

Decision2008

The Race for President of the United States

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Partners Announce Plans for Presidential Primary Debates

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 30, 2007

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – The successful statewide partnership that produced four blockbuster debates during Florida's 2006 races for Governor and U.S. Senate is back – this time to help Americans choose candidates for the highest office in the land: President of the United States.

Decision 2008: Before You Vote, a project created by **Leadership Florida**, in partnership with the **Florida Press Association** and the **Florida Public Broadcasting Service**, will produce two one-hour LIVE debates featuring the major Republican and Democrat candidates for president. The debates, which are expected to generate a national television audience numbering in the millions, are scheduled for **Jan. 23 and 24 of 2008**, in what is shaping up to be the signal week of the presidential primary season.

Now that Gov. Charlie Crist and the Florida Legislature have propelled Florida to the front of the electoral heap, shifting the state's presidential primary from early March to Jan. 29, Florida voters have a new, highly visible and critical role in the national race for president. In addition to appealing to residents of such a diverse and dynamic bellwether state as Florida, candidates from both parties will enter these debates mindful of a unique national electoral calculus.

The first debate in the Decision 2008 project, featuring the major Republican candidates for president, will occur on **Jan. 23** – only one day after the New Hampshire primary in advance of Jan. 29 primaries in Florida and South Carolina. The second debate, on the following evening, **Jan. 24**, will feature the major Democrat candidates for president. One week after the Florida primary, voters in 24 states will go to the polls on Feb. 5, 2008 – the night that likely will determine the 2008 nominees to become the 44th president of the United States.

Letters of invitation have been sent to each of the major candidates for president and the Florida and national chairs of the Democratic and Republican parties. Organizers expect full participation, on account of Florida's pivotal importance as a swing state wielding 27 electoral votes and because of the critical timing of the state's primary election. Candidates who meet the federal eligibility requirements for the presidency, appear as a candidate for president on his or her party's Florida presidential primary ballot, and have at least 10 percent support among all likely voters who will participate in their respective primaries as determined by a poll taken by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research will be invited to participate in these important debates.

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“The debates of **Decision 2008: Before You Vote** will provide every voter here in Florida and those across our nation with the opportunity to learn more about the candidates and issues in these two primary contests,” said Jeff Bartel, chairman of Leadership Florida and vice president of external affairs for Florida Power & Light. “Democracy flows from an informed electorate, and we’re confident that millions of Americans will tune in to these lively, spirited and substantive debates.”

Both debates will take place on the campus of a soon-to-be-named public university in Florida. They will be broadcast LIVE in primetime on public television stations throughout Florida, with a public radio simulcast and Webcast, and will provide for comprehensive coverage by the daily news media. It is expected that C-SPAN will either simulcast the debates or rebroadcast them. The partners said that all of Florida’s commercial broadcasters and cable outlets will be granted complete rights to re-broadcast both debates – to further educate an expanded audience of voters.

Foy Maloy, chairman of the Florida Press Association and publisher of the Fernandina Beach News Leader, said the partnership promises to deliver Florida voters dynamic, fair and rigorous forums for the major candidates to present themselves and their policy prescriptions to Americans.

“These debates offer candidates the chance to prove their mettle,” Maloy said. “Florida’s newspapers are proud to be partnered in this important effort to give Americans the opportunity to evaluate those who seek to steer our ship of state.”

Indeed, Florida newspapers will devote substantial space to covering the races involved and, through the Florida Press Association, also will promote viewership of the live statewide debate series through the donation of prominent advertising space.

Sandy Cesaretti Ray, chairman of Florida Public Broadcasting Service, and also general manager of WSRE-TV, licensed to Pensacola Junior College, said she was confident that the critical timing of the debates would be the magnet to draw candidates to participate and viewers to watch and listen.

“These candidates know all too well how important Florida is in selecting the next occupant of the White House,” said Cesaretti Ray. “We are thrilled to be a partner in this effort, and as we approach these debates, we look forward to announcing a marquee broadcast journalist as moderator.”

The partnership in the “Decision 2008: Before You Vote” project demonstrates its deep reach, significance, balance and non-partisanship.

Leadership Florida has developed a reputation for 25 years as a builder of a stronger, diverse statewide sense of community. A respected non-partisan convener, LF has taken the lead in training and developing leaders with a statewide, rather than parochial, view of our state’s needs. The **Florida Press Association** is a nonprofit corporation designed to protect the freedoms and advance the professional standards of the press in Florida, with a membership that includes most of Florida’s daily and weekly newspapers. **Florida Public Broadcasting** is a non-profit network of 26 public television and radio stations dedicated to serving our local communities and who reach 99 percent of Florida’s population.

Additional information about Decision 2008: Before You Vote, including the criteria for candidates’ participation, is available at www.beforeyouvote.org.

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