

lowest since we have had these debates on television.

Forty-two percent of the people turned out and were interested in the debates prior to the election in 1992, and we had a major candidate, Ross Perot. Of course, the only reason he was able to achieve a significant amount of attention was because he happened to be a billionaire. That is not fair. In 1996, they did a poll right before the election to find out who was paying attention. We were getting ready to pick the President of the United States. It dropped to 24 percent.

If we want people to be civic-minded, interested in what we are doing, feeling like they have something to say about their government, we ought to allow them in. We should not exclude this 42 percent that have been excluded. I think opening up the debates in this way would only be fair and proper. It would be the American way to do it. I strongly urge my colleagues to support this fair-minded amendment.

Mr. Chairman, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to take the 5 minutes in opposition to this amendment.

The CHAIRMAN. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Massachusetts?

There was no objection.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. MEEHAN) is recognized for 5 minutes in opposition.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Chairman, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from California (Mr. FARR), who has been a leader in our efforts to find a way to pass real campaign finance reform.

Mr. FARR of California. Mr. Chairman, I thank the gentleman for yielding time to me. The gentleman is doing a wonderful job on his bill, along with his colleague, the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. SHAYS).

Mr. Chairman, I rise on this amendment in deep concern and in opposition to the amendment. I think the sincerity of the author is true, but I think this is the wrong place. This whole bill is about congressional campaign finance reform. It is how we regulate the money that controls our elections, to get elected to this House. It is not about presidential elections.

There might be a great debate about how to do that, but as the gentleman knows, the presidential election process is controlled by each of the 50 States. We have no national primary in the United States. I think there is room for that kind of debate, whether we ought to move in that direction, whether the process for qualifying for a ballot ought to be more uniform, as the gentleman suggests.

But to take the gentleman's ideas about presidential debates and move them into this bill is, I think, the wrong way to go; the wrong place, the wrong time, and frankly, the wrong issue. So I strongly oppose this amendment. I think the gentleman is going

to try to confuse what the underlying bill is all about.

We have to keep that in focus. We have to keep it limited to that issue. We cannot build the coalition that we need to build if we try to put everything in this bill, and make it a Christmas tree on all of the ills about lack of voting in America, lack of enough debate for those who wish to run for President of the United States from minor parties.

With all due respect for the gentleman's sincerity, I strongly oppose this amendment, and recommend that all my colleagues oppose the amendment, because it is probably technically germane, but it is not politically germane to what we are trying to accomplish.

Mr. PAUL. Mr. Chairman, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

It is always interesting that when we have an appropriate amendment that seems to catch the attention of the Members, that it is probably not the appropriate time to bring it up, and that we should hold hearings and do it some other day.

We have been spending months, and I believe both sides of the aisle have been very sincere in their efforts to clarify and to improve our election process. I think this would be a tremendous benefit to the congressional candidates as well, because there would be more interest. People are not even listening to the debates. If they are not even willing to listen to the presidential debates, how can they get interested in Senate races and in House races?

The rating of the debates in 1996 was the lowest in 36 years. The Vice-Presidential debate, we cannot even get people to listen to the Vice-Presidential debates. It had dropped off 50 percent from 1992. In 1992, there was more interest. It is because we happened to have a billionaire interested, and he was able to stimulate some people in some debates.

All I am asking for is for us to endorse the notion, and we have the authority, the money comes from congressional appropriations. We have written these laws. These are election laws. We have this authority. We have the authority under the Constitution and we have the authority under our laws to do this.

So I would strongly suggest if Members are fair-minded and think they would like more interest, or if they want to continue the way we are going now, we are going to have less and less people interested. People are really tired of it. The American people do not understand this debate, but they do understand they would like to have somebody speak up for them.

Forty-two percent of the people have been essentially disenfranchised, and they are important. Hopefully they are important enough to go to the polls and let us know about it. But they have been disenfranchised because they have lost interest. They have been pushed around, either with ballot ac-

cess rules and regulations, or not being allowed to appear.

This does not mean those candidates more on the right would happen to be in the debate, or more on the left. It would open it up. This is fair-minded, it is proper, it is a good place to do it. It is a chance to vote on it, and I ask for support on this amendment.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Chairman, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Chairman, I will not use all of my time, but in conclusion, essentially what this does is, a presidential candidate who receives taxpayer-funded matching funds from participating in debates, they will not be able to participate in any debates to which equally qualifying candidates for funds would have participated in.

I agree that there should be more open and free debate, but I am also concerned that the bill might have the opposite effect. It might actually stifle debate, if a candidate who takes matching funds cannot participate in the debate.

Furthermore, Mr. Chairman, it seems to me that the Commission on Presidential Debates was established in 1987 to ensure debates are a permanent part of every general election.

□ 1830

It handles the rules of who participates and how the presidential debates will take place. I am concerned with the fact that if this amendment were to pass, Congress would essentially be setting the rules for who can and who cannot participate in presidential debates. I believe that that decision should remain with the independent commission.

Certainly, this is an item that in another forum that we could discuss, have hearings on, and I think that would be in our interest. But in any event, I feel, Mr. Chairman, that we should vote "no" on this amendment and take it up at another point in time.

Mr. Chairman, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE).

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Chairman, I agree with the gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. MEEHAN) on this. And in a way I have a lot of sympathy for the amendment, because I am one who feels that everyone should have a right to participate in these debates and opportunities.

But, Mr. Chairman, there are times in almost any election, particularly at the presidential level, in which we need to focus on the candidates who are going to be the major candidates who the majority of people by far in this country are going to vote on.

I think it should be up to the independent commission to make that decision so that they can formulate it, come forward with it, and make absolutely sure that everyone in this country who is going to be voting for the