

You Might Be Right - Presidential Debate Commission - Transcript

Frank Fahrenkopf: Number one thing that's lost I can think of, which is the most popular debate that we've ever used, and we use them every four years, is the town hall meeting. When a citizen can actually look a presidential or vice presidential candidate in the eye and ask them a question and have that person answer the question, that's the most popular.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support from members of our Producer Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

Televised debates have been instrumental in shaping the course of presidential elections for decades, providing voters with a platform to evaluate the candidates and sometimes producing decisive moments that boosted one candidate and doomed another. But for the first time since 1987, the major party candidates have agreed to network-hosted debates on their own, removing the nonpartisan nonprofit Commission on Presidential Debates from the process.

In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee governors, Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, are joined by Frank Fahrenkopf, co-chairman of the Commission on Presidential Debates, to delve into the history, his reaction to the recent news and the future of these essential civic events.

Bill Haslam: Well, Phil, we're back taking a little break. It's good to be back together. I think we have a really good topic today. This is definitely timely.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. This is one of those things that really is right in the news today and a very, very important and a lot of people are focused on, and I think it's nice to do that kind of thing once in a while.

Bill Haslam: We've both been in debates and felt the pregame jitters as you're walking out there on the stage and thinking, oh man, we've worked really hard to get to this point. Let's don't blow it. And I think one of the things we want to talk about with our guest is is this the right mechanism to make such an important decision? As well as we're at an interesting point, obviously, with the commission that was set up to do the debates actually not doing the debates this year.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. We've both had, as you said, experience with the debates and I wonder if they haven't evolved into something that's such a performance piece. You spend so much time getting ready for that hour or that 90 minutes, and it is all about getting that zinger in or that quotable line at the end of it. I have my questions as to what extent it really is a good measure of a candidate that people should use to base a decision on. I don't have a better idea, but they're part of the world now and it's changing.

Bill Haslam: Agree. Well, let's talk with our guest, Frank Fahrenkopf.

Well, Phil, it's really a pleasure for us to have Frank Fahrenkopf Jr. with us as our guest. Frank is the co-founder and co-chair of the Commission on Presidential Debates, which has conducted the presidential and vice presidential debates going all the way back to the 1988 election. He also was the national chair of the Republican National Committee back from '83 to '89. He's a frequent commentator. A lot of our listeners will have seen him on Meet the Press or Hardball, Face the Nation, The Daily Show, Today Show, and on and on. He's also a founder of the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute, serves on numerous corporate and nonprofit boards. And since we're taping this not too long after Father's Day, it's worthy of note that he's a girl dad. He's got three grown daughters, two attorneys and a physician, and he and his wife Mary, proud parents of the three girls and got his J.D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

Frank, thank you very much for joining us.

Frank Fahrenkopf: Thanks for being with you, Governor.

Phil Bredesen: I'd like to start out, I won't ask you the question of how someone with the J.D. from Berkeley ended up as a Republican, but we'll move on to the real questions. Presidential debates in that form are a relatively modern innovation. Obviously, there's the one in '60 and then a long hiatus and they're coming in. Why do you think they're valuable?

Frank Fahrenkopf: Well, I think there are two points that I think that they're important about the debates and why I think they're valuable. First of all, we consistently after each cycle go out and do some polling and we ask the question, was the debate important in how your decision was reached as to who you were going to vote for? And consistently year after year, it's been about 65 or 70% said that it was important, wasn't the only consideration, but it was an important factor that they went through in determining who they were going to vote for.

But I've always viewed the debates of being not only a question of the candidates indicating to the public where they stood on issues that are important to the public, whose position might affect how they vote, but it also tells you something about the candidate. Seeing the candidate on the stage, participating in a discussion tells you a lot about character, tells you a lot about how they conduct themselves under pressure and so forth. So there's two things. It's the perception of the candidate as a human being, as a possible person they want to have to be president, and where they stand on the issues. So I think they are important, Governor.

Bill Haslam: We're going to circle back around to talk about they're definitely important to how people decide to vote as to whether or not they should be as important and whether this is a good test to try to figure out who we want to be our next leader. We'll circle back around to that. Tell us a little bit about how the presidential commission or the Commission on Presidential Debates came about. Give us a little bit of the history of that and how we got to this.

Frank Fahrenkopf: So it really came about as a result of difficulties interestingly in this

particular year that where the two candidates could never agree. The League of Women Voters took over in 1976 after we went 16 years, as you mentioned, without having any debates. It was Lyndon Johnson was not going to let Barry Goldwater get up on a stage with him. President Johnson had a view, I think, that was shared by George H.W. Bush that if you come as president and you allow someone to get on the stage with you, you're raising that person's character, you're raising how important they are and so forth. So we went for a long time. Jimmy Carter challenged President Ford, but President Ford I don't think wanted to debate, but after he pardoned Ford, excuse me, pardoned Nixon, his numbers really crashed and he didn't have any choice and it wasn't a good debate for President Ford, but the league constantly had to deal with the parties and the campaigns, not so much the parties.

I think I got to make that distinction. I misspoke. We, as a commission, have nothing to do with the parties. I thought it was very interesting and I don't know how the hell they did it, but the Republican National Committee withdrew from the Commission on Presidential Debates about a year and a half ago, and I always figured out, "How the hell do you withdraw from something you never belonged to?" Because we never have any contact whatsoever with the parties. We deal only with those candidates who have satisfied the constitutional requirements – 35 years of age, born in the United States, been here for 14 years, on and off ballots in enough states to conceivably get 270 electoral votes and pass the 15% rule, which was originally put in place by the League of Women Voters when they did it.

And so what happened was there was a great deal of disharmony, a great deal of problems in 1984 because the league, for some reason, gave both campaigns the right to veto whoever the league was nominating as a moderator and the three reporters. Back in those days, there was a moderator and always three reporters who were involved and the two campaigns vetoed over 100 journalists and there was a real battle over whether or not it was going to happen and so forth.

And as a result of that, I think it was '86 or '87, two study committees were put together, unrelated. One was at Georgetown University where the Center for Strategic and International Studies was then on campus and the other was at the Kennedy School at Harvard. And they were both looking at the whole process of how we elect presidents. It wasn't just debates, but they did come to one thing that both sides agreed on individually that there should be created an entity that exists for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to ensure that every four years there are held general election presidential and vice presidential debates. I was chairman for President Reagan then. Paul Kirk of Massachusetts was the chairman of the DNC. Both committees came to us, asked us to do it. We went to our relative committees and Paul and I created the commission in 1987 and we've done every debate, general election.

We have nothing to do with the primaries. I want to make that very clear to your listeners too. I mean, that's a zoo. We have nothing to do whatsoever with the primaries. And so we started in '88. We've done 33 of them, when you count the presidential and vice presidential debates starting in 1988, and that's how we came into existence. There have been controversy throughout the different times, different players wanted to do things differently. So we've

survived since our founding in 1987.

And earlier this year, we announced where we planned to go for the four debates, three presidential and one vice presidential, in this cycle. The first one was going to be on September 16th. It's important it's September 16th because on September 6th will be the final day that all 50 states will have their ballots done, who's going to be on the presidential ballot in those states. So we had to wait until we knew what was going to happen there. And then, of course, we had the situation where President Trump was making statements all over, whenever he went, "I'll debate him anywhere, anytime, whatever he wants." And then Biden came back and said, "All right, how about this one?" And they came up with the CNN event and which Trump has accepted. So that's where we are.

Phil Bredezen: I mean, it's been going on and it's had its pluses and minuses from the candidate standpoint, but what happened this cycle?

Frank Fahrenkopf: Well, what happened was there was some legitimate criticism of four years ago that the first debate we had four years ago was scheduled about a week and a half, two weeks after some states had started their absent ballots because we were in the middle of the pandemic. And so the question was, "Oh, gee whiz, you're going too late. These people, millions have already voted." It turned out – we did our homework – it was about 900,000 votes were cast before the first debate four years ago. So that's why what we did this year is we went backwards. The one we've scheduled for the 16th of September is the earliest we've ever had a campaign debate.

And we made sure that every state had finished what they would do because many states were changing their law after the pandemic about early voting and so forth. So our guesstimation is that on the first debate that we would do what we planned, which has not gone through as of now. There's only two states that anybody could have cast a vote and maybe for a week, and that was Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Every other state came after, you couldn't vote until after that debate. So that was a legitimate criticism and that's why from four years ago, and that's why we went back, studied every state's work on their voting legislation and scheduled when we did.

Bill Haslam: So obviously you come to it with a perspective on this as the co-chair. From the citizen standpoint, what's lost by not having the official commission lead the debates? What should we be aware of? What's the risk here?

Frank Fahrenkopf: There's two things, or maybe three because I'm worried about how many people are actually going to see, particularly this first debate, because CNN has put some stranglehold on the other networks as to what they're going to do. But number one thing that's lost I can think of, which is the most popular debate that we've ever used, and we use them every four years, is the town hall meeting. When a citizen can actually sit, look at presidential or vice presidential candidate in the eye and ask them a question and have that person answer the question. That's the most popular.

And we are working now with 35 nations around the world helping them, NGO organizations, some in danger of their lives, and they follow what we're doing and they love the town hall meeting and how it's so unlike what they can do in their countries, but now they're getting there. So we do lose that.

We also lose the fact that we've always done them on college campuses. Tennessee has been very, very good to us. We have been, I think, twice at Belmont and did a great job. And if you were around Belmont during those, it's enthusiasm among students. We start really talking about the history of our nation and how we got to where we are, and also special classes on civics, which I don't think are being taught enough in there are schools across the country. So we lose that education touch, which we think is very, very important.

And then as I say, the last thing I'm worried about is also how many people are going to watch. The Nielsen ratings, example four years ago, said that the first debate we had 78 million people watch, but that's way low. Nielsen does not count what's on the platforms, and we work with all the platforms. We come out with the White House operation, so everyone sees us and you don't have to pay for it. We do no advertising. There are no breaks. You do 90 minutes without a break. Here, there are going to be two breaks, I understand, where they're going to be advertising, which I think just really sort of destroys the dignity of what we're attempting to do, educate the American people. But the best guesstimation for us was after you considered everybody, was probably 120 million people who watched that first one four years ago. So what's it going to be now? I don't think all the networks have worked out their difficulties with CNN and we'll have to see. So I think it's the volume of people who are going to look at this thing, plus the fact that historically most Americans don't really focus on the presidential elections in the fall elections until after Labor Day. Summer's over, they then focus on it and they start voting.

So those are the kind of three elements that I see we're losing. Plus this whole thing about a mute button. The mute button that I put in for the final debate four years ago was never used, after what happened in the first debate where it started out where Trump clearly violated the rule. The rule was that each candidate got two minutes without interruption to answer the question that started the particular issue that they were going to discuss, and then the other person would get two minutes uninterrupted and if the other person had talked during that two minute period, we would've muted this button. But after that, there's no muting.

This is supposed to be a debate. It's not supposed to be an interview by a reporter. Now what I'm hearing now that what they're planning on doing is almost going back to 1960, where what happened was the reporter would ask a question of candidate A, candidate A would have two minutes to respond, then candidate B would have one minute to respond to that, and then candidate A would come back for a minute and then they would move on to another subject. The reason we changed so much, we went to a single moderator, we divided the 90 minutes in the six 15-minute pods, each pod focusing on a particular issue, and with the moderator having the ability after each of them had done two minutes to drill down in their answer. Here, I don't

know whether that's going to be possible, so I think that may be lost. To be fair to them, I don't know what they've worked out with regard to how long each candidate's going to get to answer each question and so forth.

Bill Haslam: Frank, and you might not know the answer to this, but where goeth the presidential commission from here, both this year and future years? You've led this for, I guess, the commissions have had the process for 36 years, so eight or nine election cycles. What happens from here to the commission?

Frank Fahrenkopf: What we're at is right now at a very critical time. It's not only for the commissions, but for the four universities who have already spent money, who have spent time, energy, who are so excited about that they're going to host these things, and suddenly when that letter came out from Biden with the CNN thing, it, well, kind of pulled the rug out, not only from us but from them. They've already spent money. There's more money to be spent. And so I've talked to the presidents of each of the universities and what we're going to do is we're going to wait and see what happens here on the 27th. Have they come up with a way to have a good debate that will help educate the American people? If it does, if they do the job, we may say, "Hey, congratulations and we'll fade away. You do the rest of your debates."

I think they're talking about doing a VP debate sometime maybe in July or something after Trump has named his running mate. But we are just going to have to watch and see, but we have to help those members from the universities because we may have to tell them that it's not going to go. They're going to go forward. They're going to have the remainder of their things done by exactly why we were created. We were created to make sure it happens. So if it happens, we're not going to say, "Well, we could have done a better job." If it happens and they're effective, we'll probably slide away. Now, this is probably my last rodeo, I've been doing this for a long time, but that's up to the commission. I think they'll probably say, "Well, let's go forward. Let's see what they do with it, and hopefully we come back in 2028. Maybe we've learned something, maybe we haven't."

Phil Bredezen: So what I'm trying to understand is with this long history of these presidential commission debates, what was the thinking going through Biden's mind or was someone there to simply take a different tack? What advantage does that offer to them?

Frank Fahrenkopf: There were a couple of members in the White House very, very close to the president, chief advisors, who participated in a study commission two or three years ago about the debates. The people who were on it were very much opposed to the Commission on Presidential Debates. They didn't like the interference of having worked on the campaign. Suddenly, last minute, here comes some outside group telling you where, when you're going to be and answer questions from moderators you may not know and so forth. And so they filed that report and then I think what happened was when Donald and I really believe it was Donald had the RNC say they're withdrawing from the Commission on Presidential Debates, that that planted the seed there that maybe there was a way to get out of dealing with us and they could put together a plan that would benefit Biden and that hopefully Trump would accept it.

I was very surprised, to be candid with you, when it was done by a letter, a letter went out two, three Wednesdays ago, it went out to everyone in the media, it went out to all the candidates proposing, "All right, we're going to do it on CNN. CNN's moderators." Two of whom have not been very kind to Donald Trump in the past. "We're not going to have any audience there because we're afraid that Trump plays to audiences." And originally, I think they've said, "We wanted to be seated at a table." I think Trump said, "No, we're going to stand." And so there've been some negotiations back and forth, I'm not sure. So they saw an opening and as I say, I was very surprised that, I mean, within a few hours of that offer going out, that Donald accepted it. I don't think his staff or his advisors had a chance to say, "Wait a minute here. This favors Biden more than it favors us."

But in my experience, and I've known both of the men for 40 years, Donald makes quick decisions sometimes, and I think that's what he did. He said, "I accept it," and then it was pretty hard for him to get out of it or modify it too much since he said, "I'll debate anywhere, anytime," and so forth. So that's I think how this came about and I wish I knew more. Hopefully, we'll get to know a hell of a lot more on the 27th, 28th as to whether or not what they're going to bring to the American people is worthwhile and achieves the goal that we exist for to educate the American public.

Bill Haslam: Phil and I both had the experience of being in debates multiple times, and while it is, does do what you say, it sharpens your response. It's not just an interview where you can answer what you want to answer or duck the question, avoid the question, although you can try. But both being in debates and watching them, I never walk away convinced that, yeah, this is a great test for who will be a great leader in office. I've always thought there's better ways. And yet as a nation, as you said, people do put a lot of weight into debates. Do you think we've put the right amount of focus and priority here? Are there other ways that we should help people decide who they want to elect?

Frank Fahrenkopf: You know what the real change is that I felt? Before I became national chairman, I was the chairman of the state chairmen and then I was chairman of my party in Nevada for many years and Paul Laxalt and I came up through politics together. Paul was very close to Howard by the way, I'm sure you know, and sometime when I write a book, I'm going to talk about a conversation when Howard called us right after the election, we took back the Senate and Howard called Paul to say that he would support Paul to be the majority leader, and I tried to talk Paul into do it. He wouldn't do it, and we called Howard back.

Jim Cannon, as I remember, was with him and he said no. Paul said, "I'm going to support you, Howard." And Howard told me years later, he said that was the longest 20 minutes between those two phone calls he'd ever spent in his life, but Howard did a great job.

The problem I think today that has really led to this terrible, terrible lack of comity, not comedy, comity, C-O-M-I-T-Y in the country is what's happened with the media. I mean, my lord, where do you go? And this is what we have to face in trying to choose moderators. Where in the world

do you go to find someone who's balanced, who's going to be in the middle, who's going to be straightforward? I mean, what you got with the television networks, I mean, it's just really incredible. You've got now, the last reports I've seen, the American public, only about 23% agree that they can trust national media, TV and newspapers.

So that has really hurt. Then the whole thing with this little thing I'm holding in my hand right here, which changed the way so many of our people get their news. That's there. I don't know how we solve this problem and it's concerning me for the future. I'm wondering what my grandkids or what kind of country we're going to live in When you have the animosity, this is so deep and on the Hill, particularly, my lord. I mean you were governors and you know how difficult it was to work with Congress back when you were governors and think about how you'd like to work with them now. It's just incredible. So I don't know the answer, how we can solve the problem, but hopefully we can. I've got great faith in the American people that we're going to do the right thing at the right time. But it's scary.

Phil Bredesen: This podcast, "You Might Be Right," is based on Howard Baker's assertion that "always remember the other fellow might be right." From a personal standpoint, is there a time in your past you can think of where you had some strongly held opinion and by listening to another person ended up completely reversing your position or dramatically changing your position?

Frank Fahrenkopf: It's hard to say. I was a lawyer. I tried a lot of cases that the other guy never was able to convince me that I was wrong. But sure, I think. It is hard for me to say on this particular issue or that particular issue. I mean, particularly when you've got the issues we have now, when you're talking about inflation, when you're talking about control of the border, control of the drugs coming into the country, I don't know. I don't know. I try to think I'm open-minded and I think the fact that Paul Kirk— I was chairman for six of Ronald Reagan's years at the White House, and two of the best friends I made when I was in Washington those days was a guy named Paul Kirk, who I told you was chairman of the DNC, and his predecessor was a guy named Chuck Manatt, democrat from California.

Those two, their wives, their kids all became with family friends with us. There was that comity. You could talk about issues and so forth and disagree on them, but you never got so mad you couldn't do it. You had friendship and you trusted someone's integrity. So that's what's missing. I don't know how we get it back. I really, really don't know how we get it back. I hope we do.

Bill Haslam: Frank, thank you. We appreciate that. This has been a helpful conversation for us, for our listeners. One of the things we're focusing on as we prepare for the election are all the ways that things that we should be focusing on to decide who our next leader will be. It's obviously a critical decision, so thank you very much for your help and for your work on the presidential commission. We're grateful for the time you've given us.

Frank Fahrenkopf: Thank you. Thank you, Bill. Thanks, Phil. Appreciate it.

Phil Bredesen: I'm kind of sad to see that system that was set up with the commission kind of crashing into a wall this year, and I'm still not sure I understand all the rationale and reasons, but I hope we can get something useful out of the two that are scheduled and maybe there's an opportunity for the commission to step back in if these don't work.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, I'm like you. I think having some neutral arbiter, so to speak, to set the rules has been a good thing. I still hold this fundamental thought that this is not the right way for most people to make their minds up about who should be the president. I don't know if you want to do like business does with an inbox exercise where a problem comes before you and you have to tell how you'd solve it or who you'd bring it to the table. But coming up with the best zinger in an hour long or 90-minute long debate doesn't feel like the way to choose the next leader of the free world.

Phil Bredesen: Well, people, I think, evaluate them differently. I wish I could quote off the top of my head here, the study, but there was a study done, a psychological study, a number of years ago that people had a more accurate assessment of who won the debate and who would win the election when they watched it with the sound turned off, that it was about presence and body language and so on, more than the actual words being said. So from that standpoint, it may well offer something. We have a lot of channels of communication we depend on that are different from just hearing the linear words.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. Although Nixon would say against Kennedy sound off, sound on, he didn't do so well.

Phil Bredesen: Well, they learned about five o'clock shadows in that first debate.

Bill Haslam

Thanks. Thanks again for our listeners, we really do want this fall to be about helping people think through this election and how we go about the important task of selecting our next leader.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

Thank you, Governors Bredesen and Haslam, for hosting these conversations. "You Might Be Right" is brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee with support from the Boyd Fund for Leadership and Civil Discourse. To learn more about the show and our work, go to youmightberight.org and follow the show on social media @YMBRpodcast.

This episode was produced in partnership with Relationary Marketing and Stones River Group.