

# Excluding Antiparty Parties

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*Parties that reject traditional party politics have a hard time getting their messages out. By Robin Ferrer*

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Consider this. Going in to the 2004 elections for US president, Ralph Nader is on the stage with George W Bush and John Kerry for a debate. On every issue that is raised Mr Nader has a radically different view from that of the candidates from the two established parties. He's anti-war, anti-Patriot Act, and is opposed to WTO/Nafta. President Bush and Senator Kerry, on the other hand, are both pro-war, pro-Patriot Act, and pro-WTO/Nafta. Mr Nader scores points for bringing a radical new vision to the election debate. His views open up alternative perspectives that the electorate had not considered till he articulates them in a framework that allows instant comparison against the views of the establishment. He does not win the election. But he wins a large share of the popular vote. More importantly, he has brought an entirely different perspective to the political debate. And he has got people thinking about alternatives.

Unfortunately, Mr Nader was not allowed to participate in the debates and share his radical views. This was unfair. The 33 states he contested represented 270 electoral college votes, which could have given him the majority required to become president. Furthermore, a poll cited on the Nader election campaign website, said 57% of Americans would like to see Mr Nader participate in the debates. But his voice and views was not heard at these prime-time, mainstream events. Mr Nader ended up with 1% of the vote.

The decision to let independent candidates participate in the debates is the responsibility of the [Commission on Presidential Debates \(CPD\)](#) . The CPD website does not list any criterion for evaluating claims of third-party or independent candidates for participation. From all accounts, it's an arbitrary decision.

However, in 1992, the billionaire Ross Perot (who later founded the Reform Party) was allowed to debate against George HW Bush and Bill Clinton. Mr Perot won 19% of the popular vote—against 38% for Mr Bush and 43% for Mr Clinton. In 1996, Mr Perot stood again, but was not allowed to participate in the debates. His share of the popular vote was 8%. It is possible that Mr Perot's performance in the debate of 1992 enabled him to win half as much of the popular vote as President Bush I—a factor that some analysts see as having contributed to the incumbent President Bush I losing to Bill Clinton. Mr Nader was not allowed to participate in the debates in 2000 and was denied that opportunity again in 2004.

## Crisis of party politics

In recent years, there has been growing disillusionment with established parties of government in democracies throughout the world. Evidence of this can be found in the decline of party membership and of partisanship. Much of this decline is due (i) to the perception that there is not much that differentiates parties, and (ii) to the crumbling of the traditional loyalties and social identities that defined these parties. Parties are also seen as highly bureaucratized and run by elites that have little contact with the grassroots, where party members simply carry out routine tasks, if they are active at all. Furthermore, party elites are seen to work, in cooperation with corporations and businesses, to further the interests of business and capital rather than those of ordinary people. People are also now aware of the enormous amount of influence that the corporate and business sectors exert over *all* parties of government—not just the governing party.

## The rise of antiparty parties

It is as a reaction to this perception of corruption at the heart of parties of government that people have swung to the antiparty parties, parties that have never held power before, which reject traditional party politics and parliamentary compromise, and emphasize popular mobilization. Sometimes, these parties are organized along party lines, such as the Greens in several countries. Most commonly, however, antiparty parties are loose

organizations that stress the popular and spontaneous character of their organization. Recent examples of successful antiparty movements are Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia in Italy, Jörg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, UKIP in the UK, and Howard Dean's remarkable campaign for nomination as the Democratic candidate for the 2004 US presidential elections. Very often, in countries where no antiparty party appeared, the ruling party has been voted out of power.

### The suppression of antiparty parties

Quite clearly, antiparty parties pose a serious threat to the established parties. That threat is twofold. First, there is the direct threat these parties pose of actually winning power. Second, and more subversive in the long term, is the effect of the messages that antiparty parties deliver. What they say is that there are alternatives that are not being discussed by the established parties. They open up new ways of thinking which challenge the older parties' policies and practices. In the US, for example, it is extraordinary that debate is limited to a set of policies on which the two parties are in general agreement. And it is in order to limit mainstream discussion to these narrow policy options that a maverick candidate like Mr Nader is being kept out of the debate. For a democracy that takes pride in the free speech it allows its citizens, gagging political debate is a rather conspicuous way of showing the limits of that freedom. It is a shortcoming of democracy that needs to be addressed.

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## SIDEBARS

### Sneaking in

I am talking to Zorro about sneaking through the air conditioning system and landing on the stage.

– *Ralph Nader, about getting a place at the debates between presidential candidates in the 2004 election.*

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### Speaking or Sniffing?

Free speech is the whole thing, the whole ball game. Free speech is life itself.

– *Salman Rushdie, interview in the 'Guardian', 8 Nov 1990.*

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### Just the Two of Us

In the US presidential elections, a candidate needs 270 out of 538 electoral college votes to win. If a third candidate were to win even one electoral college vote, or one state, it is possible that no one candidate would win the required 270 votes. Clearly, the electoral system favours two-party politics. What does that say about options open to the electorate if the two parties are in agreement on main policy issues?