

Debates create their own controversy

Erin Murphy Times Bureau

DES MOINES — Next weekend, the Democratic candidates for president will debate one another while standing on an auditorium stage in Iowa.

The Republican candidates will do likewise in January.

If the brief history of the 2016 presidential debates is any indication, Iowa will be the center of political conflict and intrigue when those debates come to town.

The 2015 primary debates have been full of drama, often before the first question is asked. Whether because of Democrats calling for more or the many issues with the voluminous Republican field of candidates, this year's presidential debates, it seems, have created as many questions as they have answered.

GOP's crowded stage

The Republican debates have been particularly contentious, both on stage and off.

From the outset, the Republican National Committee faced the unenviable task of presenting a debate for a field that at one point grew to an unprecedented 17 candidates. The national party chose to divide the debates into two sections, using polling numbers to divide them.

Still, in the first two debates the party kept 10 candidates in the primary debate. The result was debates that lasted three hours yet still included candidates competing for speaking time by beckoning to moderators and talking over each other.

"When you've got that many people in that little time under those time constraints, it's hard to get anything of interest (out of the candidates)," said Dennis Goldford, a political science professor at Drake University, the host of next weekend's debate. "It's like trying to have a serious conversation in a rowdy bar."

Deciding who gets to participate in the main debate has been a source of contention as well.

Candidates have been critical of the criteria — in particular the use of national polling — used to determine who participates in the main debate, which airs during prime-time television viewing hours, and who is relegated to what many have called the "JV" debate, which airs earlier.

Bobby Jindal has said the candidates should be divided by how they are performing in early-state polls, such as those surveying Iowa and New Hampshire.

That would help Jindal, who is faring better in Iowa than national polls.

Although Jindal may have self-serving motivation for a different qualifying strategy, some political science experts agree.

"This is dumb. Using the national polling to determine who gets on that main stage is wrong," said David Redlawsk, a political science professor at Rutgers University, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, and a fellow at Drake University's Harkin Institute for Public Policy and Citizen Engagement.

"Because there's no national election going on. It's as simple as that," Redlawsk said.

Officials in early voting states are concerned that using national polling to determine debate divisions weakens their impact on the nominating process. The fear is for some candidates on the main debate-JV debate bubble, the national polls become more important than the early-state polls, so those candidates may spend less time campaigning in the early states.

"It's a significant concern for me," said Jeff Kaufmann, chairman of the Republican Party of Iowa. "I've had multiple conversations — always constructive, always pleasant — with the Republican National Committee and with (RNC chairman) Reince Priebus himself. ...

"I sense movement on that issue. I sense they are getting it."

Kaufmann said he realizes his opinion cannot sway rules for the entire primary debate schedule, nor should it, he said. So Kaufmann is focused on where his voice may carry some weight: for the January GOP debate in Iowa.

"I have been talking about our debate in January," Kaufmann said. "I will continue to advocate for local polling data (for that debate)."

Then there was the most recent Republican debate on cable news network CNBC. Many Republicans were infuriated by some of the questions and how the moderators conducted the debate. The Republican National Committee pulled out of its partnership with parent network NBC on a future debate, and some of the candidates' campaigns got together to make a list of demands they say must be met before they agree to participate in future debates.

How many debates are enough?

The Democrats who are traveling to Iowa next weekend have had their fair share of debate drama as well.

Martin O'Malley's campaign raised a stink after the Democratic National Committee sanctioned six primary debates.

That's the same number of party-sanctioned debates as the 2004 and 2008 primaries. But what's different this year is the Democratic committee also has implemented rules that punish any candidate who participates in a debate not sanctioned by the party.

When unsanctioned debates are added, there were 15 Democratic primary debates in the 2004 cycle and 25 in 2008.

Critics contend the Democratic National Committee limited the debate calendar this year to make it easier for front-runner Hillary Clinton to secure the nomination.

O'Malley, the most vocal critic of the Democratic debate schedule, likely would benefit from more debates because he started the race with dramatically lower name recognition than Clinton or Bernie Sanders.

"People want to make that claim (that there are not enough Democratic debates)," Goldford said. "But you can argue that there are enough scheduled that if O'Malley is going to make an impact or break through, there are enough debates for him to do it in. If he doesn't, it's not because there aren't enough debates."

Redlawsk said the Democrats' bigger problem with a shorter debate schedule was that they ceded national attention to the Republicans between the GOP's first debate on Aug. 6 and the Democrats' first debate more than two months later on Oct. 14.

The Democrats do not share their political opponents' problem with the field of candidates. The Democratic field was never big to begin with and got even smaller recently when Jim Webb and Lincoln Chafee dropped out of the race and Vice President Joe Biden decided against running.

That means three candidates — Clinton, Sanders and O'Malley — will participate in the second Democratic debate.

Front-row seat

Goldford and Redlawsk both said they will be interested to see in the Democratic debate whether Sanders gets more aggressive with Clinton as he tries to continue to gain ground on her in the race.

"Will there be rhetorical knives used? There haven't so far," Goldford said.

Redlawsk said that as a political scientist he relishes the opportunity to take in a presidential debate in person, which he has once before, in New Hampshire in 2012, he said.

"This is way cool," Redlawsk said.