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Statewide Televised Debates in Florida U.S. Senate & Governor Races Announced by Leadership Florida, Florida Press Association

TALLAHASSEE – Florida’s exciting 2018 election year is headlined by vigorous races for Governor and U.S. Senate – and both will be spotlighted in live, hour-long, statewide televised debates announced today by Leadership Florida and the Florida Press Association. The two organizations, partnered in the most successful and respected ongoing debate series in Florida’s modern history, will hold the twin debates from the campus of Broward College, on October 23 & 24, from 7-8 p.m., just two weeks before voters go to the polls.

“Decision 2018: Before You Vote” will present the debates for what is expected to be a massive statewide television audience of viewers and voters who will have the opportunity to size up the two candidates for U.S. Senate and Governor. Incumbent Democratic U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson is expected to be challenged in his reelection bid by Gov. Rick Scott, who has not announced for the race yet. Robust primary races already are shaping up in the race for governor and the winning nominees will share their visions for Florida’s future in the “Before You Vote” debate. The contests are among the most anticipated and important in the nation, as Democrats try to win majority control of the U. S. Senate and recapture a Governor’s Office they have not won since 1994.

The debate programs will be broadcast in each of Florida’s 10 major media markets on select network affiliate broadcast partners. The debates will be produced by West Palm Beach-based ABC station WPBF/Ch. 25, with key guidance from veteran producer and project consultant Philip Alongi, a former longtime executive producer for NBC News. Criteria for candidates to qualify for participation in the debates will be announced soon, and major candidates in both parties are expected to appear.

“It wasn’t that long ago that Florida voters decided the presidency, and this year we could simultaneously help determine the direction of the U.S. Senate and of the third largest state in the nation,” said Leadership Florida Chair Beth Kigel. “Florida’s elections are among the most crucial in the nation this year, and our debates will surely be one of the best ways for voters to see the candidates present themselves and challenge their opponents.”

In addition to the role of Leadership Florida and the Florida Press Association as debate partners, Broward College will serve in the essential role of host site, and underwriting sponsors will include the Florida League of Cities, AARP, the Claude Pepper Center at Florida State University, and the League of Southeastern Credit Unions. One other sponsor is expected to join the project soon.

“The key to an informed electorate is a full and open discussion of the issues, and it’s vitally important that Florida voters understand their choices when deciding who will serve us in the U.S. Senate and the Governor’s Office in the coming years,” said Dean Ridings, President & CEO of the Florida Press Association. “We are proud to provide a quality, trusted forum for the kind of meaningful debate the framers had in mind when they established our system of government so long ago.”

By serving as the epicenter of Florida’s political discourse during the debate, Broward College will further its core role in the community. The debates are expected to attract dozens of journalists from Florida and around the nation.

“Our goal as educators is to foster thoughtful dialogue on important topics, and none will be more important than the future direction of our state and nation,” said Broward College President J. David Armstrong. “We are proud to host these important, timely debates so our students and all Floridians can hear the candidates share their vision for our state and nation.”

WPBF President and General Manager Caroline Taplett anticipates large viewership for the face-to-face matchups of the nominees, both during the live broadcast and in rebroadcast on multiple platforms.

“We are committed to producing a high-quality program that offers voters thought-provoking exchanges between the candidates who are seeking their support,” Taplett said. “Florida has a history of razor-thin statewide elections, and these debates could be a tipping point. We’re pleased to have the opportunity to bring them to a statewide audience.”

Broadcast market partners that will carry the debates statewide include:

Miami-Ft. Lauderdale ---WFOR (CBS)
West Palm Beach -----WPBF (ABC)
Orlando-----WESH (NBC)
Jacksonville -----First Coast News -- either WTLV (NBC) or WJXX (ABC)
Gainesville-----WCJB (ABC)
Tampa/St. Pete-----WFLA (NBC)
Tallahassee-----WCTV (CBS)
Pensacola-----WEAR (ABC)
Panama City-----WMBB (ABC)
Fort Myers-----Either WBBH (NBC) or WZVN (ABC)

About Leadership Florida

For 36 years, Leadership Florida has dedicated itself to bringing together emerging and existing leaders from across the state to challenge, prepare, and inspire them to build a better Florida. As a respected non-partisan organization, Leadership Florida provides meaningful forums and creates unique opportunities introducing members to fresh transformative ideas and information. Leadership Florida is a federally registered trademark. For more information, visit www.leadershipflorida.org.

*The **Florida Press Association** is a nonprofit organization with a purpose to protect the freedoms and advance the professional standards of the press in Florida, with a membership of Florida's daily and weekly newspapers and online local media. Visit www.flpress.com to learn more.*

About Broward College:

Serving more than 63,000 students annually, Broward College provides residents with certificate programs, two-year university-transfer degrees, two-year career degrees, and baccalaureate degrees in selected programs. The mission of the college is to provide high-quality educational programs and services that are affordable and accessible to a diverse community of learners. For more information, visit www.broward.edu.

WPBF 25 is the ABC affiliate serving the West Palm Beach-Ft. Pierce Designated Market Area. WPBF 25 is owned and operated by Hearst Television. Hearst Television is recognized as one of the industry's premier companies, and has been honored with numerous awards for industry innovation, community service, and distinguished reporting – including nine consecutive Walter Cronkite Awards for Excellence in Television Political Journalism.

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