



Commentary: Election Forum “No Shows” Reveal Character

By **Mark Harmon** - October 26, 2020



Curb Center at Belmont University prior to start of second presidential debate on Oct. 22, 2020/ (Photo: Tennessee Lookout)

A funny thing happened on the way to the forum—specifically recent online League of Women Voters forums in Knox County. The funny thing was that the Republican candidates didn’t show up while the Democratic candidates did —with one exception within each party.

The League and its partner organizations planned a trio of Zoom forums with both a timekeeper and a local TV reporter as moderator, following an orderly pattern of questions and answers for competing candidates. The first forum had little difficulty as all three candidates for an open, non-partisan school board seat attended.

The second forum, however, had a noticeable absence. Incumbent Republican Congressman Tim Burchett was a no show. Following the rules, Democratic challenger Renee Hoyos was given three minutes to make a statement, and then was asked to leave. The remaining time was a give and take between State Senator Becky Duncan Massey and her Democratic Challenger, Dr. Jane George.



*U.S. Rep. Tim Burchett,
R-Knoxville (Photo: U.S. House of
Representatives)*

When the third and final forum rolled around, we realized how much of an outlier Massey was. This final Zoom chat was all about State House candidates. Incumbent Democrat Gloria Johnson was there, but her Republican challenger Elaine Davis ignored the event. Of the two women clashing for the open seat created by the retirement of Bill Dunn, only Democrat Elizabeth Rowland was there; the GOP’s Michelle Carringer was not.



Republican businessman Eddie Mannis, rebounding from his recent failed bid to become Knoxville’s mayor, didn’t bother with the forum, leaving Democrat Virginia Couch to speak about her own small business credentials. One of them will replace departing extremist Martin Daniel.

Former County Commissioner Sam McKenzie was in his Zoom box, but his on-ballot independent opponent was not there; no Republican sought the seat. Kari Keeling, a write-in candidate for a House seat in the northwest corner of Knox County, made an appearance, but neither Republican candidate Jason Lafferty nor independent option Greg Mills bothered to be there.

For Democrats, the only blemish in the pattern was for a district in the western part of the county where both incumbent radical right-winger Rep. Jason Zachary, R-Knoxville, and Democratic challenger Justin Davis failed to appear. Davis tells me he was absent because he had to deal with an accident at his workplace.

Congressman Tim Burchett’s snub is particularly galling in light of his refusal to agree to Hoyos’ challenge to do one-on-one debates. Political pundits rate the district safe for Republicans, and apparently Burchett cowers in the safety of that history.

Hoyos, however, has been running a strong campaign, raising substantial funds and using creative means of voter contact. Both sides have started TV ads. Burchett’s features him chatting with people around a tractor. He then declares, “Sure, the special interests don’t like me” while flogging his anti-Washington observations. The Burchett special interest statement is laughable. Campaign contribution data, tallied via OpenSecrets.org, show corporate cash and PAC money totaling \$190,000 for Burchett in this election cycle. Hoyos is refusing corporate PAC money.

The Hoyos TV ad takes aim at Burchett’s votes against relief funds regarding COVID-19 and some of his indefensible statements on the pandemic. Burchett is illustrated an inept car mechanic who makes silly claims where a car engine burns

behind him. Hoyos uses a fire extinguisher to put out the blaze, as she talks about her support for public health.

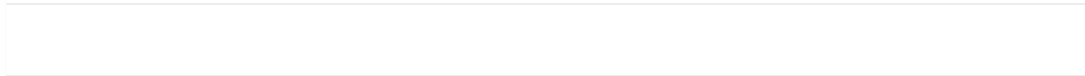


In 1998, I ran for Congress in the 13th District of Texas and became very familiar with candidate forums. I went to a whole bunch of them over the course of more than a year, winning my primary (despite being outspent) but failing to unseat the Republican incumbent who spent nearly half a million to win. He ignored my debate challenge and failed to show at every forum but one—and at that one claimed a conflict, was allowed to speak first and leave. That lame incumbent, Mac Thornberry, retires in two months from Congress after a long and shallow career serving radical-right policies.



Renee Hoyos (Photo: Hoyos For Congress)

That experience left me with respect for candidates of all stripes who march unafraid into direct clashes, and with a heavy suspicion of those (especially political veterans like Burchett) who make tactical decisions to duck them.



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