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Gray matters in televised senate debate

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While we can't necessarily quarrel with the legal reasoning, we

respectfully take issue with a Los Angeles Superior Court judge's

decision to bar Libertarian senatorial candidate Judge Jim Gray from

a televised debate sponsored by the League of Women Voters of

California.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge David Yaffee on Tuesday denied

Gray's request for a temporary restraining order to block the league from holding a debate scheduled for Tuesday and broadcast live on KNBC-TV Channel 4.

With the ruling, Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer and Republican challenger Bill Jones will exchange their talking points without Gray, a Newport Beach resident and an Orange County Superior Court judge.

The nonpartisan and nonprofit league argued that Gray is not a viable candidate because he did not meet the league's threshold that requires candidates to show that 10% of likely voters would vote for them.

The League can do whatever it wants in the promotion of its voter-education programs. But we think this particular format, which bars new ideas -- even ideas some might call "fringe" -- from being heard, is an unhealthy one for the electorate.

Why does the League of Women Voters get to decide who the viable candidate is?

On the presidential level, at least, televised debates might not historically determine the momentum of a campaign, but they play important roles. They can help exploit candidate weaknesses and they expose the players to large audiences. On the senatorial, or statewide level, an audience gives third-party candidates like Gray a

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statewide level, an audience gives third-party candidates like Gray a shot they would not otherwise have.

Michael R. Beschloss, an author and historian who in 1993 was a senior fellow at the Annenberg Washington Program, said then that third-party candidates have been crucial factors in several presidential elections.

"They tend to check the effectiveness of the main parties," he said.

This is not a plug for Gray's Libertarian politics, which include replacing U.S. troops in Iraq with an international force, repealing parts of the USA Patriot Act and reducing the scope of government. Rather, we urge an awareness that -- in a state where groups with enough signatures and money can put a plethora of initiatives on a ballot and even recall a governor, and where legislatures can draw up political district maps that favor the party in power -- that alternate voices need to be heard during campaigns. Like it or not, this is a two-party system. But alternate parties serve the role of at least offering some ideas, some of which may be legitimate, and keep people like Boxer and Jones looking over their shoulders. That's a good thing, at least for the sake of debate.



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