

Scholar on U.S. Presidency to Provide 'Consumer's Guide' for Debate

Contributed by Lee Eric Smith
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OXFORD, Miss. - With only weeks until the Sept. 26 presidential debate at the University of Mississippi, the Department of Political Science is hosting "A Consumer's Guide to The Presidential Debate" on Sept. 2.

The event, at 7 p.m. in the Overby Center Auditorium, features Michael Nelson, Fulmer Professor of Political Science at Rhodes College and author of the recent "The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2007."

"Obviously, what the candidates have to say about the issues will be worth listening to," Nelson said. "But on election day, our choice is between two individuals not two platforms. The presidency is the one part of our constitutional system in which the power of an entire branch of government is lodged in one individual. That means character, intelligence, energy, openness to new ideas and even openness to criticism are all very important."

Richard Forgette, chair of the UM political science department, said that despite all the media coverage of the debate, it is important to put the event in proper perspective - something he expects Nelson to do during his talk.

"Professor Nelson is a very close observer of campaigns and the electoral process over time, and he will place the debate in context for voters on campus and in the community," Forgette said. "His talk will be to explain why debates matter, when they matter and for which voters."

"We've been electing a president for 18 months now, and most voters have already made up their minds," Forgette continued. "That's not to say that debates don't matter. They just matter to some voters more than others, and they can alter our perceptions of our vote choice. Dr. Nelson will take us through all of that in an engaging and useful way."

Nelson's first tip for watching the debates: You're the boss.

"Think of McCain and Obama as job candidates, the debates as the interview and yourself as an employer deciding which one has the qualities you want in the person who fills that job," Nelson said. "First impressions are important, but why not take advantage of the opportunity to evaluate the candidates over a period of several hours? That's the opportunity that the three presidential debates give us - why not take it?"

Nelson also said not to overlook the vice presidential debate. "Historically, there's about a one-in-three chance that one of the vice presidential candidates will become president someday," he said.

Nelson has published 22 books. Among the most recent are "The Presidency and the Political System, 8th ed." (2006), and "The Elections of 2004" (2005). He has published numerous articles in scholarly journals such as the Journal of Politics and Political Science Quarterly and in periodicals such as Newsweek, The New York Times and Virginia Quarterly Review.

In related news, as part of its debate-related academic program, UM is offering the academic course POL 100: Presidential Election Topics this fall semester. Nelson will address the class prior to his evening program.

Visit the Department of Political Science . For a complete listing of UM's debate-related events and more about the Sept. 26 presidential debate, visit <http://www.debate.olemiss.edu> .