we focus on statewide races and ballot issues, we share our experience and learning with large and small organizations across the state to strengthen voter education at all levels of elections.

Candidate debates are a long-cherished tool of democracy and voter education. In 2018, seeing a decline in the number of debates being put on over multiple election cycles, The City Club of Cleveland piloted a project that convened 55 Ohio leaders of media, academic, and civic organizations. The City Club, a non-partisan entity, gathered these parties to evaluate and develop a response to this decline. Through research, it learned that three other states had been addressing this problem too. Indiana, Utah, and Washington each had formed their own statewide collaboration and collectively, the organizations of these states have staged more than **75 debates** since 2008, including Utah's co-hosting of the Vice-Presidential debate in 2020.

After the Ohio leaders met, they put aside their usual competitive approach to debates and determined to work together. In 2018, they produced one debate for Governor of Ohio, and one for a U.S. Senate seat. In an effort to reach Ohio's more than 7.7 million voters, they provided the feed for showing these debates at no cost. They also reached out to commercial and public television and radio, newspapers, and online news outlets. Partners like the Ohio Association of Broadcasters, the Ohio News Media Association, the Enquirer/USA Today Network in Ohio, and the League of Women Voters of Ohio also helped with outreach. Ultimately, these two debates

reached every market in the state through more than 40 outlets. This success led to the creation of the Ohio Debate Commission, which now is an IRS 501(c)(3), non-profit educational (non-partisan) organization.

In the 2020 cycle, forced to overcome obstacles presented by the pandemic, the ODC relied on its partnerships to put on the only virtual public forum for two Ohio Supreme Court races. All four (4) candidates participated and more than 50 media outlets, including nationally recognized news outlets like the Associated Press and government access channels, covered this important broadcast.

In addition, the ODC organized and held three virtual debate watches for the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates. Over 600 individuals from across the state heard speakers like Tom Sutton of Baldwin Wallace University's Community Research Institute. After watching the debate, participants reconvened for facilitated conversations in virtual breakout rooms. More than 150 college students in Ohio joined these debate watches and helped facilitate the breakouts.

Now Ohioans will face one of the most important statewide votes to decide who will be our state's next U.S. Senator. The ODC is uniquely positioned to give all constituents a chance to assess candidates for this seat, as well as the other nine statewide seats that will be on the 2022 ballot.

With the ODC's successful, non-partisan track record, and our well-recognized and accepted partnerships, we respectfully seek your support for an Amendment to help fund the ODC so we can continue to present lively discussion of issues, ensure as many voters as possible see the candidates side by side, and convene a neutral and non-partisan stage for statewide candidates to express themselves. These goals are the fundamentals of democracy that we all value and support.

Notably, there is strong precedent for state funding of this work. The Utah legislature has funded the non-partisan Utah Debate Commission since FY 2017 when they approved the amount of \$125,000 over one year. Then, in FY 2018, the Utah legislature approved annual ongoing

funding of \$65,000 per year. With that support, the Utah Debate Commission has staged over 30 debates, with media, academic, and civic support from across Utah.

Well-managed debates bring people together to watch and listen. They provide a chance for voters of all parties and interests to learn about the candidates' positions, and glean information that news articles, paid advertisements, and planned campaign events cannot provide. Through our work, voters can see and judge candidates' style, ideas, and responsiveness for themselves. Open, neutral debate also benefits candidates: It lessens the strain on campaign resources and offers them an easy way to reach millions of Ohioans with a professional, non-partisan production.

Lastly, debates bring needed value to Ohio's civic infrastructure at a critical time in our nation's evolution. More debates, not fewer, can help transcend polarizing trends by serving the essential, Constitutionally-valid function of open public discourse.

For these reasons, we respectfully seek your support for an Amendment to House Bill 110 to help fund the Ohio Debate Commission.

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.