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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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14.08.2020

America Doesn't Have Real Presidential Debates, But It Should

On August 6, the Commission on Presidential Debates denied US president Donald Trump's request to increase the number of debates between himself and Democratic nominee Joe Biden from three to four.

Trump's case: The expansion of voting by mail means that many ballots will have been cast before the first scheduled fake debate on September 29.

The CPD's response: "[T]he debate schedule has been and will be highly publicized. Any voter who wishes to watch one or more debates before voting will be well aware of that opportunity."

In reality, the number of CPD presidential debates will, as usual, come to a grand total of zero. The purpose of CPD since its formation in 1987 has been to, as League of Women Voters president Nancy M. Neuman noted at the time, "steal the debates from the American voters."

The events put on by CPD are not "debates." Debates involve formal arguments over questions of substance. CPD events are theatrical productions — side-by-side candidate commercials, financed by millions of dollars in arguably illegal campaign contributions from corporate sponsors.

You almost certainly won't see the Constitution Party's Don Blankenship, Green Party nominee Howie Hawkins, or Libertarian presidential candidate Jo Jorgensen on the CPD "debate" stage this year. These two-contestant, two-winner beauty pageants are run by the

two “major” parties, and since 1992 (when independent candidate Ross Perot got onto the stage and took 19% of the vote) have been specifically designed to exclude third party and independent candidates.

Going into the CPD “debates,” Donald Trump’s goal will be to make Joe Biden look senile, and Joe Biden’s goal will be to make Donald Trump look stupid. They’ll both almost certainly succeed.

When the events end, most viewers probably won’t know any more than they did before about where those two candidates stand on the important issues. For the candidates, the CPD, and the “major” parties, that’s a feature, not a bug. If voters understood how similar the two “major” parties and their candidates are on actual policy, they might start taking a harder look at those third party and independent candidates.

Every four years, those other candidates spend a good deal of time and money trying to get over the CPD’s bar, a bar they know will be manipulated or simply raised if that starts to look like a possibility.

We won’t get real debates until voters start boycotting the parties and candidates who refuse to have them.

CounterPunch 13.08.2020