



October 2, 2020

Co-Chairs of the Commission on Presidential Debates:

The Arab American Institute and Common Cause appreciate and respect the role of the Commission on Presidential Debates (“CPD”) in ensuring—for the benefit of the American electorate—nonpartisan voter education since 1987. However, last week’s debate fell short of that traditional role.

The waning minutes of the September 29th Presidential Debate saw President Trump repeat and proliferate unsubstantiated and discredited claims with the effect—and potential intention—of creating distrust in the electoral process and decreasing participation in our democracy.

In total, President Trump used the word “fraud” at least five times in discussing the election and electoral processes. Especially with respect to mail-in voting, FBI Director Chris Wray recently affirmed that he knows of no widespread mail-in voting fraud.<sup>ii</sup> Nonetheless, the following quotes from the President—which have no factual bases—went unchallenged, unqualified, and have already contributed uncertainty and distrust in our democracy:

- “They’re sending millions of ballots all over the country. There’s fraud. They found them in creeks. They found some, just happened to have the name Trump just the other day in a wastepaper basket. They’re being sent all over the place. They sent two in a Democrat area. They sent out a thousand ballots. Everybody got two ballots. This is going to be a fraud like you’ve never seen.”<sup>iii</sup>
- “Take a look at West Virginia, mailman selling the ballots. They’re being sold. They’re being dumped in rivers.”<sup>iv</sup>
- “Hey, they found ballots in a wastepaper basket three days ago, and they all had the name military ballots. They were military. They all had the name Trump on them.”<sup>v</sup>

i *Combating Online Disinformation*, Common Cause.

ii Goldman and Kanno-Youngs, *F.B.I. Director Sees No Evidence of National Mail Voting Fraud Effort* (Sept. 9, 2020) New York Times.

iii. Timm, Jane, *'Dumped in rivers ... creeks ... wastepaper baskets': Trump's falsehoods on mail-in ballots* (Sept. 30, 2020) NBS News.

iv Walsh, Joe, *Trump Bizarrely Claimed West Virginia Mailmen Are 'Selling' Ballots. They're Not.* (Sept. 30, 2020) Forbes.

v Bump, Philip, *What we know about those discarded Trump ballots in Pennsylvania* (Sept. 25, 2020) Washington Post.

Further, the President explicitly called on a white supremacist group, the Proud Boys, to “stand by” and urged his supporters to “go into the polls and watch very carefully.” Left unchallenged, this rhetoric has a dangerous potential of both suppressing the vote among historically targeted communities<sup>vi</sup> — including Arab Americans — leading to violence at the polls.

While we understand the intention of the CPD’s rule against moderators fact-checking the candidates,<sup>vii</sup> such amplification of disinformation about voting or the election process undermines the CPD’s broader efforts “intended in a nonpartisan manner to enhance the educational value of the debates themselves.”<sup>viii</sup> Unchecked disinformation—coupled with the President’s unwillingness to commit to accepting the results of the election itself—can lead to informal institutions such as the CPD’s debates to be weaponized in an effort to undermine American democracy itself.

Given the challenges and the civic educational goals of the CPD, we ask that future moderators are prompted to provide information to viewers on how to vote and affirm the safety of voting via the various options which exist. Moderators should also point to trusted sources of election-related information, such as state secretaries of state, local boards of elections, or other relevant election officials. This prompt could be given before or after the debate. Additionally, instead of asking moderators to provide a live fact-check of disinformation, they could simply preface any debate segment on election-related issues with the aforementioned prompts to reinforce the integrity of our democracy.

We are encouraged by the CPD’s statement that, “additional structure should be added to the format of the remaining debates,”<sup>ix</sup> and look forward to working with the Commission on what structure can best ensure that Americans view our electoral processes as safe and trustworthy. If you have any questions, please reach out to Ryan J. Suto, Esq. (rsuto@aaiusa.org; 202-652-4984) or David Vance (dvance@commoncause.org; 202-736-5712).

Respectfully,

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vi. Porterfield, Carlie, *White Supremacist Terrorism ‘On The Rise And Spreading’* (Jun. 25, 2020) Forbes.

vii. Epstein, Reid, *What Are the Rules for the First Debate Between Trump and Biden?* (Sept. 29, 2020) New York Times.

viii. *The Commission on Presidential Debates: An Overview*, The Commission on Presidential Debates.

xi. *CPD Statement* (Sept. 30, 2020) The Commission on Presidential Debates.