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Candidates nights recall more civil time

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Beneath the stained-glass windows of Corpus Christi Catholic Church, they're practicing the rites of democracy.

From a bunting-draped table at the altar, candidates for legislator, judge and county commissioner preach about crime, taxes and health care. About two dozen voters in the pews write out questions about school funding, college affordability and the minimum wage.

In Corpus Christi's South Side neighborhood, more people are sitting in front of TV sets right now, getting their politics in 30-second blasts during breaks in Jeopardy! and Wheel of Fortune.

But at this candidates night, like at dozens of others scheduled between now and Election Day, debate often takes on a softer tone.

It's more of a civics lesson, boring parts included, served up with cookies and punch.

"We don't try to ambush anybody," said Erin Cordle of the Columbus Catholic Diocese, who coordinated the Wednesday night forum. "We don't allow the crowd to get abusive."

Like lawn signs and summer parades, candidates nights are an heirloom of old-time, neighbor-to-neighbor politicking that's hung on in the age of TV ad blitzes, recorded phone calls and Internet blogs.

Candidates and voters mingle over tables of snacks and stacks of campaign fliers. Questions are framed politely. Answers, even with one-minute time limits, can be long-winded.

And people who want your vote ask for it.

Dottie Miller's a reason the tradition lives on.

The 79-year-old sat among audience members Thursday night at the Prairie Township Senior Center, listening to candidates for the Ohio House, Franklin County Common Pleas Court and the Franklin County Board of Commissioners.

She didn't come for "gotcha" moments, funny put-downs or October surprises. She gets enough of that on TV.

She didn't really come either, it seems, for details about cluster development, shopping-mall proliferation and bond ratings.



The South Urban Academy Junior ROTC presents the colors to a nearly empty sanctuary at a candidates night at the Corpus Christi Catholic Church.



Elizabeth Stackel, left, and Debbie Stollenwerk prepare for candidates night at Corpus Christi Catholic Church on the South Side.

"I can see their eyes and facial expressions," Miller said. "I get more of a sense of their character than with the canned stuff."

A debate during last year's Prairie Township trustee race was standingroom only at the senior center, but Thursday's candidate night had about 90 folding chairs to spare.

Attendance, including candidates and supporters, was about 65.

That's a big turnout for one of these events, though. Just about every candidate recalls speaking to groups far smaller, where politicians outnumbered voters.

Marilyn Brown, a Democrat running for county commissioner, said she spoke to five voters at an earlier candidates night. Franklin County Appeals Judge Alan C. Travis, a 2005 appointee who's seeking his first elected term, said he figures even a small audience will go home and talk to friends and neighbors.

But as attendance declines, the number of events grows.

The Franklin County Consortium for Good Government, a group of churches and civic groups led by the League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Columbus, will sponsor nine Meet the Candidates forums before the end of October.

Business associations and other groups are claiming spots on the calendar as well.

On Wednesday, candidates raced from a Hilltop Business Association dinner on the West Side to the Franklin County Consortium's kickoff at Corpus Christi to a third forum at Peace Lutheran Church in Gahanna.

Three more were scheduled Thursday by the consortium, the Ohio Farm Bureau and the Columbus Board of Realtors.

Somali community leaders hosted their first candidates forum this year. Candidates said invitations are still coming in, despite Election Day looming just more than three weeks away.

For candidates, they're difficult to squeeze in but tougher to skip. Republican John Roscoe quickly pointed out Wednesday that his Ohio Senate opponent, incumbent Democrat Ray Miller, was a no-show at Corpus Christi.

Miller was detained by a meeting and arrived a half-hour later.

Columbus Councilwoman Maryellen O'Shaughnessy, who's making the rounds this fall for a Central Ohio Transit Authority sales-tax levy, said candidates who skip public forums do themselves no favors.

There aren't many opportunities to square off with your opponents, she said. And there aren't many opportunities left for voters to join the debate.

"You hate to see people using TV as their only source of information," O'Shaughnessy said. "The best communication in any campaign ... is face-to-face communication."

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