

Op-Ed

Submitted by the

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DON'T LOCK THIRD PARTIES OUT OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

HOW REPUBLICANS & DEMOCRATS PLAN TO GAG THE COMPETITION

BY DAVID BERGLAND (785 WORDS)

The criteria for inclusion in the 2000 presidential debates were announced last week by the Commission on Presidential Debates, and they are a welcome step towards objective standards. Unfortunately, those standards are still so unfair that a Jesse Ventura-style candidate would be wrongly excluded.

National debates play such a crucial role in presidential politics that the Debate Commission has an obligation to be open and inclusive. But the Commission has failed to meet that obligation. Its new criteria will unfairly exclude candidates with a serious chance to win the presidency — or with the potential to win the support of a substantial number of American voters. That's just wrong.

For example, Reform Party Governor Jesse Ventura was at 10% in a statewide poll in Minnesota in late September 1998, before being invited to participate in five debates in October. Ventura went on to win the gubernatorial election with 37% of the vote.

Yes, that was a gubernatorial election — but the same scenario could unfold in the presidential election. It *could*, except the Commission has decreed that only candidates who score at least 15% in public opinion polls will be allowed into the debates.

As the election of Ventura demonstrated, debates can *change* the outcome of an election. That's why the Debates Commission should offer voters a broad spectrum of legitimate candidates — instead of acting as kingmaker among a handful of establishment candidates. Everyone benefits when voters are exposed to *more* choices in a presidential debate.

The best evidence of that was Ross Perot in 1992. The Texas billionaire (running as an independent) was polling at just 7% in October when he was invited to participate in the presidential debates. Perot ended up winning 19% of the vote — and, more importantly, boosted voter turnout by 12 million from the previous election.

More candidates in the presidential debate mean more ideas, more excitement, and more voter involvement. The lesson is clear: If we want voters to start tuning back into the political process, we have to open up the system — and the debates — to a wider array of legitimate candidates. The future success of American democracy demands it. Regretfully, the Commission appears to want to keep the system closed.

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Its three-part test for including candidates in the 2000 presidential debates says candidates must:

- Be eligible to run under the U.S. Constitution.
- Be qualified to be on the ballot in enough states to have a mathematical chance of securing an Electoral College majority.
- Show up in at least five "selected" national polls at 15% before any debate.

These criteria are more objective than the Debate Commission's previous standards, which had relied partly on the "opinions" of journalists, campaign managers, and political scientists. But as Ventura's victory shows, the criteria still could shut the door on the next president of the United States.

Instead of the restrictive 15% threshold, the Debates Commission should set a more inclusive standard of no more than 5%. Such a criteria would have included John Anderson in 1980, Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 — and, hopefully, other third-party candidates in 2000.

However, a standard that was even *lower* than 5% would still not create the kind of crowded free-for-all presidential debates that many people fear — and certainly wouldn't allow 100 candidates on stage, as the Debates Commission suggested in an attempt to justify its restrictive standards.

The fact is that if *every* candidate on enough state ballots to theoretically win the presidency in 1996 had been invited, only six candidates would have qualified — fewer than appear in many presidential primary debates.

Interestingly, the Commission charged with deciding whether anyone other than the usual Democrats and Republicans will be allowed into the debates is made up entirely of (you guessed it) Democrats and Republicans. Its co-chairmen are Paul Kirk and Frank Fahrenkopf, Jr., the former heads of the Democratic and Republican national committees.

The Commission claims it wants to limit the debates to candidates who could garner "majority" support, but even the Democrats and Republicans combined don't have that. As radio talk host Lowell Ponte has pointed out, in 1996, the Democrat and Republican candidates between them won the votes of only 42% of eligible voters — far short of a majority. So why should two political parties who *together* can't muster majority approval be the ones deciding who the entire country will get to see in the debates?

They shouldn't be — which is why the selection process should be opened up immediately. The new criteria are a tiny step in the right direction. Now, we encourage the Debates Commission to take another *big* step, and make the 2000 presidential debates truly fair, inclusive, and representative of the broad spectrum of American political beliefs.

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NOTE: A photograph of Mr. Bergland, an electronic version of this essay, and exclusive local reprint rights are available. Call Press Secretary George Getz at (202) 333-0008 Ext. 222 for more information.