

The Need to Advertise the 2001 Gubernatorial Debates

A proposal for a public education campaign to alert New Jersey voters to their opportunity to see and hear the candidates for governor debate.

The Need

Eagleton's research in the 1997 gubernatorial campaign showed that it was nearly impossible for a voter to find out when the debates were on the air. There was no organized effort to publicize the debates. Television pages made no special mention of the debates in paragraph-size features common for special programming. The "grid" of television programs included "gov. debate" only sporadically. News stories about the debates by political reports sometimes included information about broadcast time and place, but readers had to seek out these details by carefully reading the campaigns stories.

This year, the two gubernatorial debates required in connection with the public funding of the gubernatorial campaigns will take place on the evening of Wednesday, October 10 and Thursday, October 25. Given that there has been limited campaigning out of respect for the tragedies related to the terrorist attacks, the debates are likely to be even more important this year in giving give voters an opportunity to learn about the candidates.

Addressing the Need

Eagleton is requesting support for an advertising campaign that includes ads in the Sunday and day-of-the-debate editions of all 21 New Jersey daily newspapers and in each of New Jersey's 165 weekly newspapers the week before each of the two debates.

DKB Partners in Morristown is providing the creative support on a pro bono basis for designing the ads, and the New Jersey Press Association's Newspaper Network has advised Eagleton on the campaign will make the ad placements. Supporters will be acknowledged in the ads. In addition, Eagleton will organize a press advisory on the debate broadcasts.

The experience gained in this initial effort should be useful in developing an advertising campaign for the voluntary debates in the 2002 U.S. Senate race and in advocating for tax-supported advertising for the required gubernatorial debates in 2005.

Related information

New Jersey taxpayers are providing more than \$10 million for the campaigns of Mayor James McGreevey and Mayor Bret Schundler, but public funds are not available to alert the citizens to these debates.

For the 2001 debates, sponsors were asked to submit their plans for disseminating information to the public. However, the debate-sponsoring organizations do not have funds to advertise and are dependant on outside sources for meeting the cost of the producing the debates. The two debate sponsors are not likely to be able coordinate efforts for a consistent approach publicizing both the required debates. While many newspapers provide public service ads, arrangements need to be made with each newspaper and timing and placement cannot be assured. Paid advertising provides the coverage needed to be effective.

Eagleton's study of the 2000 campaign for U.S. Senate shows that the major party candidates debated five times, twice on the radio and three times on non-prime time network television. Where major newspapers were involved as sponsors of debates, ads were placed in those newspapers as a public service. Also, at least six of the major daily newspapers ran boxes with information about the debates in their news sections. However, there was no consistent state-wide effort to advertise the debates, and the television pages did not include promotion of the debates.

Debates are often cited by voters in polls as important to them as a source of information in voting. In April 2001, an Eagleton poll asked a sample of New Jerseyans who had voted in the presidential election what source of information was most helpful in deciding whom to support for president. The response was as follows: 40% debates; 25% television news; 25% newspaper stories; 7% none or don't know; and 3% campaign advertisements. While Eagleton cannot say that New Jerseyans would give similar responses about the gubernatorial debates (in part because they did not have significant advance information as they did for the presidential debates), they are likely to find them useful if they have the opportunity to see them and see pre- and post-debate coverage.

The lack of news coverage of New Jersey campaigns on New York and Philadelphia television stations means New Jersey voters cannot rely on that media for information. Daily newspapers are a resource to 75% of New Jersey voters (3.7 million of the 5 million voters). Weekly newspapers, with a circulation of 1.7 million, provide a reinforcement for the daily and Sunday papers. They tend to be read cover to cover and often over several days.