

Regulators to create task force to improve N.J. 2013 gubernatorial debate

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State House Bureau

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TRENTON -- New Jersey election regulators plan to create a task force to improve gubernatorial debates in time for the 2013 election.

Jeff Brindle, executive director of the Election Law Enforcement Commission, proposed the panel after campaign officials and voter advocates testified Tuesday about their concerns with the debate system during the 2009 election.

Officials from the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University and the League of Women Voters told ELEC the debates need more publicity to draw a larger audience, and that potential debate sponsors and moderators should be better vetted.

The league said the commission should push major-party candidates who do not accept public financing — such as then-Gov. Jon Corzine last year — to participate in the debates even though that's not required.

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"The biggest failure in the required debates is the lack of a focused, central entity to imaginatively advertise the debates as belonging to everyone," said Ingrid Reed, director of Eagleton's New Jersey Project.

Reed and others praised New Jersey's public financing system — which provides a 2-for-1 funding match those who qualify — as a lifeline for candidates of modest means.

But there was criticism over aspects of the debates — especially the format of the first-ever lieutenant governor's debate last October. The forum at Monmouth University had a rowdy crowd of about 600 people, most supporting Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, then the Monmouth County sheriff.

"We did not know there would be a hometown favorite in Monmouth County," said Tom Dallessio, executive director of Leadership New Jersey, which hosted the debate but had planned it before Guadagno was chosen.

He also acknowledged concerns raised afterward about "the monitoring of time each candidate had to respond, and the role of the moderators in the debate."

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Mark Magyar, who served as policy director for independent Chris Daggett, said Corzine's running mate, Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen), "got a very raw deal in that debate."

Reed said a task force could give ELEC more "equipment" to manage debate formats once they are assigned to sponsors.

"It's difficult to anticipate all of the things that make a good format and how you handle problems," Reed said.

Brindle said the task force — to be formally created at ELEC's next meeting — could devise a plan for the Legislature to consider well in advance of the next election.

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