



June 1, 2015
Washington, D.C

Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Chair Democratic National Committee
430 South Capitol Street SE
Washington, DC 20003

Thanks for doing the excellent job you are doing.

The purpose of this letter is to discuss the issue of debates in the upcoming Democratic primary nominating process.

In recent weeks, as I have traveled around the country, I have been hearing concerns from voters about the need for vigorous candidate debate. The people of this country are tired of political gossip, personal attacks and ugly 30-second ads. They want the candidates to engage in serious discussion about the very serious issues facing our country today.

In my view, the candidates for President should engage in a series of debates beginning this summer. I want to outline my reasons why these debates would be very beneficial to the cause of the Democratic Party and progressive politics in America.

Voter Turnout: In recent years, low voter turnout has hurt progressive candidates all across our nation. As you know, the lower levels of turnout in both 2010 and 2014 have resulted in huge Republican gains in the House and Senate as well as in statewide and legislative races. It's obvious that when more people vote, more Democrats win elections, and so the purpose of our campaign should be to encourage as much voter participation as possible.

I believe a larger number of debates beginning in the weeks ahead would encourage such voter participation and I think we have ample evidence to demonstrate that fact. First, the large number of debates in the 2008 Presidential campaign is probably one of the reasons why that campaign was so successful in helping not only elect President Obama to an historic victory but for the Democrats to control the House of Representative and elect sixty members of our Democratic Caucus in the Senate. Those debates helped voters, beginning in the primary process, to understand more about the candidates and their positions on issues.

I believe that we should not learn the wrong lessons from the past but instead should look at the fact that an engaged and vigorous nominating process was one of the keys to success in registering voters early on and convincing people they had a meaningful stake in the general election in November. In 2008 voter turnout was extremely high, and that vigorous process of multiple debates and an engaged nominating process, was one of the reasons for this increased voter turnout that enormously benefitted Democrats at all levels of politics.

Inter-Party Debates

In addition to having a number of early debates beginning this summer and continuing through the primary and caucus process, I believe we need to go beyond the bounds of traditional party debates. I am extremely concerned by the fact that many working-class Americans are voting against their best economic interests by supporting right-wing Republicans whose agenda represents the interests of the billionaire class, and not the needs of working Americans. Why are millions of struggling Americans voting for Republican candidates who want to cut Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and education while giving huge tax breaks to the very richest people in this country?

That is why I believe we should be open to a less traditional form of debating by welcoming the opportunity to debate not only amongst members of the Democratic Party but also having debates between Democratic and Republican candidates during the primary process. I believe that these inter-party debates would put in dramatic focus the shallow and at times ridiculous policies and proposals being advocated by the Republican candidates and by their party's platform. It would also serve to engage large numbers of voters who typically do not pay attention to the process until much later when the general election begins to come into focus. By engaging these voters early and raising the stakes around the election I believe we can get people to participate at higher levels which will undoubtedly benefit Democrats up and down the ticket.

Further, I also think it is important for us to debate not only in the early states but also in many states which currently do not have much Democratic presidential campaign activity. While a number of these non-target states have not in the past had much organized campaign presence, I believe it is critical for the Democratic Party and progressive forces in America to engage voters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. By expanding the scope geographically of debates beyond the early calendar states we can begin to awaken activism at the grassroots level in those states and signal to Democrats and progressives in places like Texas, Mississippi, Utah, and Wyoming that their states are not forgotten by the Democratic Party.

I would be happy to discuss these ideas and proposals with you or members of your staff. In the meantime, I hope we can use this as an opportunity to build a constructive dialogue around this issue and others affecting the nominating process.

Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Senator Bernie Sanders