

VPOINT

The debate debacle — a partisan fraud

Between 1976 and 1984, the League of Women Voters served as the nonpartisan presidential debate sponsor, ensuring the inclusion of popular independent candidates and prohibiting major party campaigns from manipulating debate formats.

The current sponsor of the presidential debates is the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD). The CPD was created by the major parties as an extension of the major parties. Its stated purpose is to "provide the best possible information to viewers and listeners." In reality, the CPD, posing as an independent sponsor, lets the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates control the debates. The result has been diminished voter education and silence on critical issues.

Every four years, provisions about debate formats and the prohibition of third-party candidates are negotiated in secret by Republicans and Democrats. The CPD then implements the negotiated provisions. This shields the major party candidates from public criticism about the debate structure.

In 1980, over President Carter's objections, the league invited independent candidate John Anderson to participate in the presidential debates. Carter refused to debate Anderson, but the league did not acquiesce to Carter's demands. Instead, the league hosted a presidential debate between John Anderson and Republican nominee Ronald Reagan that attracted over 55 million viewers.

Four years later, the Reagan and Mondale campaigns vetoed 68 proposed panelists in order to eliminate difficult questions. The league publicly lambasted the candidates for "abusing the process." The ensuing public outcry persuaded the candidates to accept the league's panelists for the next debate.

But the major parties wanted to control the debate process. In 1986, the Democratic and Republican

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National Committees agreed that they would take over the presidential debates. The CPD was formed and named Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk, former heads of the Republican and Democratic National Committees respectively, as co-chairmen — they are still the co-chairs of the CPD.

In 1988, the Bush and Dukakis campaigns drafted the first secret debate contract that dictated who participated, who asked the questions, even the heights of the podiums. The league declined to implement it, eventually withdrawing from sponsorship of the debates stating:

"...[T]he demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetrate a fraud on the American voter. It has become clear that the candidates' organizations aim to add debates to their list of campaign-trail charades devoid of substance, spontaneity and answers to tough questions. The league has no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public."

The only reason Ross Perot was included in the 1992 debates was then President Bush indicated that he would not participate unless Perot was included — a mistake Bush must regret but others learned from!

In 1996, Dole demanded the exclusion of Perot. Clinton, meanwhile, wanted the smallest possible audience for the debates because he was ahead in the polls. The result? Perot was excluded, follow-up questions were prohibited, one debate was canceled and the remaining two debates were deliberately scheduled opposite the World Series, resulting in the smallest audience in presidential debate history.

The CPD allows the two major parties to exercise absolute control over the format of the debates.

Candidates hand-pick panelists and moderators, prohibit candidate-to-candidate questioning, require the screening of town-hall questions, severely limit response times, and limit or ban follow-up questions. Ultimately, the public is left with an essentially scripted show.

"It's too much show business and too much prompting, too much artificiality, and not really debates — they're rehearsed appearances," said former President George Bush. Walter Cronkite called the CPD debates an "unconscionable fraud." New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg calls them a "mockery."

The inclusion of third-party candidates improves presidential debates. Third-party candidates introduce popular and groundbreaking issues that are often adopted by major parties. The abolition of slavery, women's right to vote, Social Security, child labor laws, public schools, the direct election of senators, and the formation of labor unions are some example of issues shunned by major parties that were brought to the forefront by third parties.

And third-party candidates can win. Reform Party candidate Jesse Ventura won the 1998 Minnesota governor's race after appearing in the debates. "If you are allowed in the debates, the candidate that no one gives a chance to, lo and behold, can win," Ventura said.

Open Debates is an organization committed to reforming the presidential debate process and informing the public about the CPD. It also promotes an alternative debate sponsor — the nonpartisan Citizens' Debate Commission, comprised of national civic leaders committed to voter education. It wants to follow in the footsteps of the League of Women Voters and operate with full transparency, employ challenging formats, include popular independent candidates and sponsor debates that serve the voters first. Check out the Web site at opendebates.org.