

New York Times calls for exclusion of Green candidate Ralph Nader from presidential debates

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An August 22 editorial in the *New York Times* calls for excluding the candidates of the Green and Reform parties from the presidential debates. The rationale, according to the *Times*, is that “neither Ralph Nader nor Patrick Buchanan has yet reached the status of a candidate with demonstrated national support.”

The editorial spells out explicitly what was implied in an earlier editorial published June 30 under the headline “Mr. Nader's Misguided Crusade.” In that statement the *Times* denounced Nader's candidacy as “a self-indulgent exercise that will distract voters from the clear-cut choice represented by the major party candidates, Vice President Al Gore and Gov. George W. Bush.” The *Times* went on to complain that Nader's presence on the ballot would spoil what would otherwise be an “uncluttered playing field.” (*See*: Why the *New York Times* wants Green Party candidate Ralph Nader out of the presidential campaign <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jul2000/nyt-j03.shtml>).

The *Times*' agitation against third party and independent candidates is remarkable for its brazen disregard of the most elementary democratic principles. So contemptuous is the newspaper of such considerations as the right of the public to hear differing viewpoints and the right of those outside of the two official parties to present their policies, it does not even bother to address such principled issues.

Instead it crudely argues from the standpoint of political expediency. It wants an electoral process that is not “cluttered” by the intrusion of people, parties and political ideas not sanctioned by the parties funded and dominated by big business. This is cynicism of the purest water.

Only those candidates who have “demonstrated

national support” should be allowed to participate in the televised debates, says the *Times*. This, of course, begs the question: precisely how is this “national support” to be demonstrated? Is this not the purpose of holding elections?

We can determine whether or not a candidate has “demonstrated national support” by the pre-election opinion polls, the *Times* would presumably reply. But aside from the thorny question of what level of support qualifies as “demonstrated” and “national”—a largely subjective yardstick—there is another problem. In order to win a substantial public following, a candidate has to be able to present his or her views to wide sections of the electorate. In present-day America that requires access to the mass media, and a fair degree of coverage by the media. Nationally televised debates are among the most important venues for candidates to reach a mass audience. By excluding third party and independent candidates from such debates, the political and media establishment, with the full-throated support of the *Times*, throws up immense obstacles to prevent them from gaining “demonstrated national support.”

Call it sophistry, a vicious circle, or Catch-22—it is a mockery of a democratic process. Institutions like the *Times* set themselves up as the arbiters of who is to be heard before a single vote has been cast in the general election.

It is obvious that the *Times* views presidential elections as little more than an organizational exercise—the means by which the powers-that-be select the personnel to defend their interests for the next four years. It does not apparently occur to the newspaper's editors that elections, if they are to serve a genuinely democratic purpose, must be more than a means of

shuffling office-holders. The notion that elections should be the occasion for the widest possible discussion and debate of social and political issues seems entirely foreign to them. But if elections are to be more than a glorified horse race, then candidates who have met the basic qualifications for ballot status must be included in national debates, regardless of whether or not they stand a chance of getting elected.

The *Times* does not even consider the implications of its position on the debates. If candidates who have attained ballot status should be barred from debates, why not go one step further and ban them from the elections altogether? A political campaign streamlined along such lines would eliminate the “messiness” of having to contend with candidates who might advocate views seriously at odds with the status quo.

The newspaper expresses not only indifference to democratic rights, but also contempt for the intelligence of the people. The *Times* suggests that voters would simply be incapable of making sense of a debate comprised of more than two candidates.

The electoral process in the US has long been stunted and distorted to conform to the interests of the most privileged social layers and effectively exclude left-wing and socialist opponents of the capitalist system. But in recent years, the legal and practical hurdles thrown up against parties and candidates not backed by corporate interests or billionaire sponsors like H. Ross Perot have grown even more flagrant. Absurd and arbitrary petitioning requirements have been imposed to deter independent candidates from obtaining ballot status. Police routinely harass petitioners at shopping malls and on public streets, and the media blacks out the campaigns of left-wing and socialist candidates.

What is behind the *Times'* opposition to the appearance of Nader and Buchanan in the presidential debates? Neither of these candidates opposes the profit system. Buchanan is an extreme reactionary who espouses views of an essentially fascistic character. As for Nader, his campaign represents a combination of liberal reforms and a reactionary strain of economic nationalism, and the Green Party exists largely for the purpose of pushing the Democratic Party to the left.

Nevertheless, the *Times* is well aware of the erosion of popular support for the two-party system, a political structure which has served American capitalism well and which the *Times* wants to maintain. The so-called

“newspaper of record” sees in the weakening grip of the Democrats and Republicans the danger of the emergence of a mass political movement of an anti-capitalist character. It senses that were a socialist candidate, for example, given the opportunity to speak on national television—addressing the issues of social inequality, the decay of democratic rights, the corruption of the political system—he or she would win support from broad layers of the population.



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