

*the* **SECRET HISTORY** *of the*  
**COMMISSION ON  
PRESIDENTIAL  
DEBATES**

*by Kirk Anderson  
for the Star Tribune*

Oct. 8, 2004, St. Louis

"WHICH ONE OF YOU GUYS IS A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE?"

"WE BOTH ARE."



"WE ARE AT A  
PRESIDENTIAL  
DEBATE."

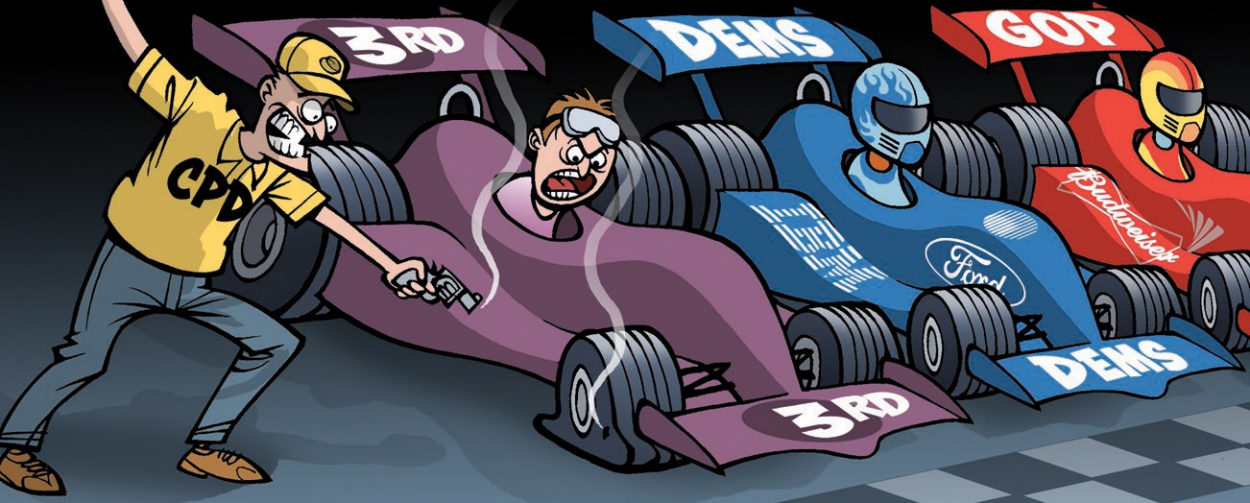
AND YOU  
HAVE US IN  
HANDCLIFFS."

"CAN YOU  
EXPLAIN THAT  
TO ME?"

"LET ME GET  
BACK TO YOU  
ON THAT."

**HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT?**

Despite its boring name, the Commission on Presidential Debates is not an official government agency, but a private, non-profit corporation, funded with tax-deductible, confidential, corporate donations. Created by and for the two major parties, the CPD is bipartisan, not nonpartisan.



Hey, wait --  
isn't the CPD  
*tax-exempt?*  
Doesn't that mean  
they're not s'posed  
to be in *partisan*  
*politics?*



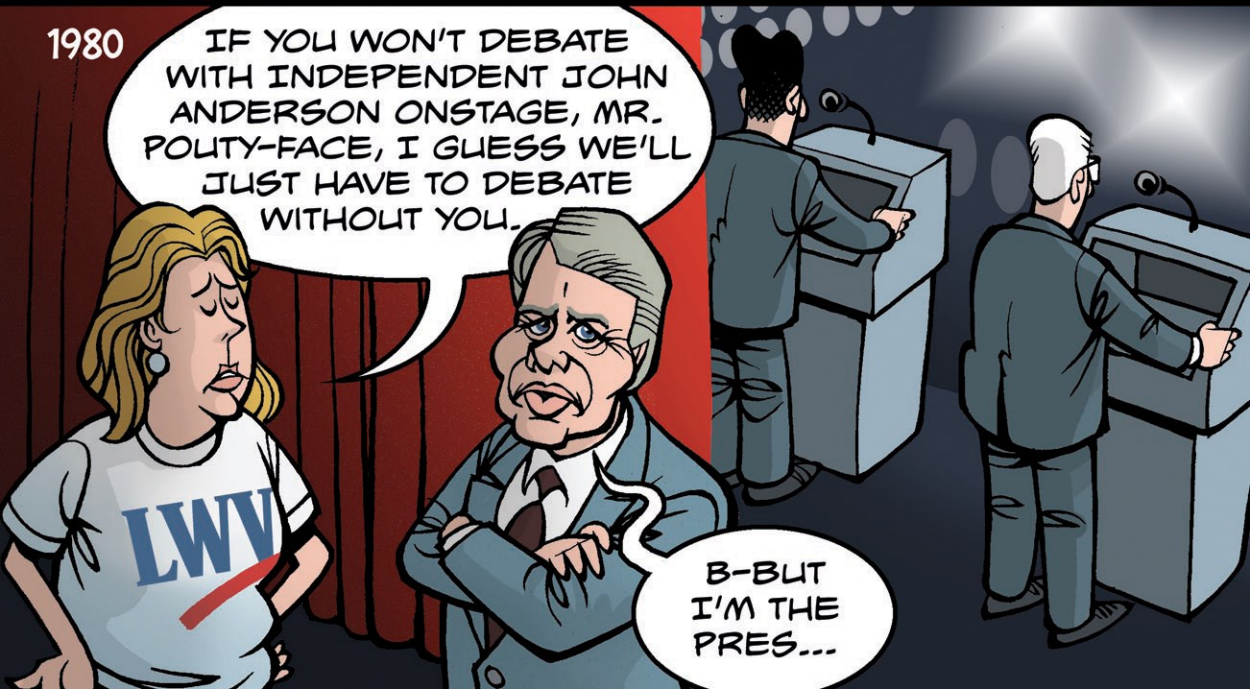
WE'RE **BOTH**  
EXCLUDING THIRD  
PARTIES, DEMOCRATS  
**AND** REPUBLICANS! HOW  
CAN YOU **GET** MORE  
NONPARTISAN?!!

Debates *USED* to be run by the nonpartisan *League of Women Voters*.

1980

IF YOU WON'T DEBATE WITH INDEPENDENT JOHN ANDERSON ONSTAGE, MR. POLTY-FACE, I GUESS WE'LL JUST HAVE TO DEBATE WITHOUT YOU.

B-BUT I'M THE PRES...



In 1984, the *Old Boys' Club* started vetting the *League of Girls'* panelist suggestions.



They vetoed around 100 names.  
... just to get three panelists.



... just for the *FIRST* debate.

**1987:**  
In secret  
negotiations,  
the two parties  
planned the...



... OMISSION OF  
PRESIDENTIAL  
DEBATES!

HOW ABOUT  
CO-MISSION...

... LESS  
BRAZEN.



So, in 1988...

**THIS IS A HIJACK!**

SUBMIT TO  
OUR LIST OF  
DEMANDS AND  
NO ONE GETS  
HURT!



THEIR DEMANDS INCLUDE...  
CHOOSING ALL PANELISTS?!  
HAND-PICKING THE AUDIENCE?!  
**BANNING FOLLOW-UP  
QUESTIONS?!**



WE WANT NO PART IN  
"PERPETUAT[ING]  
A FRAUD ON THE  
AMERICAN VOTER!!!

- 10/03/88

DEMANDS

League  
Women  
Voters  
LW

FINALLY! WE CAN  
DICTATE THE CAMERA  
SHOTS WITHOUT  
INTERFERENCE!\*

\* Yes, they really did.

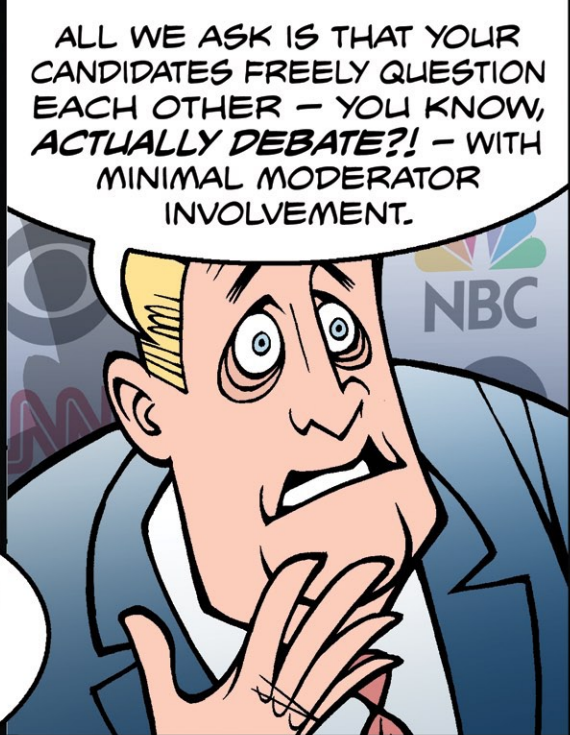
**1991 -- To avoid a re-run of the commission's lame, scripted, 1988 debates, the networks offer to take over.**



AT OUR OWN EXPENSE!

IN OUR OWN FACILITIES!

HELL, WE'LL EVEN EXCLUDE THIRD-PARTY CANDIDATES FOR YOU!



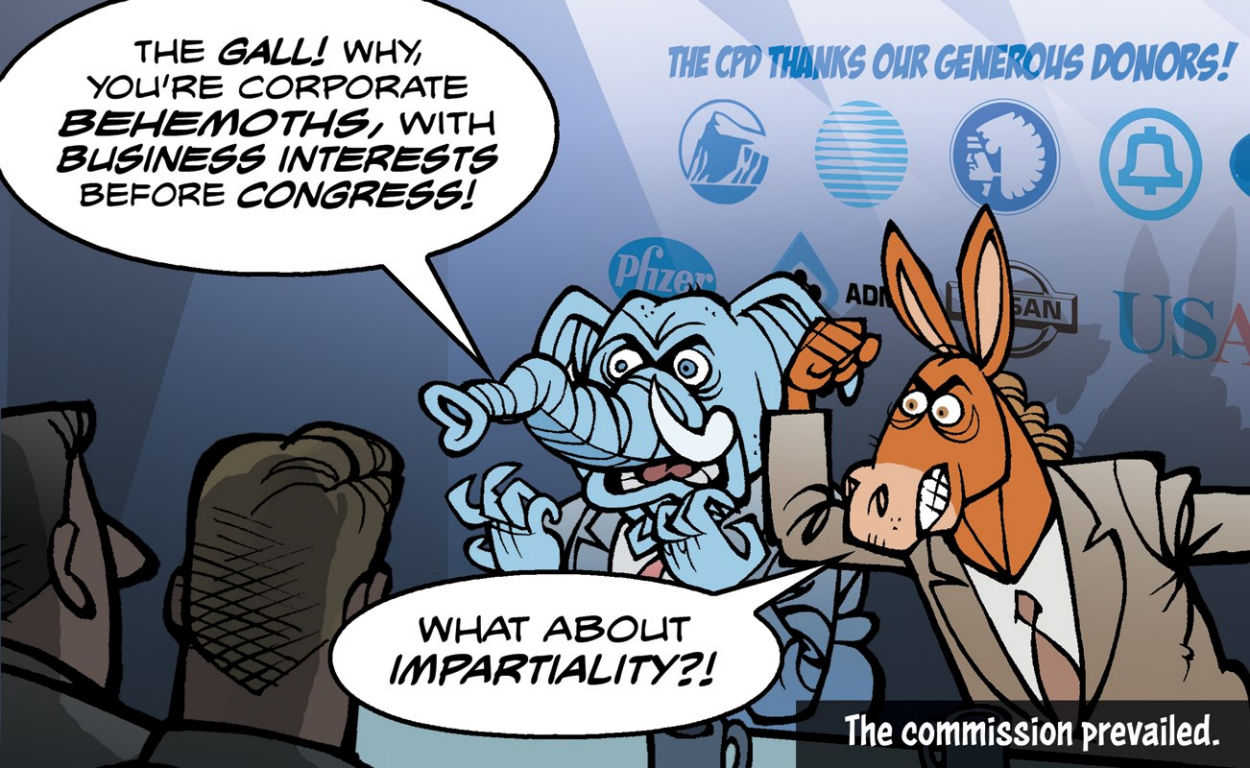
ALL WE ASK IS THAT YOUR CANDIDATES FREELY QUESTION EACH OTHER — YOU KNOW, **ACTUALLY DEBATE?!** — WITH MINIMAL MODERATOR INVOLVEMENT.

**THE GALL! WHY,  
YOU'RE CORPORATE  
BEHEMOTHS, WITH  
BUSINESS INTERESTS  
BEFORE CONGRESS!**

**THE CPD THANKS OUR GENEROUS DONORS!**

**WHAT ABOUT  
IMPARTIALITY?!**

**The commission prevailed.**



**1992 --** The "Town Hall" debate format was novel, but risky.

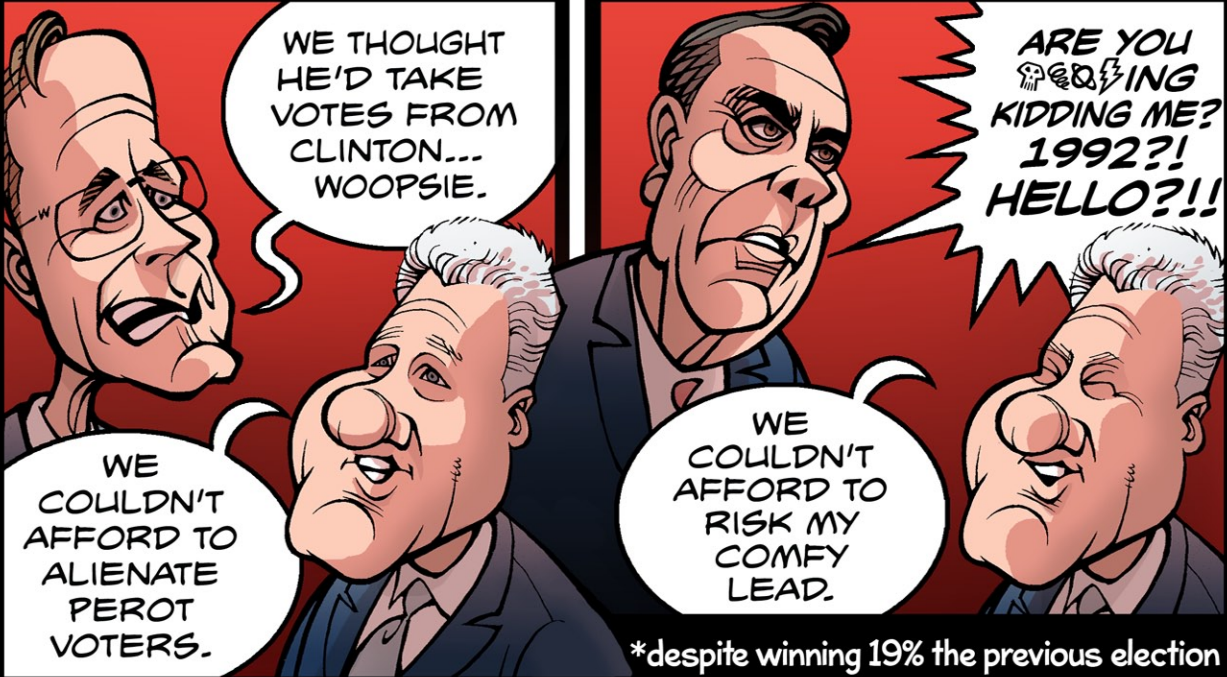
**1996 --** So they banned follow-up questions.

**2000 --** And screened the questions in advance.



1992 So how did Perot get in?

1996 So how did Perot get kept out?\*



WE THOUGHT HE'D TAKE VOTES FROM CLINTON... WOOPSIE.

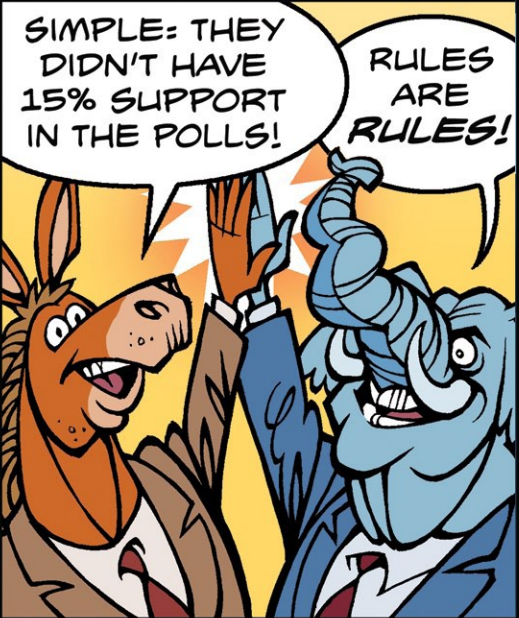
WE COULDN'T AFFORD TO ALIENATE PEROT VOTERS.

ARE YOU F\*CKING KIDDING ME? 1992?! HELLO?!!

WE COULDN'T AFFORD TO RISK MY COMFY LEAD.

\*despite winning 19% the previous election

2000 So how were Nader & Buchanan kept out?



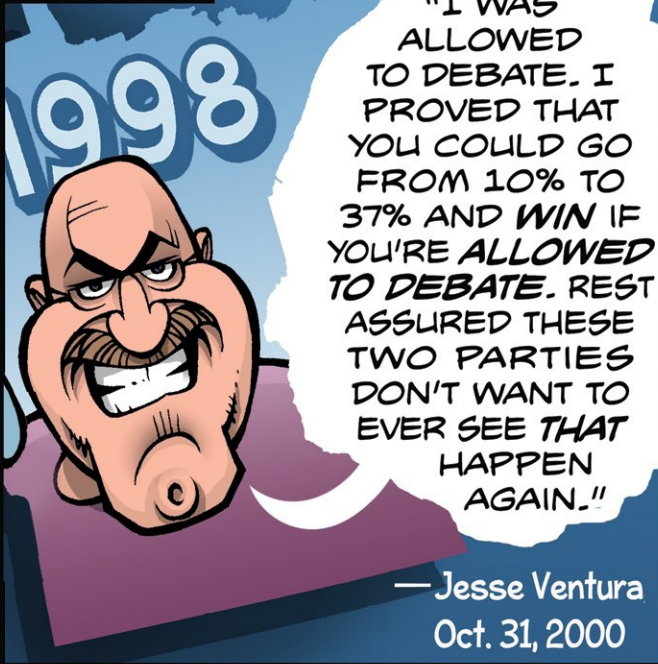
A cartoon illustration featuring a brown rabbit on the left and a blue elephant on the right. Both are wearing suits and ties. The rabbit is speaking, and the elephant is responding. The background is yellow with a lightning bolt symbol.

SIMPLE: THEY DIDN'T HAVE 15% SUPPORT IN THE POLLS!

RULES ARE *RULES!*

Why 15%?

1998

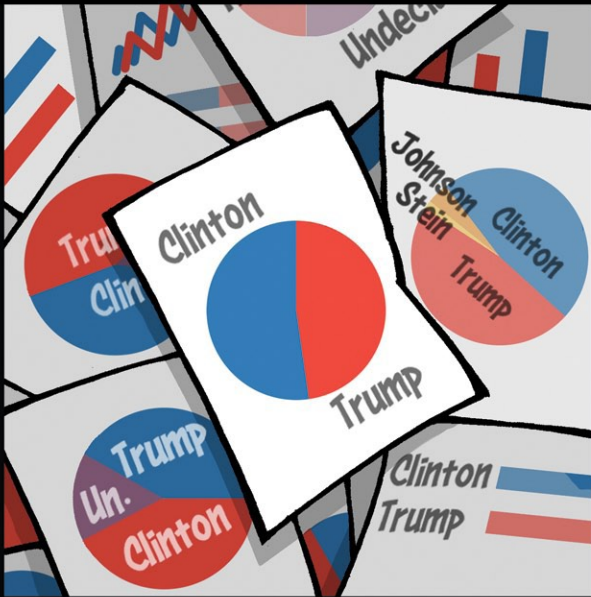


A cartoon illustration of Jesse Ventura with a large, angry expression, showing his teeth. He has a thick mustache and is wearing a purple shirt. Behind him is a blue background with the year '1998' written in large, light blue numbers. A large white speech bubble contains his quote.

"I WAS ALLOWED TO DEBATE. I PROVED THAT YOU COULD GO FROM 10% TO 37% AND *WIN* IF YOU'RE *ALLOWED TO DEBATE*. REST ASSURED THESE TWO PARTIES DON'T WANT TO EVER SEE *THAT HAPPEN AGAIN!!*"

—Jesse Ventura  
Oct. 31, 2000

But wait -- how can you get to  
15% in the polls -- when you're  
***NOT IN THE POLLS?!***



If a candidate under 15%  
wants to attend the debate,  
a chair will be provided nearby.




Green Party's Jill Stein & Cheri Honkala,  
shackled to chairs for eight hours in a  
warehouse nearby the Oct. 16, 2012, debate.






# **THE JOB INTERVIEW**

*• a summary •*

A blue elephant in a suit is pointing his trunk at a brown rabbit in a suit. The elephant has a smug, slightly menacing expression. The rabbit looks nervous and is holding a small brown object in his hands.

LOOK, WE ALL  
KNOW *ONE* OF  
THE *TWO OF US*  
IS GOING TO GET  
THE JOB.

SO WE TOLD  
YOUR OTHER  
CANDIDATES  
TO GO HOME.

A group of four people are sitting at a conference table. From left to right: a man with glasses in a grey shirt, a woman with blonde hair and glasses in a red top, a woman with dark hair in a yellow top, and a man with glasses in a white shirt. They all have surprised or concerned expressions. In the foreground, the back of the blue elephant and the brown rabbit from the previous panel are visible, looking towards the group.

WE ONLY HAVE  
TIME FOR SCRIPTED,  
SOUND-BITE ANSWERS.  
AND NO FOLLOW-UP  
QUESTIONS.



AND WE BROUGHT OUR OWN INTERVIEWER - WE WANTED SOMEONE UNBIASED.



... AND WE CHOSE THE TOPICS.

READY?