

Column: Give third parties a voice

By Terry Michael

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With looming worries about jobs, home values, health care, college debt and Afghanistan, Americans seek clear options this November. They're not getting them by design.



Pool photo by Joe Burbank

Libertarian Party presidential candidate Gary Johnson.

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progressive, pro-government advocate.

This isn't the ideal solution. Preferably, key third-party candidates, whom voters in many states will see on the ballots, would have a role in the debates that follow the conventions in the weeks leading up to the election, but the debate system was created to do the opposite. Formed in 1987 by Democrats and Republicans, the [Commission on](#)

In general elections, major parties offer red meat, like tax cuts or promises to save Medicare, to reliable partisans while [microtargeting messages](#) to the [undecideds](#) in a few swing states to sweep up the last few votes by muddying the waters. The goal is to win state by state pluralities adding up to the 270 electoral college votes needed to win.

Voters are professionally manipulated, not engaged. Instead of seeing clear-cut alternatives, they hear just the messages campaign operatives want.

It doesn't have to be that way. If the broadcast and cable networks would let the two most prominent minor parties, Libertarians and Greens, briefly address the nation immediately after [Mitt Romney](#) and [President Obama](#) deliver their acceptance addresses, the whole dynamic could change.

All voters would miss out on is the predictable chatter of talking-point-programmed pundits networks always put on right after the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates accept their parties' nomination at their respective conventions. Instead of post-speech analysis, citizens would hear important alternatives, from the libertarian-conservative, free-market promoter [Gary Johnson](#), and Greens candidate [Jill Stein](#), the

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Presidential Debates was designed to restrict televised face-offs to their candidates. I know. I coordinated the Democratic press relations announcing the commission. I even drafted the news release as a young press secretary in 1987. I assisted DNC Chairman Paul Kirk, working with our Republican counterpart, RNC Chairman Frank Fahrenkopf, now co-chair with former press secretary [Mike McCurry](#).

The debate commission's rules make participation all but impossible for participants other than Democrats and Republicans. Third parties can't qualify unless they poll at least 15%, and they can't get 15% if they don't receive news coverage — a Catch-22.



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As a result, the debates avoid serious discussion of issues that the two-party partisans see as "third rails" or that both prefer to avoid. Chosen by the debate commission, the [media moderators](#) try to draw out candidates, but the journalists often steer clear of controversy. They assume nominees will stick to talking points and deflect tough interrogation, so they often end up lobbing soft balls, fearing they might looked biased if they push too hard.

Since there is no chance Johnson or Stein will make the 15% threshold, there is another way voters can hear their arguments. The networks could offer each five minutes immediately after the Romney and Obama acceptance speeches. The Libertarians and Greens are the only candidates representing minor parties that have been on enough statewide ballots in recent elections to have a mathematical chance of winning.

If they are allowed to address millions of voters, we may avoid the quadrennial fight over excluding those voices

from the debates. That would be a win-win for voters, candidates, the debate commission and TV networks.

And voters can benefit from more intelligent political discourse, with well-framed alternatives, outside the control of major political party operatives.

Terry Michael, director of the [Washington Center for Politics & Journalism](#), has endorsed Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson.

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