

Panel discussion smoothes encounter between Ellison, Fields

Written by By Brandt Williams, Minnesota Public Radio
Friday, 02 November 2012 09:39

MINNEAPOLIS — A face-to-face encounter between Democratic Fifth District Rep. Keith Ellison and Republican challenger Chris Fields was a much more subdued event than their previous debate when the candidates verbally attacked each other.

The two participated in a panel discussion Tuesday in north Minneapolis, each taking questions at separate times.

This time the candidates exchanged a brief and polite 'how do you do' as Fields finished his segment with the panel and Ellison arrived to begin his. The two were guests on the locally produced television program, "Conversations with Al McFarlane," hosted by the publisher of Insight News, a weekly newspaper which focuses primarily on black community issues.

Each candidate took questions from McFarlane as well as the Rev. Randy Staten and Bill English of the Black Church Coalition and African American Leadership Summit.

The panel grilled Fields on his support of the voter ID amendment, his opposition to the Affordable Health Care Act and Fields' Republican affiliation. They criticized the GOP for supporting policies that they say hurt African Americans. But Fields, who is African American, said no party has a monopoly on what is best for minorities, and that the Republican philosophy of smaller government works best.

"I believe the best solutions to problems are found at the state and local level," Fields said. "I also believe the federal government is just too big right now and is too sloppy."

Towards the end of the 25-minute interview, Staten asked the question that had been the elephant in the room.

"You're saying some negative things about the current congressman..." Staten said.

Last week on a live debate broadcast on KFAI-FM, Fields accused Ellison of using campaign contributions to dig up a restraining order that Fields' wife filed against him in 2006. In an exchange words, Ellison called Fields "stupid" and a "low-life scumbag."

Following the debate, Ellison issued an apology and said he acted badly.

Fields said he doesn't hold anything personal against Ellison, and that he would like another face-to-face debate.

"I think side-by-side in a town hall forum where the voters, where the people get to ask the questions — I mean, that is fair," Fields said. "That should be part of our democracy. He should be willing to defend his record. I'm afraid right now he's trying to duck this debate."

Ellison left the panel discussion without speaking to MPR News. The congressman's campaign issued a statement to say he did not think another debate was in the best interest of the district. Ellison had a much easier time discussing his record with the panel than with his challenger.

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"I've been real busy passing legislation and appropriation bills directly focused on the north side of Minneapolis," Ellison said. "When I hear people take after me on this I'm always confused because, I'm like, I don't need GPS to find north Minneapolis. I know where it is. I live here."

Ellison did not refer to Fields by name, nor did he talk about their last debate. He said he should be reelected in order to fight against House Republicans who he says are blocking vital legislation.

"We have the American Jobs Act. They won't even take the bill up," Ellison said. "They won't even allow us to debate the American Jobs Act and stuff that will put Americans back to work."

There will be no further debates between Ellison and Fields before Election Day.