

NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT: John Bonifaz, (617) 368-9100

Scott Lewis, (617) 573-0100

DATE: October 4, 2000

FOR RELEASE: Immediate

**FEDERAL APPEALS COURT GRANTS EXPEDITED REVIEW OF  
NADER SUIT OVER  
CORPORATE FINANCING OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES**

**Court Hearing Scheduled in Boston for Thursday, October 5, 9:30 AM**

**Plaintiffs Include Susan Sarandon, Phil Donahue and Other  
Voter-Supporters of Nader Candidacy**

**Lawsuit Claims Illegal Corporate Contributions  
Flowing to Debate Participants; Charges of Illegality Remain  
Over Bush-Gore Debates**

[NOTE TO PRESS: The federal appeals court hearing in *Becker v. FEC* will take place on Thursday, October 5, at 9:30 a.m., before a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor, 1 Courthouse Way, Boston. Attorneys for the plaintiffs will be available for interviews immediately before and after the hearing.]

BOSTON – A federal appeals court has granted expedited review of a case brought by Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader and voters challenging the corporate financing of the presidential debates. The lawsuit, filed in federal district court in Boston in June, seeks to strike down Federal Election Commission regulations which have allowed a small handful of U.S. corporations to contribute millions of dollars to help stage the debates. If successful, the case could have a dramatic impact on the structure of the remaining presidential debates this month.

On September 1, 2000, U.S. District Court Judge Patty Saris ruled that the FEC regulations were permissible despite a century-old federal law prohibiting corporate contributions to political candidates. Nader and his voter-supporters are appealing that ruling to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. A three-judge panel will hear the appeal on Thursday, October 5, at 9:30 a.m., at the U.S. Courthouse in Boston.

Thursday's hearing comes just two days after the first presidential debate between the Republican candidate George W. Bush and the Democratic candidate Al Gore. Two other debates between Bush and Gore are scheduled for October 11 and October 17, respectively. A debate between the Republican and Democratic vice-presidential candidates is scheduled for Thursday night.

"Corporate money has no place in presidential debates," says Scott Lewis, a partner at the Boston law firm of Palmer & Dodge, which is co-lead counsel with the National Voting Rights Institute on behalf of the plaintiffs. "Under current corporate financing, the debates this fall look like the Bud Bowl. Federal law requires an overhaul of this process."

The Commission on Presidential Debates, a non-profit corporation which organizes the presidential debates, announced in January that Anheuser-Busch will serve as one of the national financial sponsors this year, as well as the sole national sponsor of its October 17, 2000 debate in St. Louis, Missouri. The company is paying \$550,000 to underwrite the St. Louis debate. Other corporate sponsors in prior presidential election years have included IBM, J.P. Morgan & Co., and the Philip Morris Companies. The lawsuit alleges that the CPD is continuing to raise and solicit additional corporate contributions for its debates.

Since 1907, federal law has barred corporations from making contributions or expenditures in connection with political campaigns for federal office. The law allows only three exceptions to this prohibition, covering internal corporate communications, internal voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns, and the administration of a corporate political action committee. The law does not create an exception for the financing of debates.

"By definition, debates are partisan events which showcase the positions of those candidates selected to participate," says Greg Luke, an attorney with the National Voting Rights Institute. "FEC regulations which allow corporate money to finance such events directly violate federal law."

The lawsuit asks for a court order invalidating the FEC regulations. Such an order could result in a potential FEC enforcement action against the Commission on Presidential Debates for financing its debates with illegal corporate money and could re-open the question how the presidential debates should be organized.

In addition to Nader and his campaign, the plaintiffs include actress Susan Sarandon, former television talk-show host Phil Donahue, and other voter-supporters of the Nader candidacy. The Association of State Green Parties and Green Party USA also serve as plaintiffs. The lead plaintiff in the case is Heidi Becker, an undecided voter and a student at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, the site of the first presidential debate.