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BOHANNAN AND MILLER-MEEKS HIT WITH FEC COMPLAINT FOR BOYCOTTING OPEN DEBATE, ACCEPTING RESTRICTED TV AIRTIME

After dodging a three-way Iowa PBS debate, major-party nominees face federal campaign finance complaint alongside Gray Media over two-candidate forum.

DAVENPORT, IA — Independent congressional candidate Michael Bridgford formally filed a sworn administrative complaint with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) on September 29, 2026 against both major-party campaigns in the Iowa First Congressional District - Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Christina Bohannon - as well as television broadcaster Gray Media, for violating federal campaign finance laws in connection with an upcoming televised debate.

The complaint alleges that after both Miller-Meeks and Bohannon boycotted the non-partisan *Iowa Press Debate* on Iowa PBS - where all three certified general election candidates had met published objective standards and received invitations - the two campaigns negotiated a restricted, two-person forum with Gray Media's KWQC - Davenport and KCRG - Cedar Rapids to shield themselves from a competitive stage.

Under the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA, 52 U.S.C. § 30118) and 11 C.F.R. § 110.13, broadcasters are legally prohibited from staging debates that advance favored candidates or fail to use pre-established, objective criteria. When campaigns knowingly participate in an exclusionary, non-qualifying forum, the free airtime and studio production provided by the station constitute an illegal, corporate in-kind contribution accepted by the participating candidates.

A Calculated Boycott of the Public Stage

In August broadcaster Iowa PBS applied its pre-established criteria and extended invitations to Miller-Meeks, Bohannon, and Bridgford. Among other requirements, it required all candidates raise at least \$50,000 by July 1. Bohannon and Miller-Meeks raised over \$7M each, while Bridgford raised nearly \$190K - the 4th largest war chest nationwide among Independents and in the top 25% of all challengers for House seats in 2026. Rather than defend their records before Iowa voters in an open format, both major-party candidates turned down the invitation, shuttering the continuously-running forum for decades. In fact, Iowa PBS hosted the only prior debates between Miller-Meeks and Bohannon in both 2022 and 2024.

Only after refusing the Iowa PBS stage did the Bohannon and Miller-Meeks campaigns agree to a two-candidate broadcast with Gray Media. When challenged to produce the statutory pre-established standards used to restrict the roster, the broadcaster claimed a new requirement that candidates must have raised at least \$1,000,000 in campaign donations by

July 1 - a financial barrier never published in advance and contradicted by Gray Media's own track record in similar media markets.

Since Bridgford's initial campaign filing was made on July 1, the complaint alleges the Broadcaster applied an after-the-fact financial standard since the media company was aware of his fundraising total before creating the criteria for the debate.

"Iowa voters are exhausted by establishment politicians who believe they can dictate the terms of our democracy behind closed doors," said Michael Bridgford. "Mariannette Miller-Meeks and Christina Bohannon both refused to show up to Iowa PBS because they didn't want to answer tough questions next to an Independent on the ballot. Instead, they ran to a commercial broadcaster to carve out a private, two-person safe space. Federal law is clear: politicians cannot accept corporate-subsidized television stages designed to suppress competition."

Data Reveals \$1M Rule is a Major-Party Protection Racket

The FEC complaint outlines how the \$1 Million threshold was reverse-engineered specifically to protect the status quo:

- Gray Media Admits Candidates Under \$1M in Other Markets: An analysis of other recent federal debates staged by Gray Media stations demonstrates that the network regularly hosts candidates with far smaller war chests—including general election candidates who raised just \$32,000 (WHNS in South Carolina) and \$58,000 (WCAX in Vermont, where *both* participating candidates were below \$1M).
- 82% of Challengers Cancelled Nationwide: Official FEC campaign disclosure data reveals that 82% of non-incumbent challengers nationwide have not crossed \$1M. Applying Gray Media's threshold would eliminate debates in over 80% of incumbent-contested races and cancel open-seat debates nearly three-quarters of the time - effectively serving as an anti-competitive incumbent shield.

Demanding Transparency and Compliance

The filing urges the FEC to open an expedited investigation, issue subpoenas into backchannel coordination between the campaigns and network producers, and enforce penalties against Gray Media and the campaigns for providing or accepting unlawful corporate contributions.

"If Representative Miller-Meeks and Professor Bohannon believe their visions for Iowa can withstand public scrutiny, they should have no fear sharing a stage with every qualified candidate on the ballot," added Bridgford. "Voters deserve an honest debate, not a coordinated production negotiated to protect two party insiders."

The complete complaint, along with supporting documentation and FEC campaign finance data, is available upon request or at bridgfordforiowa.com.

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