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2nd Congressional District / LoBiondo should debate

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey had planned a debate between Republican Rep. Frank LoBiondo and Democratic challenger Cassandra Shober - but LoBiondo has declined to participate.

His decision not to debate is a disservice to voters in his district.

And it gets worse.

Campaign manager Ron Filan explained the decision by saying the LoBiondo campaign did not think Shober "has shown her seriousness to this campaign nor the office for which she seeks."

Say what?

That statement makes the needle spin off the arrogance meter.

This is not LoBiondo's call. It's not up to a candidate to determine the legitimacy of a political opponent. No one in LoBiondo's campaign should need to be reminded of this, and no one should be surprised that the statement struck such a sour note.

Let's stipulate that debating skill isn't the most important prerequisite for public office. And in some debate formats, candidates simply dodge questions as they repeat their practiced talking points.

But as imperfect as they can be, debates are still the best forum for allowing voters to see and hear candidates side-by-side. When they work, they can help crystallize the choice that voters have to make.

Still, strange things can happen in any live forum. LoBiondo was burned a couple of years ago at a public meeting, when a questioner asked him to recite passages from the Constitution and then posted a YouTube video of the exchange. (For the record, we don't think it's necessary for our federal representatives to have the Constitution memorized. They just need to keep a copy handy.)

And incumbents often refuse to debate. They have the most to lose, after all. But it's especially ironic for LoBiondo to use such a heavy hand wielding the power of the incumbency when he was elected 18 years ago in a wave of anti-incumbency fervor, as he and Republicans nationwide were calling for term limits.

In that first campaign in 1994, LoBiondo said, "I think part of the trouble we're having in Washington is because members of Congress have been there too long. They don't have to come back to the real world."

LoBiondo has long since reneged on his pledge to abide by term limits. But even his political foes would have a hard time accusing him of being out of touch with his district - he makes frequent local appearances and speaks to many civic groups.

So why take such an arrogant no-debate position that so effectively makes him seem as though he is out of touch?

Posted in Editorials on Wednesday, September 19, 2012 12:01 am.

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