



MEMO

To: Anderson Cooper, Lester Holt, Elaine Quijano, Martha Raddatz and Chris Wallace

From: Wylecia Wiggs Harris, CEO, League of Women Voters of the United States

Date: September 21, 2016

Re: Keep Voters at the Forefront of Debates

To the moderators of the upcoming presidential debates,

In a presidential year that has proven unpredictable at every turn, you have taken on the enormous task of bringing together the top presidential candidates to address voters and—hopefully—take on the most critical issues affecting Americans. With nearly 1 in 4 Americans saying the debates could sway their vote, and 74% saying they plan to watch the first debate (ABC News/SSRS poll, 9/11/16), you have the extraordinary responsibility of ensuring the debates are fair, substantive, and valuable to voters.

For that, we say thank you for stepping up to the task.

With a long legacy of sponsoring candidate debates, including [sponsoring the presidential and vice presidential debates from 1976-1984](#) as well as hundreds of state and local debates taking place in 2016, the League of Women Voters is no stranger to the complexities and pressures of moderating candidate debates.

Our aim in this letter is to *urge you to keep one thing front and center: America's voters*. After all, this election isn't actually about Ms. Clinton, Mr. Trump, the parties, or the pundits: it's about the future we all, as voters, seek to build.

Here are the most important lessons we have learned over nearly a century of sponsoring and moderating candidate debates:

1. Debates aren't about the candidates.

This election has had more than its fair share of distractions, controversies, and finger-pointing. But time and time again, voters tell us that *they* really want to hear about how the candidates plan to tackle the issues that matter most to the American people. Perhaps more than ever before, that means your task is to get to the specifics of what the candidates plan to do about expanding economic opportunity, creating jobs, addressing immigration reform, and forging America's path forward in an increasingly complex foreign policy landscape.

When the candidates get off topic, or turn their response time into an attack on the other candidate, we urge you to bring them back to the critical issues at hand. Ask logical and strong

follow-up questions that get to how, specifically, the candidates plan to address *voters'* most pressing concerns.

2. The best defense is a good offense.

When it comes to debates, the unexpected happens. The best way to moderate a successful debate is to prepare, communicate, and then stick to your game plan. Each of your debates will differ in format and audience, but a few constants apply:

- Clarity matters. Fully develop, and then clearly communicate, the format and guidelines to the candidates and the public.
- It's your job to make sure that the rules are followed. Once the process for the debate has been laid out and agreed upon, stick to it. Don't allow the candidates to distract or coerce you into losing sight of the rules.
- Keep things moving. Manage against the clock to ensure the most important issues get their fair time in front of voters.
- Balance, consistency and fairness are the name of the game. At the end of the day, candidates should have received roughly equal time to address voters, fielded questions of similar difficulty, and faced comparable levels of scrutiny during follow-up questions.

3. Seek authentic public input.

Please, involve the public in your conversation. Voters have made themselves clear: they are paying attention. They expect the candidates to share their vision for America's future. Even if your debate will not feature live questions from the public, we urge you to ask voters, from a variety of backgrounds, what they hope to hear during the debates. Voters' needs, not the latest controversy, should be your guiding principles in developing questions and topics.

4. Stay above the fray. Don't let pre- and post- debate commentary distract you from doing your job. This is not about you or your network. If you've followed the concepts above, you've done your job. Let the candidates – and the voters – do theirs.

Thank you for taking on this important and challenging task. We wish you the best of luck! [The League of Women Voters looks forward to joining all Americans in watching and learning from the upcoming debates](#), and in [registering and voting](#) this election year.

Yours in Making Democracy Work™,



Wylecia Wiggs Harris

CEO, League of Women Voters of the United States