

Public TV silences candidates

Third parties excluded from debate on public airwaves

by Brian Klocke

With less than two weeks until Election Day, 20 percent of Colorado voters have not been swayed by the leading Democrat and Republican candidates for governor, according to a recent Rocky Mountain News poll. Third-party



candidates Ron Forthofer (Green) and Ralph Shnelvar (Libertarian) believe that their exclusion from last Saturday's televised debate sponsored by Rocky Mountain News, News 4 TV and Rocky Mountain PBS, was a sham of democracy representative of big money politics.

At a protest outside the News 4 studios, Forthofer said, "This is outrageous. Why should the Democrats and Republicans, the parties that have the resources to buy the advertising, get free media advertising?"

Libertarians, said Shnelvar, were not present to protest the debate because they realized after zero press coverage of a recent protest at the Denver City Club that, "it was completely pointless."

Two third-party candidates for U.S. Senate, Libertarian Rick Stanley and American Constitution Party candidate Doug Campbell, have decided to try another approach. They filed a federal lawsuit on Friday asking for a temporary restraining order on Saturday's debate and the upcoming Oct. 18 debate in Pueblo, unless they were included.

A federal judge denied the suit saying the complainants failed to give the

defendants enough notice. Stanley and Campbell are continuing to pursue the issue of equal access for all ballot-qualified candidates in federal district court.

Boulder Weekly, not allowed to photograph the debate, approached gubernatorial candidates Rollie Heath (Democrat) and Bill Owens (Republican) afterwards and asked each of them about the exclusion of two ballot-qualified candidates.

"Well, I think this debate was successful," Owens said before he vanished into an elevator.

Heath's answer was nearly as evasive: "I had nothing to do with the decision. I just show up. We've gone to every debate we've been invited to."

Heath and Owens supporters rallied outside the studios before the debate.

A young Owens supporter, Steve Dribner, joined the sidewalk rally and said of the exclusion of third party candidates, "That's not really our call. That's not our decision. We're out here to support democracy."

Another young Owens supporter who did not give her name stated that several Owens boosters came up from Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma to "help campaign for the American Republicans."

Surprised at the exclusion of third party candidates, she said, "This is America. Everybody needs to be heard."

John Montgomery, News 4 debate coordinator, refused to comment until the end of the debate.

"Anybody tracking at the 15 percent level (in polls) is invited for debate and for free air time," he said. "That was the decision between the three boards of the three stations that sponsored tonight's debate."

"If the media don't cover us then people don't realize they support us on our issues and ideas," Forthofer said. "If they don't know that we exist, how can they respond positively in a poll question to say they support us? As long as the public is kept in the dark, as long as the media is not living up to its responsibilities to our democracy, then we're never going to be allowed into any of these debates.

"It's particularly outrageous for Channel 6 to be doing this as a public station. The airwaves are public airwaves, and we're leasing them to Channel 4, and this is not what democracy is supposed to be about. The media's job is to provide information so that the electorate can be informed and make decisions."

Shnelvar agreed. "The voters of Colorado have not been given an opportunity to hear the truth. Both candidates are trying to find the political center as opposed to being principled and telling the voters what they need to know."

After watching a tape of the broadcast, he laughed. "The debate was a joke. It did not present information that the electorate really needed to get in order to get good information to consider who to be governor-I wish I would have been there to provide that info."

Said Forthofer: "It's the big money that has corrupted our system. It has so destroyed the American population's public faith in our government and in the stock market and other things. The only way to clean up that system is by electing candidates that are responsible only to the public and not to big money."

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