

## **23. REFORMING THE TELEVISION DEBATES:**

### **THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSION**

### **ON PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE DEBATES**

Presidential candidate television debates have been conducted through seven consecutive presidential elections (1976 to 2000) and are firmly established in the public's mind as an integral part of the presidential selection process. The time has come, if not being somewhat overdue, for the U.S. Congress to pass legislation laying out the exact rules and regulations under which the presidential television debates will be conducted. The debates need to be officially institutionalized and administered under U.S. law.

There is an existing Commission on Presidential Debates, but it is a bipartisan body with all members belonging to either the Democratic or Republican parties. The existing Commission thus is biased toward the two major political parties and the major party candidates for President. This has produced some unfair debating rules and arrangements in recent years.

For instance, in 1996, the Republican candidate for President, U.S. Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, was able to exclude Reform Party candidate Ross Perot from that year's presidential candidate television debates. Bob Dole calculated that Perot's third party candidacy would steal more votes from him than from

incumbent Democratic President Bill Clinton. Dole thus refused to debate Perot along with President Clinton, and the Commission on Presidential Debates had no choice but to go along with Dole and leave Perot out.

In many ways, this was an unfair decision. Perot was a significant and well-financed candidate with an organized political party behind him and considerable popular support. In addition, Perot had run as a third party candidate for President in 1992 and polled a respectable 19 percent of the national popular vote. But the ad hoc Commission on Presidential Debates, with no official standing in U.S. law, had no real power to order that Ross Perot be included in the 1996 debates.

This exclusion and unfairness to third party candidates for President was repeated in the year 2000 presidential election. Liberal environmentalist Ralph Nader was running for President on the Green Party ticket. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan was the Reform Party nominee. Both Nader and Buchanan had measurable support in the public opinion polls and deserved to be seriously considered for the 2000 presidential debates.<sup>1</sup>

But neither third party candidate in 2000 was allowed to debate. Democratic candidate Al Gore figured that Ralph Nader's all-out environmentalist stands would cost Gore votes, so Gore insisted that Nader not debate. George W. Bush

made the same calculation concerning Patrick Buchanan, whose arch-conservative view points might lure right-wing Republicans away from voting for Bush. Even if Ralph Nader and Patrick Buchanan were not allowed to participate in all three Bush-Gore debates in 2000, the third party candidates certainly should have been invited to participate in at least one of the debates.

As things stand under the existing arrangement, control of the debate format and operating rules essentially resides in the major party presidential candidates rather than the Commission on Presidential Debates. That situation must end. By the year 2000, the debates had become too crucial a part of the presidential selection process to be subject to the self-interested wishes of the major party nominees. Congress must take the responsibility of passing a law that makes the Commission on Presidential Debates truly “independent” of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

This reformed body, named the Independent Commission on Presidential Candidate Debates, would have the clear and undiluted power to determine which candidates (including third party candidates) will debate, the number of debates to be scheduled, when those debates will be scheduled , and what the various formats of the debates will be.

Creating an Independent Commission on Presidential Debates will bring

more innovation and experimentation to the manner in which the debates are presented on television. It will prevent major party candidates from fooling around with the style of the debates by raising superfluous issues such as who gets to stand on an elevator box and where the thermostat will be set. The candidates will be forced to spend more time dealing with the issues in the presidential election rather than the style questions of how the debate is conducted. Thus an “independent” Commission would make the debates more challenging to and less controlled by the major party candidates.

There are a host of suggested improvements for the presidential debates. The Independent Commission on Presidential Candidate Debates could consider using some of them. *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory advocated cutting the time of each debate from the present 90 minutes to one hour. The shorter time period should make the debates more pleasant to watch and thus help to draw larger audiences. McGrory also argued for having the candidates ask each other questions face-to-face. That could produce more tension and “fireworks” between the candidates than is generated by the present arrangement, where so-called “neutral” questions come from a panel of journalists or independent voters.<sup>2</sup>

CBS News television producer Don Hewitt proposed staging the presidential debates in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives in the Capitol in

Washington, D.C. Members of Congress from both major political parties would be invited to attend. Democratic and Republican congressional leaders would ask tough questions to the presidential nominee from the opposite party. This debate format, known in the British Parliament as “question time,” would provide real confrontation on the issues for the major party candidates for President.<sup>3</sup>

An imaginative and powerful Independent Commission on Presidential Debates could adopt any particular rules and formats it pleases and thinks will improve the presidential debating process. The exact rules and formats are not what is important about this proposed reform. What is important is that Congress put a truly “independent” commission, rather than the Democratic and Republican candidates for President, in charge of the presidential candidate television debates.

### **Endnotes - Chapter 23:**

1. David Kairys, “Blocking Our View; Why Can’t We See Third Party Candidates In The Presidential Debates?”, *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, July 10, 2000, p. 22.
2. Mary McGrory, “Spin Doctors, Heal Thyself,” *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, November 11-16, 1996, p. 31.
3. David Broder, “High Drama? Well, Wouldn’t That Be Nice?”, *Colorado Springs Gazette*, October 23, 1996, p. B7.