

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES TO ENHANCE DEMOCRACY, NOT DUOPOLY



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Visit RealDebates.org, the website of the new Citizens' Debate Commission, starting in December 2004.

For much more background on the Commission on Presidential Debates, visit the website of our partners at Open Debates: OpenDebates.org

Also, look for the book *No Debate* by George Farah, the comprehensive story of the modern presidential debates and the CPD's corruption of the process -- available in January 2004.

ReclaimDemocracy.org is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization educating to revive grassroots democracy and revoke illegitimate power wielded by corporations over civic society. All contributions are fully tax-deductible to the extent of the law.

This November, 2004 op-ed summarizes the destructive impacts of the Commission on Presidential Debates, why it is unreformable and why it must be replaced.

"We have no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American people." So said the League of Women Voters in explaining its 1988 decision to withdraw from sponsoring the nationally televised presidential debates that it had produced since 1976. The League explained that those events no longer could serve the public interest due to Democratic and Republican candidates' pressure to turn the debates into staged and scripted performances.

But while the League's integrity precluded it from engaging in these artificial events, there is no shortage of university presidents that either lack such qualms or don't know the story. In November, the University of Miami (Fla), Arizona State University, and Washington University in St. Louis announced they would host presidential "debates" staged by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) next fall. But a more accurate label for these scripted events is "joint appearances between nominees of the two major political parties." Those words are the CPD's own--before it recognized the need to feign nonpartisanship and public interest.

Universities should not be participating in these sham events because they undermine the values of open and honest debate that higher education should represent.

The CPD is a nonprofit corporation created and controlled exclusively by the Democratic and Republican parties, and since they took over that 1988 debate, those parties have instituted absolute control over format, questioners, and participants. This recognition that the CPD represents only those two political parties, not citizens who deserve the tools to make fully informed choices, has prevented the League of Women Voters from engaging ever since.

Televised presidential debates are the single most influential forum for voters and offer a rare opportunity to hear candidates' ideas in more than sound bites. Yet, the CPD effectively decides the topics and the participants--with no public accountability.

The presidential debates should address a broad range of national issues that most concern citizens--

especially issues that the major-party candidates typically ignore when left to their own devices. Instead, many of the greatest concerns of the American public are excluded from discussion.

In a country where corporations are a dominant political and economic force, how could all three debates pass in 2000 without the word "corporation" even being spoken? The World Trade Organization, the drug war, immigration, population growth, "free trade," and any mention of labor or the working class also were absent. How can so many issues of vital interest to Americans freely be ignored while Slobodan Milosevic was cited seventeen times?

Answer: because the two dominant parties own, operate, and dictate almost every detail of the events. Beyond exclusion of critical issues from the discussion, this control means formats devoid of direct dialogue between the candidates or between citizens and candidates. Even the "town hall" format has been turned into a fraudulent imitation of real discourse by preventing any participant from speaking--the questions are screened and read from a card by moderators like Jim Lehrer, a man who has demonstrated impartiality between the two dominant parties, but also disinterest in rocking any boat.

The lack of substance of the presidential debates in recent years also is partially attributable to the issue that has generated the most criticism of the CPD--the exclusion of deserving independent or "third-party" candidates. All of those unmentioned topics would likely have been introduced had either Pat Buchanan or Ralph Nader not been shut out of the 2000 debates--despite a majority of Americans polled saying they wanted to hear both of them.

For 2004, the CPD has decreed that candidates outside of its duopoly must have "at least 15 percent of the national electorate" intending to vote for them. This arbitrary and absurdly high threshold is three times the federal standard to qualify for public financing and would have excluded every independent or "third-party" candidate in televised debate history, with the possible exception of John Anderson (now a vocal critic of the CPD) in 1980. Though he ran as an independent, Anderson was an incumbent Republican congressman with twenty years in office--yet he polled only between 13 and 18 percent just prior to the debates.

The only non-major-party candidate to debate under the CPD's reign was Ross Perot in 1992. Perot

polled just between 7 and 9 percent immediately prior to the debates, but he was included solely because Bill Clinton and George Bush each thought Perot would take more votes from the other. Clinton and Bush made the decision to include Perot and the CPD provided the front to justify it.

Perot's populist critique of federal deficits and corporate "free trade" was a vital addition to the forum. His inclusion sparked public interest and boosted national voter turnout by a stunning 12 million from 1988. Perot also captured 19 percent of the popular vote and made several of the causes he championed during the debates major public issues. Perot probably deserves much credit for generating public pressure on the Clinton Administration and Congress to dramatically reduce the ballooning budget deficits of the Reagan years.

Yet the major-party candidates, acting through their CPD front, excluded Perot from the 1996 debates simply by dubbing him "unelectable." Perot received \$29 million in public funds for his 1996 campaign by virtue of his 1992 performance, but his opponents were able to prevent us from getting a fair look at what we paid for. Of course, the power to arbitrarily ignore a candidate makes the "unelectable" label self-fulfilling.

Without Perot's presence, about half as many Americans watched the debates in 1996--an all time ratings low until the 2000 Bush-Gore snooze fests, with their stifflingly narrow range of discussion, sunk lower still.

The CPD's array of corporate funders likely were pleased to have Perot and his (mild) questioning of corporate power silenced. Corporate sponsors do not merely fund the CPD, they use the events to promote their agendas. In 2000 Anheuser-Busch invested \$550,000 in the CPD, then set up shop at the events with trade-show booths to ply reporters with free beer and gifts while publicizing the evils of beer taxes and government regulation of industry.

So what do the Democrats and Republicans say in response to all this? They say limiting the number of presidential debate participants is necessary to avoid scores of pretenders. And they are right.

But no one calls for every candidate to have a turn at the microphone. Simply limiting participation to candidates with a mathematical chance to win immediately drops the field to no more than six (judging by recent elections). The Appleseed Citizens' Task Force on Fair Debates, a nonpartisan panel of experts commissioned to propose such guidelines in 1999, advised also requiring that candidates either: 1) register at 5 percent in national polls OR 2) have more than 50 percent of national-poll respondents express their desire to see the can-

didate debate. If applied in 2000, this criteria would have included Buchanan and Nader.

Anything more restrictive is not just unfair to viable candidates, it undermines representative democracy.

There is more than expert opinion to make the case for including serious third-party candidates in debates-Jesse Ventura's 1998 election as governor of Minnesota offers compelling evidence. As a Reform Party candidate, Ventura polled at just 10 percent before participating in five televised debates, and no major poll ever placed him in the lead. Once his views were heard, the race was transformed, and Ventura won the only poll that matters.

The polarizing presence of George W. Bush may well yield a 2004 election without a serious third-party challenge, but replacing the CPD with a nonpartisan entity that will nourish democracy is still an imperative. An unaccountable private body has no place controlling a vital part of our democratic process.

Universities should teach students a lesson and demonstrate the same integrity as the League of Women Voters by withdrawing from hosting the CPD's sham events and refusing to participate in defrauding the voters of America. Instead, they should offer their facilities to host genuinely educational and, nonpartisan debates, organized by the newly formed Citizens' Debate Commission.

By Jeff Milchen, ReclaimDemocracy.org director.

Taking Responsibility, Building a Long-term Solution

ReclaimDemocracy.org was at the forefront of efforts during the 2000 election cycle to expose the illegitimacy of the Commission on Presidential Debates and its damage to democracy. We now have joined with Open Debates and others in the necessary work of displacing the CPD's events with real debates that will serve democracy, not partisan interests.

We aim to do this not by pleading to the Commission, but by helping to realize our vision--a Citizens' Debate Commission--a coalition effort so large and broad that all viable candidates and major television networks will be compelled to participate.

We realize the CPD exists to serve its owners' duopoly and will be displaced or forced to change only in the face of powerful, organized opposition.

Please contact us to learn more about how you can help create debates that will invigorate public discourse and enhance democracy or visit:

ReclaimDemocracy.org

OpenDebates.org

RealDebates.org -the website of the Citizens' Debate Commission (online December 2004)

The Poverty of the Debates

Below are cumulative mentions of specific words and phrases by *either* George Bush or Al Gore during the CPD events in 2000, based on analysis of transcripts as posted at CNN.com.

This is just a sampling to illustrate the dominance of issues on which the major parties choose to focus while ignoring major concerns of many Americans across the political spectrum:

Wealthiest	20
Poorest	1
Prosperity	16
Homeless	0
Middle Class	15
Working Class	0
Poverty	1
Crime (street)	23
Crime (corporate)	0
WTO	0
NAFTA	0
Corporation(s)	0
Labor	1
"Free Trade"	0
Slobodan Milosevic	17

Immigration	0
Population Growth	0
Gun Rights	0
Transportation	0

Tax (es)	144
Social Security	67
Seniors	64
Medicare	58
Prevention	0
Drugs (prescription)	60
Drug War or	
War on Drugs	0
Police Brutality	0
Prison	0

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