

## Debate Emulates Real Deal

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PUBLISHED OCTOBER 26, 2000

The major party presidential candidates squared off three times this fall in nationally televised debates on issues such as social security, tax policy, and education. On Monday night, some of Columbia's politically active students got to defend their candidates' policies for themselves.

Hosted by the Columbia Political Union (CPU), the debate featured representatives of Al Gore, George W. Bush, Ralph Nader, and, in a last-minute addition, Patrick Buchanan.

Students representing the four candidates answered questions posed by members of the Spectator managing board on four pre-determined topics and one "wild card" topic. The debate was moderated by Dean of Student Affairs Chris Colombo.

By CPU co-Coordinator Marc Dunkelman's estimate, only 80 students turned out for the event, which some of the debaters said reflected a national trend toward apathy on the part of young voters.

"I'm a bit disappointed there was a small turnout," said Architecture, Planning and Preservation student and Gore supporter Ben Bolger. "I think it's representative of some of the apathy on campus that's been engendered by a two-party system."

"I was very disappointed," said General Studies student Ron Lewenberg, who is president of the Columbia College Conservative Club and represented Buchanan in the debate. "I was seriously hoping this place would be full."

But Dunkelman, CC '01, said he was pleased by the attendance. "It's great to have 80 people come out in the middle of midterms," he said.

The largest group of audience members--and by far the most vocal--supported the Green Party's Ralph Nader. Nader backers carrying signs vigorously applauded their representatives in the debate and laughed loudly at points made by their opponents.

Dunkelman attributed the high Nader turnout to Nader's exclusion from the three official presidential debates. Bush and Gore supporters, he said, "already had an opportunity to see their candidates perform."

Audience member and Nader supporter Dylan Stillwood, CC '02, gave another reason for the high number of Nader supporters.

"I think that Nader's the only candidate that people can be excited about, to be honest," Stillwood said. "It's an active campaign, not a passive campaign like the ones of Bush and Gore."

Nader, Bush, and Gore were represented by members of the campus organizations that back them. There is no Buchanan group on campus, however, and the debate was not originally intended to include a Buchanan supporter. A small group of conservative students petitioned the CPU to allow a conservative candidate into the debate, and Dunkelman said the CPU's intention was never to exclude a candidate with student support.

"We didn't think we had any Buchanan supporters on campus," Dunkelman said. Once the CPU received e-mails calling for conservative involvement, Dunkelman said, "it seemed to make sense" to include them.

Because his late entry did not allow the Spectator time to draw up Buchanan-specific questions, Lewenberg could only speak during the one-minute rebuttal time that followed the debaters' responses to each question. Under the pre-arranged debate format, each group gave a two-minute response to a candidate-specific question on each topic, and then had one minute to respond to the other speakers' answers. All four candidates responded to a final "wild-card" question, chosen from those submitted to the CPU by e-mail, and gave a two-minute closing statement.

Lewenberg said that having only one minute for every three the other groups had put him at a disadvantage, but said he thought he "made some good points."

Before the debate, Lewenberg had circulated e-mails accusing the CPU of "trying to stifle [Buchanan's] views." But after the debate he said he did not blame the CPU for his earlier exclusion. "Earlier there had been some miscommunication that had prevented candidates on the right from fully being involved, but fortunately some accommodation was made," Lewenberg said. "Next time things will be better," he added.

Substantively, the debate closely mirrored the Gore-Bush debates, with debaters closely echoing their candidates in theme and, sometimes directly, using their words. "I think that everyone's presentations were accurate of their candidate," said Nader supporter Julia Carson, BC '02.

The addition of Nader and Buchanan supporters had fairly little effect on the major party candidates' interaction, as they focused mostly on each other. Nader and Buchanan's supporters attacked both major parties, the two party system in general, and even occasionally each other. They often drew laughs from the audience with their caricatures of Gore and Bush.

The debate's format left little time for back and forth discussion between the speakers, and the one-minute rebuttals almost never left the candidates time to address the other candidates' responses. Despite the format, or perhaps because of it, the debate remained civil, and Colombo kept a tighter reign on the student debaters than moderator Jim Lehrer did on Gore and Bush in the national debates.

Still, all four groups strayed frequently from the questions asked to prepared answers on the topics, which were given to them in advance.

But representatives of all four candidates called the debate a success and said they had succeeded in getting their points across.

"I think it was an excellent chance to have the students talk about their candidate," said Bush supporter Don Blydenburgh, CC '01.

"I think it was very well-organized and I think that these type of opportunities for students to participate in events and educate themselves about the candidates by either participating or by speaking on behalf of candidates is a great experience," Bolger said.

Dunkelman agreed. "I thought the people were pretty well represented," he said. "In many cases, the advocates were much more credible" than the actual candidates, he said, because they were supporting "a set of positions they really cared about" rather than their own candidacy.