



Arizona State Senate *Office of the President*

August 12, 2025

Chairman Brendan Carr
Federal Communications Commission
45 L St. NE
Washington, DC 20554
Brendan.Carr@fcc.gov

RE: Letter re Arizona PBS Investigation Request

Dear Chairman Carr:

As President of the Arizona State Senate, I write to request an investigation into the broadcast license for Arizona PBS. Recently uncovered documents show that Arizona PBS violated legal rules, contractual requirements, and long-standing traditions to improperly put its thumb on the scale of the 2022 Arizona governor's race.¹ Just like its investigations into ABC News' slanted 2024 debate moderation and CBS News' hidden 60 Minutes interview of then-Vice President Kamala Harris, the FCC should investigate whether Arizona PBS violated its duty to act in the public interest when it engaged in viewpoint discrimination against a candidate for governor.

Arizona PBS (KAET) is a licensed television broadcast station airing on Channel 8 in Phoenix.² Arizona PBS is owned and operated by the Arizona Board of Regents for Arizona State University.³ In 2022, Arizona PBS claimed that it was "the seventh most-watched public television station in the nation – and the largest owned and operated by a university, reaching nearly 2 million Arizona homes ...".⁴

¹ See Stacey Barchenger, *Katie Hobbs rejected a Kari Lake debate in 2022. Here's why ASU gave her TV time anyway*, ARIZONA REPUBLIC (Aug. 6, 2025), at <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/>, attached as Exhibit 1.

² Arizona PBS' facility number is 2728.

³ Arizona PBS' address is 555 N. Central Avenue, Suite 500, Phoenix, AZ 85004.

⁴ History – Arizona PBS, May 30, 2022 <https://azpbs.org/about/arizona-pbs-history-timeline/>.

1700 WEST WASHINGTON STREET, PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85007

602-926-4136

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For years, Arizona PBS has broadcast election debates sponsored by the Arizona Clean Elections Commission, which is authorized by Arizona law to sponsor debates. See A.R.S. § 16-956(A)(2). By law, “[t]he commission shall require participating candidates to attend and participate in debates and may specify by rule penalties for nonparticipation.” *Id.* The commission has, in fact, promulgated a rule addressing when candidates decide to not participate in debates: “In the event that a participating candidate is opposed in the primary election or general election but is the only candidate taking part in a primary election period or general election period debate, as applicable, the debate will be held and will consist of a 30-minute question and answer session for the single participating candidate.” A.A.C. R2-20-107(K) (emphasis added). The contract between Arizona PBS and the Clean Elections Commission to broadcast the 2022 debates quoted the Commission’s statutory authority to penalize nonparticipation in debates.⁵

As required by the Clean Elections Commission rule, Arizona PBS “traditionally offered interviews when candidates would not debate.”⁶ In fact, during the 2022 Democratic primary for governor, Arizona PBS provided a one-on-one interview to Marco López after Katie Hobbs refused to participate in the primary debate.⁷ Arizona PBS also initially announced that it would follow this same practice during the 2022 general election.⁸

Arizona PBS broke this long-standing debate tradition and its contractual obligations for political reasons during the 2022 general election for governor. Like she had during the primary, Katie Hobbs ducked the debate with her opponent, Kari Lake.⁹ After being told on the day of Hobbs’ non-debate decision that the tradition had been to give a solo interview to the candidate who agreed to debate, Arizona State University’s president pushed back in an email to Arizona State’s Media Enterprise head, Mi-Ai Parrish: “Whatever the format there remains the fact that it is our venue and brand. We need structure...and format.....and....people who believe in elections as participants.”¹⁰ The university president separately described Kari Lake as the debate’s “election denier issue.”¹¹ Parrish reportedly also expressed concerns about Kari Lake’s election integrity views to the executive director of the Clean Elections Commission, telling him that putting “a person on television with those views was wrong.”¹²

The day after the university president questioned the long-standing tradition that would have provided Kari Lake with a solo interview because of her positions on election integrity,

⁵ State of Arizona Clean Elections Commission Purchase Order, Jan. 28, 2022, p. 1 (PDF p. 2), at <https://newsroom.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz3676/files/2025-08/ASU%20contract%20with%20CCEC.pdf>.

⁶ See Barchenger note 1, *supra*.

⁷ Stacey Barchenger, *Democrat Marco López promises pardons for abortion providers, women if he's elected governor*, ARIZONA REPUBLIC (July 1, 2022), at <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/07/01/arizona-governor-candidate-marco-lopez-talks-abortion-border-education/7779462001/>.

⁸ *Arizona PBS hosting general election debates*, Arizona PBS (Sept. 15, 2022), at <https://azpbs.org/pressroom/2022/09/arizona-pbs-hosting-general-election-debates/>.

⁹ See Barchenger note 1, *supra*.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

university officials internally predicted that Hobbs would win the election. According to Parrish, “Katie is getting roasted hard, but I don’t think it will matter.”¹³ The university president’s chief of staff agreed: “I don’t think it matters either.”¹⁴ Even though she refused to debate, Arizona PBS ultimately provided Hobbs with an unprecedented 30-minute interview.¹⁵

Arizona PBS’ decision was made at the highest levels of its organization when Arizona State’s president communicated his views to Parrish, the head of the university’s Media Enterprise. In 2022, Arizona State shifted Arizona PBS on the organization chart under the Media Enterprise instead of the university’s journalism school.¹⁶ In her role overseeing Arizona PBS, Parrish sent multiple emails about the Lake debate issue to the leadership of Arizona PBS.¹⁷ “That ASU leaders would consider one candidate’s views, and then reach down and influence television programming, called into question Arizona PBS’ independence as a news organization and its autonomy from university influence, experts said.”¹⁸ Perhaps because of the legal threat that they posed, Arizona State took more than two years—743 days—to produce the internal emails exposing these partisan conversations.

As the Supreme Court has explained, “candidate debates are of exceptional significance in the electoral process.” *Arkansas Educ. Television Comm’n v. Forbes*, 523 U.S. 666, 675 (1998). In debates, “a broadcaster cannot grant or deny access to a candidate debate on the basis of whether it agrees with a candidate’s views” because such viewpoint discrimination would present “an inevitability of skewing the electoral dialogue.” *Id.* at 676. Unlike the PBS station before the Supreme Court, Arizona PBS’ actions were not “in good faith;” instead, they were “the result of political pressure from ... inside” Arizona PBS and were “an attempted manipulation of the political process.” *Id.* at 683.

The FCC has made clear that broadcast media organizations cannot manipulate public sentiment or the political process. “Rigging or slanting the news is a most heinous act against the public interest — indeed, there is no act more harmful to the public’s ability to handle its affairs.” *In Re Complaints Covering CBS Program “Hunger in America,”* 20 F.C.C.2d 143, 151 (1969). To prevent news distortion, the FCC has “an obligation to ensure that there exist reasonable safeguards against broadcaster favoritism.” *In re Fox Broadcasting Corp.*, 11 FCC Rcd 11101, 11111 (1996). In particular, the FCC must ensure that broadcasters airing candidate presentations use a format that does not “aid[] a candidate in a partisan, discriminatory fashion.” *In re King Broadcasting*, 6 FCC Rcd 4998, 5000 (1991). Broadcasters also must not take action “designed to serve the political advantage of a candidate.” *In re PBS*, 7 FCC Rcd 4681, 4682 (1992).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

You have consistently advocated for enforcing the public interest requirement for broadcast licenses. As you have explained, “media companies are required by law to operate in the public interest.”¹⁹ “Broadcasters are differently situated than others”²⁰ because they “have had the privilege of using a scarce and valuable public resource—our airwaves.”²¹ You have observed that “[b]roadcast licenses are not sacred cows,”²² and that “[n]ews distortion doesn’t cut it.”²³ And you have warned that licensees who do not comply with their public interest obligations could be penalized by license revocation.²⁴ Under your leadership, the FCC has opened or re-opened news distortion investigations into multiple outlets, including local PBS stations.²⁵

Arizona PBS has defended its 2022 actions by claiming that the long-standing tradition of interviewing the only debate participant “conflicted with Arizona PBS’s licensing requirements.”²⁶ This interpretation is inconsistent with Arizona PBS’ own actions, including during the 2022 primary election, as well as PBS’ legal guidance.²⁷ It also conflicted with the contract that Arizona PBS signed, which incorporated the Clean Elections Commission process for penalizing nonparticipating candidates. As the PBS public editor explained, Hobbs’ decision not to debate “triggered a contractual next step: Lake would appear in a solo town hall on Arizona PBS.”²⁸ But Arizona PBS refused to honor that contractual obligation.

Based on the emails between top university officials, Arizona PBS made broadcast decisions based on how it viewed Kari Lake’s positions on election integrity and Katie Hobbs’ electoral prospects. Arizona PBS did not act in the public interest because it exhibited “broadcaster favoritism” for Hobbs and acted “in a partisan, discriminatory fashion” that was “designed to serve the political advantage of a candidate.” In an election decided by just 17,000 votes out of more than 2.5 million votes cast, Arizona PBS provided Hobbs with a crucial lifeline

¹⁹ Brendan Carr (@BrendanCarrFCC), X (Nov. 23, 2024, 7:18 PM), <https://x.com/BrendanCarrFCC/status/1860478092721959090>.

²⁰ Brendan Carr (@BrendanCarrFCC), X (Nov. 7, 2024, 8:39 AM), <https://x.com/BrendanCarrFCC/status/1854519146752413856>.

²¹ Brendan Carr (@BrendanCarrFCC), X (Nov. 18, 2024, 12:57 AM), <https://x.com/BrendanCarrFCC/status/1858389116930425092>.

²² Carr note 19, *supra*.

²³ Brendan Carr (@BrendanCarrFCC), X (April 16, 2025, 6:58 PM), <https://x.com/BrendanCarrFCC/status/1912641900558893377>.

²⁴ Geoff Bennett and Karina Cuevas, *FCC chairman says network oversight offers a needed ‘course correction,’* PBS (July 31, 2025), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/fcc-chairman-says-network-oversight-offers-a-needed-course-correction>.

²⁵ Liam Scott, *FCC launches media investigations, reinstates complaints*, VOICE OF AMERICA (Feb. 5, 2025), at <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-communications-agency-reinstates-complaints-starts-investigating-media/7964421.html>.

²⁶ Arizona State University Media Relations and Strategic Communications, *Arizona PBS*, at <https://newsroom.asu.edu/arizona-pbs>.

²⁷ See PBS Standards, *Candidate Appearances*, at <https://www.pbs.org/standards/media-law-101/candidate-appearances/>.

²⁸ Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, *No Debate*, PBS (Nov. 5, 2022), <https://www.pbs.org/publiceditor/blogs/pbs-public-editor/no-debate/>.

by giving her a 30-minute statewide interview broadcast to two million Arizona homes instead of the solo interview to Kari Lake that the law and tradition required.²⁹

The FCC should investigate Arizona PBS' blatant viewpoint discrimination against Kari Lake and partisan calculations designed to benefit Katie Hobbs. I respectfully request that the FCC take appropriate enforcement action, including license revocation, to protect the public interest and ensure that Arizonans will not be subjected to biased media manipulation in future elections.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Warren Petersen", written in a cursive style.

Warren Petersen
President of the Arizona State Senate

cc: Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
45 L Street NE
Washington, DC 20554

²⁹ Perhaps coincidentally, Arizona PBS' broadcast license expired on October 1, 2022 and was not renewed until October 27, 2022. See TV Station Information KAET, <https://publicfiles.fcc.gov/tv-profile/kaet>. Arizona PBS' decision to deviate from the law, its contract, and tradition occurred was publicly revealed on October 12, 2022. Other Phoenix broadcast stations with expiring licenses in Fall 2022 received renewals much earlier. See, e.g., TV Station Information KTVK, <https://publicfiles.fcc.gov/tv-profile/ktvk> (renewed Sept. 1, 2022 before Oct. 1, 2022 expiration); TV Station Information KPNX, <https://publicfiles.fcc.gov/tv-profile/kpnx> (renewed Sept. 21, 2022 before Oct. 1, 2022 expiration).

Katie Hobbs rejected a Kari Lake debate in 2022. Here's why ASU gave her TV time anyway

Stacey Barchenger
Arizona Republic

AI-assisted summary ASU officials, including former Arizona Republic publisher Mi-Ai Parrish, privately discussed how to handle the 2022 gubernatorial debate because of candidate Kari Lake's election denial stance. Emails reveal President Michael Crow and his aides favored offering Democrat Katie Hobbs a separate interview on Arizona PBS, breaking with precedent and ending the station's partnership with the Clean Elections Commission. The decision sparked controversy and raised questions about Arizona PBS's journalistic independence and potential legal risks for Arizona State University.

Arizona State University President Michael Crow and his aides, including a former publisher of The Arizona Republic, privately discussed what to do amid a messy public dispute over a gubernatorial debate in 2022.

They had what Crow called an "election denier issue." The former publisher, Mi-Ai Parrish, told the debate sponsor that it was wrong to give someone with those views — a nod to GOP candidate Kari Lake — television airtime.

Their discussion, documented in emails obtained by The Republic, as well as additional reporting, appeared to favor one candidate over another: Democrat Katie Hobbs over Lake.

Not only did the university power brokers' decision to offer Hobbs an interview on Arizona PBS break from years of precedent, but it also permanently ruptured the station's two-decade partnership to air debates sponsored by the voter-approved Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission. Commission rules and debate terms stipulate that a candidate

Aug. 6, 2025, 6:15 a.m. MT **Key Points**

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 1/13

receives a one-on-one interview if their competitors do not agree to meet on the debate stage.

That decision took into account Hobbs' political fortunes and Lake's false view that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, the emails sent by those at the top of the higher-education hierarchy show. They appeared to leave journalists at Arizona PBS, the university's public broadcasting station, and the staff at Clean Elections in the dark.

Crow made his feelings plain in a message on Sept. 11, 2022, the day Hobbs' campaign made the decision final that Hobbs would not debate Lake.

"Whatever the format there remains the fact that it is our venue and brand," Crow wrote to Parrish. "We need structure...and format.....and....people who believe in elections as participants."

That ASU leaders would consider one candidate's views, and then reach down and influence television programming, called into question Arizona PBS' independence as a news organization and its autonomy from university influence, experts said. And it could have risked legal repercussions for Arizona's largest university, they added.

The Republic requested the emails under Arizona public records law on Oct. 13, 2022, the day after Hobbs revealed on national television that Arizona PBS had offered her the interview. The university provided 690 pages of lightly redacted emails on Oct. 25, 2024 — 743 days later and just before the 2024 election, in which Lake was a candidate for Senate.

The university declined The Republic's requests to interview its leaders for this story. ASU spokesman Jay Thorne responded to 13 written questions but declined to answer any follow-ups.

Parrish and Batt into Batts, the dean of the university's journalism school who was the public face during the fallout of the decision, did not return calls seeking comment.

Thorne reaffirmed what university leaders said publicly years ago, that ASU prioritized "the integrity of the election process." Arizona PBS invited both Lake and Hobbs for interviews, an attempt to give voters a chance to hear from both candidates so they could make an informed decision, Thorne said.

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 2/13

The leaders' discussion reflected that "those involved in hosting the debate were aware of the sensitivities involved in negotiations between the campaigns and the dynamics involved regarding debate format and conditions," Thorne said.

Lake, a Donald Trump acolyte, campaigned in 2022 on the false claim that Trump won the 2020 presidential election. By the time of the 2022 general election debate, she had already claimed her own race had been subject to "stealing" and fraud.

Hobbs' campaign said she did not want to be part of Lake's "spectacle" and spent about a week negotiating with voter-approved debate sponsor Clean Elections to change the format and give separate interviews with each candidate. The Clean Elections Commission rejected the idea, and both it and Arizona PBS told the public they would proceed as they had before: Giving Lake a one-on-one interview.

When Hobbs revealed in an MSNBC interview that Arizona PBS planned to give her an interview anyway, it set off a fevered response.

Clean Elections backed out, taken by surprise by Hobbs' announcement and unable to get answers from Arizona PBS about the decision. Hobbs got her interview on Arizona PBS, and Lake got an interview hosted by Clean Elections on another television station as she pledged not to appear at any PBS-affiliated events.

Lake held a characteristically combative news conference outside ASU's journalism school blasting Crow for putting his thumb on the scale, prompting public backlash against the university and additional security precautions.

'What outcome are you seeking?' top aide asks Crow

While the public watched that debate drama unfold through news headlines, ASU's powerbrokers had an internal debate of their own, the emails obtained by The Republic show.

In early September, two days before Hobbs' campaign said she would not debate, ASU senior vice president and Crow's chief of staff James O'Brien reached out to Parrish to "catch up" about debate discussions. The emails indicate they planned a phone conversation that day.

Parrish then emailed leadership at Arizona PBS, saying, "We may have issues." The station's senior director and content officer, Ebonye Delaney, questioned whether Parrish was concerned about federal law for broadcasters known as equal time, and said offering both

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 3/13

Lake and Hobbs airtime could end the agreement with Clean Elections to partner on future debates.

Parrish also sent the latest update on the debate format to O'Brien and Crow, noting the practice had been to give the agreeable candidate 30 minutes. That had happened months earlier, when Hobbs refused to debate her Democratic opponent in the primary, Marco López, Parrish wrote. López got an interview on Arizona PBS as a result.

Crow thanked Parrish, and later added to Parrish: "Whatever the format there remains the fact that it is our venue and brand. We need structure...and format.....and....people who believe in elections as participants."

Crow, in a message to O'Brien and Parrish the same day, directed them to "make sure you are both on the same page here." Parrish wrote to an adviser to the station's general manager that she "heard from Mike" and "things are proceeding."

"What outcome are you seeking?" Parrish asked Crow, though no response from him was included in the emails provided to The Republic.

After Hobbs publicly declined the debate, Parrish and O'Brien considered the political reverberations.

"Katie is getting roasted hard, but I don't think it will matter," Parrish wrote to him in a Sept. 12, 2022, email. "Bigtime businesspeople are hosting Republicans and Independents for Hobbs next week. Najafi, Hirsch, Harper, etc., hosting."

O'Brien agreed with her: "I don't think it matters either."

In the following days, Parrish scheduled a meeting with an ASU lawyer about the "PBS debate contract" and requested a copy of the contract from station staff because she was "asked for it" and "Jim wanted to see it."

On Sept 28, 2022, Batts and Parrish scheduled a call on the subject of "gubernatorial debate." Batts then emailed O'Brien asking for a meeting: "Got a minute?" he wrote in the subject line.

"Mi-Ai just informed me on the decision regarding an interview with Katie Hobbs," Batts wrote. "I have a couple of questions. Would you have time to talk today?"

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 4/13

O'Brien scheduled a call with Batts for that evening, and requested another the following day, according to the emails.

Four days later, on Oct. 3, 2022, an Arizona PBS producer reached out to Hobbs' campaign, writing, "Arizona State University and Arizona PBS" were inviting her for an interview.

Several days after that, Republic columnist Bill Goodykoontz contacted Arizona PBS journalist Ted Simons to confirm details about how to watch Lake's interview and asked if Hobbs had been offered a separate one-on-one. Simons passed the message to Delaney, who passed it along to Batts, asking how to respond, according to the emails.

Batts responded that "Arizona PBS/Horizon has offered Hobbs the opportunity for a separate interview," but that there was "nothing else to report. Period. Hard stop." "Horizon" is the public affairs show hosted by Simons, who is also the debate moderator. Delaney questioned not mentioning ASU, and Batts wrote back to tell her simply: "Arizona PBS and Horizon."

On Oct. 12, the behind-the-scenes scheduling spilled into public view for the first time, causing a frenzied reaction. Until the moment Hobbs revealed the interview on MSNBC, Arizona PBS' public statements in news releases were that it would follow the law and give Lake the one-on-one.

Reporters sought out Crow in the aftermath, hoping to understand his role. The longtime university president told the Arizona Agenda politics newsletter he did not make a policy-level decision about debates but that he did "indicate that we need to continue to fulfill our mission of unbiased and non-partisan coverage of public figures and talk to important people in the public realm like Lake and Hobbs to have the public learn of their views, even if there is no debate." Crow declined to speak to The Republic at the time, with an spokesperson saying: "This is a PBS matter."

Crow wrote the station merely responded after there was no agreement on a debate and that he was "not sure why Lake is asking folks to call us."

"Hopefully folks are asking (Clean Elections) how they tried to solve the election denial issue. I am not sure if they asked the candidates to sign something about whether or not they agreed with due process and rule of law as it governs elections or not," he wrote.

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 5/13

Parrish at the time described the decision as an institutional one made with democracy in mind, even if it was "messy."

She told The Republic that "democracy is most important to us, to inform the people of Arizona on this really important issue."

But Parrish had also expressed concern about Lake's views in a conversation with Clean Elections, according to Tom Collins, executive director of the commission. Collins said Parrish told commission staff that putting "a person on television with those views was wrong."

Arizona PBS had done just that only months earlier.

Lake and three other candidates seeking the GOP nomination for governor debated on the Arizona PBS stage in partnership with Clean Elections, a raucous affair that went viral for its quips and heavily featured Lake's false claims of stolen elections. Arizona PBS and Clean Elections in September 2022 also hosted a debate featuring Mark Finchem, the GOP nominee for secretary of state who claimed election results were "irredeemably compromised" and furthered false election conspiracies.

Clean Elections paid Arizona PBS \$234,000 for debates that year, in accordance with its contract, according to public records provided by the commission. It paid about \$41,000 for the hastily arranged interview with Lake on another station.

Collins said Clean Elections was taken aback that Parrish, who represented a public entity and journalism organization, would object to including Lake because they "don't like what this person is saying."

"To say that it was a shock would be an understatement," Collins told The Republic. "And then to act on that, it really was surprising."

"Viewpoint based distinctions between speakers are not something that public entities should be lightly contemplating," he said.

ASU's decision 'a definite problem of journalistic ethics,' expert says

The debate debacle at ASU and Arizona PBS falls into an area of First Amendment law that is greatly nuanced by decades of federal regulation of broadcasters, especially public ones,

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 6/13

according to Robert Corn-Revere, chief counsel to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

Broadly speaking, the First Amendment prevents government from discriminating based on viewpoints.

Corn-Revere also pointed to a 1998 U.S. Supreme Court case called *Arkansas Educational Television Commission v. Forbes* that confirmed public broadcasters are protected by the First Amendment and broadcast law when they exercise independent journalistic judgment in organizing debates.

The Arkansas commission, which operated several television stations, excluded Ralph Forbes from a congressional debate on grounds he was not a serious candidate. Forbes sued, alleging he was kept out because of his views. The nation's top court affirmed the stations' decision, finding it was made based on objective criteria. Those included that Forbes was not a serious candidate, had little if any financial support and little public backing. Two justices with Arizona roots — Sandra Day O'Connor and then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist — joined the majority in the 6-3 ruling.

"The broadcaster's decision to exclude Forbes was a reasonable, viewpoint-neutral exercise of journalistic discretion consistent with the First Amendment," the court ruled.

Corn-Revere said the situation at ASU could raise a legal question about compliance with the Forbes decision, but he did not want to speculate on the situation without knowing more details.

"If a journalistic organization is hosting a candidate debate and makes its decisions based on what those candidates think or what their views are, then I would say that is a definite problem of journalistic ethics," he said. "And in the public broadcasting context, you may have legal issues as well."

"If you're using other factors — simply you think the candidate is too ugly to be on the air or you think a candidate has abhorrent views, or whatever else — then it could be a very different question both ethically and legally," he said.

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 7/13

Who is Mi-Ai Parrish, the adviser to Michael Crow?

Parrish is a well-connected journalism leader and was president and publisher of The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com from 2015 to early 2018.

During the 2022 election cycle, Parrish was managing director for ASU's Media Enterprise, a unit that includes the school's media ventures, and reported up to O'Brien. Arizona PBS had previously fallen under ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, but that year was shifted to the Media Enterprise.

That Parrish played a role in the decision-making has drawn scrutiny before. At the time of the debate, Lake attacked Parrish over social media posts that appeared to support Hobbs and called Lake "unfit" to lead, posts that Parrish defended at the time.

The Arizona Agenda in 2023 revealed that Parrish ran a consulting firm even as she led ASU-affiliated media organizations — the kind of outside work that is not allowed in independent newsrooms because of its potential to create real or perceived conflicts of interest. Journalists should be independent of what they are covering, and bar any outside influences from dictating or shaping coverage.

The firm, MAP Strategies Group, listed some clients on its website: Arizona Public Service Co., Banner Health, the city of Glendale, and the Center for the Future of Arizona, a nonprofit run by Crow's wife, Sybil Francis.

Parrish told the Agenda nearly two years ago some of those clients were old, and she would remove them from the site, though many — including those named here — were still listed when this story was published. She also told the Agenda she filed a conflict of interest form every year. When the Agenda asked ASU for those documents, the university responded 11 months later that it did not have those public records.

The Republic also asked for conflict of interest disclosures, but ASU did not respond.

Nor did the university's spokespeople answer questions about when employees could have other jobs. ASU employees can have outside work that does "not interfere with their positions at ASU or create a conflict of commitment," according to a 2023 letter and policy document from Crow.

That document said employees must not engage in activities that create a conflict of interest.

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2025/08/06/asu-governor-debate-kari-lake-katie-hobbs/84659134007/> 8/13

Interviewing Hobbs showed 'questionable judgment,' PBS editor says

Don Heider, a journalism ethics expert, said it was "inherently irreconcilable" that Parrish was in a position to influence news coverage while having a consulting business.

"It's the appearance of impropriety, the appearance of a conflict of interest," he said. "It's so hard to get public trust and credibility. We don't want to do anything that's going to compromise that public trust in the product we're putting out every day. And so that's the core issue."

Heider is the executive director of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. He is a former television journalist and was the dean of the School of Communication at Loyola University in Chicago. In 2021, he was a finalist to become the dean at the Cronkite School, a position that ultimately went to Batts.

Heider said the lack of transparency in communicating the decision to offer Hobbs an interview also raised questions, even if he could understand the news value of offering both candidates airtime. Allowing the public to hear from both is "a core value that we should all be doing," he said.

The debate controversy in 2022 was such that even the Public Broadcasting Service's public editor responded in a blog post.

Public Editor Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, a journalist for decades, told The Republic his job is to represent the audience as an ombudsman, but also help viewers understand PBS. While he works for PBS, his work is done independently and for stations is like being called to the principal's office, he said. When PBS was questioned for the decision to offer Hobbs an interview, he began reporting.

He first explained that PBS' member stations are not owned by PBS, as with other networks. PBS stations are run autonomously, with programming decisions made at the local level except for prime-time shows. Arizona PBS' broadcast license is held by the Arizona Board of Regents for ASU.

To Sandoval-Palos, debates are a trustworthy part of political discourse, allowing candidates to challenge one another's views and veracity. He said he was concerned that the disruption or interference in Arizona gave fuel to critics, like Lake, who claim media bias even when there is none.

8/7/25, 11:14 AM Why ASU broke years of precedent to give Katie Hobbs TV time in 2022

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He concluded that the stakes should have been clear to everyone involved what would happen if Hobbs did not debate, and that the university's "questionable judgment overruled what was supposed to be an orderly — and prescribed — follow-up to one candidate's decision to skip the live debate." Sandoval-Palos said he got the sense the decision came down from Crow's office, and occurred in part because the television station manager at the time was out on leave. What was left was an "unfair blemish" on the reputation of the station, he said.

Nationally, at least a dozen PBS licenses are held by universities, which can mean better funding but also raise concerns about their independence. As when they are owned by government entities, that can create a "precarious kind of a relationship and an interesting threat to independent journalism," Sandoval-Palos said. PBS has recommended stations adopt editorial independence policies, recognizing such situations have occurred.

Was Arizona PBS' broadcast license at risk?

The university leaned on laws that regulate television stations to justify offering Hobbs an interview.

Today, public media is being targeted by the Trump administration and some stations are at risk of closure as a result. News organizations, including PBS, have responded with lawsuits. Trump, already known for retaliating against journalists he views as biased, has ramped up his critiques. At his request, Congress in July killed \$1.1 billion funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, forcing closure of the entity that delivers federal funds to PBS, NPR and their stations.

The head of the corporation warned the cut could shutter stations in rural areas, leaving millions of Americans without a trusted source of information, educational programming and emergency alert notifications.

And Lake, a former news anchor, has taken her own condemnation of journalism to Washington, D.C. She is now working for the Trump administration as senior adviser to the U.S. Agency for Global Media. Her tenure there has seen the dismantling of publicly funded news organizations that work overseas, which she has argued were necessary to shrink federal bureaucracy. Opponents said her moves weakened the nation's efforts to counterbalance authoritarianism around the world.

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ASU, through a statement from Batts, said in 2022 the station was resuming its role as a news agency because Clean Elections did not secure a debate between Lake and Hobbs.

Thorne, the ASU spokesperson, confirmed that journalists at Arizona PBS were not involved in a "management decision" about the station's responsibilities under its license. "The station is not operated on the basis of a vote among journalists," he said.

"The priority for the university and for those involved was the integrity of the election process, which included providing an equal opportunity to all candidates in accordance with the broadcast license and for providing voters with an opportunity to have information from which they could make an informed decision," Thorne told The Republic.

He also said, "Clean Elections' practice of hosting single participant debates is inconsistent with the law governing broadcast licenses causing an irreconcilable conflict."

Arizona PBS, in partnership with Clean Elections, traditionally offered interviews when candidates would not debate. That occurred just months earlier in 2022, when López got a one-on-one in the Democratic primary, and in 2018, when then-incumbent Gov. Doug Ducey would not debate his primary challenger, Ken Bennett.

The station also aired three other one-on-one interviews when all candidates in congressional races would not agree to debate in 2022, according to videos available online.

Corn-Revere and another media law expert questioned ASU's interpretation of the federal communication law provision colloquially known as equal time.

The 1934 Communications Act said broadcasters must provide equal opportunity to opposing candidates when they give airtime to others, according to Andrew Jay Schwartzman. The law requires a candidate request that equal time, said Schwartzman, who is senior counselor at Benton Institute for Broadband & Society and a lawyer focusing on media regulations.

That was the grievance when then-presidential candidate Kamala Harris appeared on "Saturday Night Live" just before the 2024 election. NBC later aired a video recorded clip of Trump during a NASCAR playoff race after concerns the network had violated the equal time law.

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Schwartzman said the Federal Communications Commission, which licenses television stations, almost never revokes a license. Still, he said stations are cautious to avoid regulatory processes or lawsuits.

The federal law also exempts debates and some news interviews from that equal-time requirement because they are a bona fide news event. PBS' guidelines spell out that debates and news interviews are exempt from equal-time rules.

"The notion ... that the Communications Act doesn't let us have a one-person debate is wrong," Schwartzman said. "You can't blame that on the Communications Act."

After the Lake-Hobbs meltdown, Hobbs went on to win the 2022 election by a sliver. For years, Lake challenged the result in court, never able to prove her claims misconduct affected the outcome. Her lawyer was suspended for lying in the process.

Political debates in 2024 and 2025 took on a new look.

Arizona PBS continued to host its own debates under the leadership of a new station general manager, Scott Woelfel, who reports to Parrish.

And Clean Elections convened a working group to hone its debate approach, ultimately leading to a partnership with the Arizona Media Association, the trade group for Arizona's newspaper, radio, television and online newsrooms. Content from the 29 debates held in 2024 was used more than 1,600 times by local media organizations as a result of that partnership, according to a December post-debate analysis done for Clean Elections.

Arizona Republic reporter Stacey Barchenger covers the Governor's Office and gubernatorial elections, and in 2022 co-hosted multiple Clean Elections debates aired on Arizona PBS. She was not compensated by any entity but *The Republic* for that work. A communication issue about debate terms led Kari Lake to object to Barchenger serving as a moderator for a debate in the Republican primary in June 2022, months before the general election.

Barchenger infrequently appeared as a guest on Arizona PBS' public affairs show "Journalists' Roundtable," most recently in September 2023, and like other guests, was paid by ASU for each show. She has made rare and uncompensated appearances on the station's news programs since.

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Reach the reporter at stacey.barchenger@arizonarepublic.com or 480-416-5669.

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