

INTERVIEWER: The debate over gubernatorial debates continues in Minnesota just as early voting is underway in the state. Governor Tim Walz has agreed to two debates this month with his republican challenger Scott Jensen. One of them will be on MPR News. But for the first time in 40 years, Twin Cities TV viewers won't see a debate between the gubernatorial candidates.

The Walz campaign has turned down debate offers from Twin Cities' PBS, KSTP, and Kare 11 TV. There will be a debate on several smaller greater Minnesota TV stations. Walz has argued that the total of three debates the candidates will participate in before November 8th is perfectly normal, although three debates are far fewer than in years past.

It also seems refraining from debating is gaining popularity with candidates in other states, either doing just one debate or skipping debates altogether. So what gives? To help contextualize this political strategy we're joined by Brian McClung. Brian served as press secretary, director of communications, and deputy chief of staff for former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty. Brian's now with Park Street Public. That's a lobbying and political strategy group. How are you doing?

SUBJECT: I'm doing good. How are you, Kathy?

INTERVIEWER: All right. All right. It's nice to be back in the saddle after some time off. As you know, I've had the honor of doing many political debates over the years, especially the final one before the election and moderating several debates with governor Pawlenty in his time in office. When governor Walz says three debates are the norm, how many times did Pawlenty debate?

SUBJECT: Well, in the 2006 re-election campaign, which I think is the most appropriate to comparisons governor Walz is running for re-election here, governor Pawlenty participated in seven debates. And so we started off with the farm fest debate which is the one that the candidates have done here this time and then follow that up with six more. In this case, they're following that up with two more.

So I do think that is it's a significant drop off from what we've seen for gubernatorial debates in the past, even for candidates running for re-election. And it's unfortunate because I do think that debates are one of the best places for voters to get information. And really the only place to see the candidates unscripted and see how they respond to things and how they deal with confrontation. And so debates might not change a lot of people's minds but there's still a really important part of the process.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the Walz campaign is not interested in a debate televised in the Metro area? What's the strategy behind that decision?

SUBJECT: Well, and like you said when we were opening the segment, this is something that's happening not just in Minnesota but around the country, and in fact in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, California. There will be zero governor's debates in those states. Across the border in both Iowa and Wisconsin, they're just planning one debate each. So we are seeing this happen more and more. And I think candidates are very risk averse, especially incumbents who have a fundraising advantage. They'd rather not be put in a situation where something could go awry or they could make a misstep.

And, in fact, you saw that last year in the Virginia gubernatorial campaign where Terry McAuliffe made some remarks in a debate about parents not really needing to be engaged in the education of their children, very kind of clumsy phrasing of what he was trying to get across, and that was then used in ads against him. And so I think a lot of these, especially incumbents who have a lead, they're looking at it and saying there's more downside than upside to doing these debates.

INTERVIEWER: Both candidates in the Minnesota gubernatorial race have records and debates, as you mentioned, are excellent opportunities to see how the candidates respond. How they deal with pressure. They're also opportunities to press a candidate on their record. So what's lost if a candidate doesn't debate? What's the loss to the electorate?

SUBJECT: Well, debates, when they're well organized and well moderated, really do give voters a lot of information about the candidates. And without that we're just we're left with campaign rallies, or advertisements, or social media, and it's really an incomplete picture. So I think that's what we're missing out on. We're looking for our candidates to be willing to go into that arena and have that conversation, and take tough questions, and show what they're worth.

Now, of course, the presidential debates two years ago were a bad example. A lot of people were just really turned off because you had Joe Biden and Donald Trump just kind of yelling at each other. You're not really picking up a lot of information. So I do think that there's a little bit of debate fatigue, and when you look at what happened there, but with good moderation, with good rules, you really can see things in a debate that you won't see anywhere else in a campaign.

INTERVIEWER: What do you suggest? It depends on what side you're on, right? Some candidates really like to have an audience, others do not. Where do you fall down on that?

SUBJECT: I think we should have both, right? I think that you like to see how campaigns respond when you have a full room and that 2006 campaign with governor Pawlenty, I think about half or more of the debates had a live audience. We did one at the university of Minnesota that had a live audience. We did one at the MPR one at the end at the Fitzgerald theater that had a live audience. But then there were some like the almanac debate that's just with the studio. So I think that it makes sense to do both.

I can understand not wanting to do, for example, the state fair debate. I know that governor Walz was criticized for that, but the crowds at the state fair can get kind of rowdy and it makes it hard sometimes to stay focused and get your point across. So in some cases I can understand that desire to not be in a situation like that that can get out of hand. But a mix of both, I think, is good.

And I think somewhere around six debates or so is reasonable. That we should expect that to be kind of a baseline number. Even though we see more and more candidates trying to minimize the number of debates, I think trying to settle in on kind of a regular expected schedule would be beneficial.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned this is a trend nationwide. Do you think this trend will continue? Are debates going to be a thing of the past?

SUBJECT: Well, it seems like that might be the case and as I mentioned, those states with governor's races with no debates or one debate, you look at there are about a dozen states that have competitive US senate races. Many of those do not have debates scheduled or might have just one debate scheduled.

So yes, I do think that in this age of really trying to control the narrative and trying to focus it around what you can put out yourself on social media, what you can do in your TV ads, these candidates, they know that if they have a misstep or they say something foolish in a debate, that it could go viral and it could really hurt them. And so they're just trying to stay away from that.

I mean, you just have candidates in public less than you used to. I mean, back in '06, we would just go out and campaign with the governor and go to events and talk to people at parades. Of course, people not everybody had a camera in their pocket back then like they do today. So the likelihood that something off course actually ends up online or on the news is much higher now, so I recognize that. But we are kind of missing out on something by not having this type of interaction.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Brian, I appreciate the insight here. Thank you so very much.

SUBJECT: Anytime, and I'll come and debate any time you like, just let me know.

INTERVIEWER: I know you will. Thanks, Brian. Have a good day.

SUBJECT: Take care. You too.

INTERVIEWER: Brian McClung is the former press secretary of the director of communications and deputy chief of staff for former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty.