



## Let a Third Candidate Join the Clinton-Trump Debates

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A month from now, the Commission on Presidential Debates will let us know which candidates get a golden ticket to that national forum.

Will America get to hear from anyone besides Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the two most distrusted and reviled candidates in modern political history?

Two recent news reports stoked hopes that we might: Earlier this month, CNBC reported that the Commission “might consider giving an inch to a third-party candidate” like Libertarian nominee Gary Johnson. “It’s happening: The presidential debate commission is planning for three-way debates,” Rare.com gushed.

Don’t get too excited, libertarian friends: It’s probably not happening—the fix is still in.

The Commission on Presidential Debates, an organization set up and originally co-chaired by the then-chairman of Republican National Committee and his Democratic counterpart, has served as the debates’ gatekeeper since 1988.

CPD describes its mission as ensuring that the debates “provide the best possible information to viewers.” But its real mission is to make the debate stage a “safe space” for major-party candidates. It does so by rigging the rules to protect them from unflattering camera angles, the microaggressions of uncooperative moderators and—most hurtful of all—the terror of third-party competition.

There's little in the commission's recent maneuvers to suggest that this joint Red-Team/Blue-Team front group is going to rise above its origins.

Current CPD co-chair Mike McCurry downplays the significance of the "third-podium" story in the Politico article itself: "Some of our production people may have said, 'Just in case, you need to plan out what that might look like.'" When the Pentagon war-games worst-case scenarios against hypothetical adversaries like North Korea—or zombies—that doesn't mean it's about to happen.

As for "giving an inch" to third-party candidates, it's more like a millimeter, and also entirely hypothetical. The commission will still, as it has since 2000, require them to demonstrate 15 percent support in five national polls, but CPD's other co-chair, Frank Fahrenkopf, allowed, "If someone came in and let's say he was [polling] at 14.5 percent and the margin of error in five polls was 3 points," they'd have to "look at it... but right now that person would not be included."

Libertarian Party presidential candidate Gary Johnson speaks at the Cannabis World Congress & Business Exposition in New York on June 16. Gene Healy writes that the presidential debate commission has always been the cat's paw of the party organizations and the campaigns it serves.

More to the point, the fact that McCurry, Bill Clinton's former press secretary and erstwhile Democratic National Committee communications director, and Fahrenkopf, former head of the Republican National Committee, run the operation that runs the debates ought to tell you something about whose interests the group serves.

Politifact calls the CPD an "independent, bipartisan organization." Score that "half true:" the commission is as bipartisan as the Iraq War, the 2008 bailouts and the imperial presidency itself. But the CPD has always been the cat's paw of the party organizations that founded it and the campaigns it serves.

McCurry hasn't lost his Lewinsky-era ability to snow journalists: "Our posture is, we design something we think is in the best interest of American citizens," he told Politico, and "if the two campaigns decide to have on their own a separate set of discussions about terms, the commission then considers their requests," in the form of a "memorandum of understanding" (MOU).

"If"—that's cute. Every presidential debate since 1988 has featured a MOU negotiated between the major parties. The CPD's willingness to rubber-stamp these insider deals is what allowed it to hijack the debates from their previous host, the actually independent League of Women Voters, in the first place.

The MOU negotiations are a closed-door process, but the contracts usually leak, and it's perversely amusing to speculate about what inspired some of the strictures.

Was it Al Gore's petulant eye-rolling tic in 2000 that led to the rule, "No TV cutaways to any candidate who is not responding to a question," or Bush 41's graceless glance at his wristwatch in '92?

Surely, it was the diminutive Governor Dukakis who pushed for the 1988 rule that the candidates' podiums "will not exceed 48 inches" in height, since they went up to 50 inches in the subsequent deals. In any case, however, when the parties make demands, the commission simply asks, "How high?"

At the 1987 press conference announcing the CPD's creation, the co-chairs strongly signaled that third parties need not apply. And over the seven presidential election cycles it's run the debates, the CPD has allowed an extra podium in just one: in 1992, when the George H.W. Bush campaign demanded Ross Perot be included, and the Clinton team acquiesced.

In perhaps its one spark of "independence" in its three-decade history, the CPD objected: They were "worried about the precedent of third-party candidates always being included," Clinton's campaign chairman explained. But the campaigns had made a deal, and the commission had to go along.

Four years later, neither the Red nor the Blue Team wanted the troublesome Texas billionaire back, so the CPD kept him out—despite the fact that 76 percent of voters supported his inclusion.

Banning Perot, who'd garnered nearly 19 percent of the vote in 1992, was so glaringly arbitrary that the CPD felt compelled to adopt facially "neutral" rules for the 2000 race, and thus the "15 percent rule" was born. Applied retroactively, that bar would have been high enough to exclude every third-party candidate since the dawn of television, except Perot—and it's kept out every third-party candidate since.

When pollsters have asked Americans about broadening access to the debates, as Annenberg did in 2014, 56 percent agree that "the rules for a third-party candidate inclusion should be relaxed so that it is easier for them to be part of the debate," while only 28 percent found the current rules acceptable. But they seem to be the rules we're stuck with, so long as this self-dealing Red/Blue junta controls the forum.

McCurry told CNBC he sometimes finds himself "mischievously" daydreaming about getting ex-Daily Show host Jon Stewart to moderate, then waking up to ask himself, "Do I have the balls to actually recommend this?"

But bringing in the liberal Stewart wouldn't exactly hurt McCurry's (Blue) team. Here's a braver idea: Do more than "posture" about "the best interests of American citizens": loosen the rules to allow alternative voices—open up the debates.

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