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Why the Democratic National Committee Must Change the Rules and Hold a Climate Debate

The climate emergency is not a “single issue” — it is the single precondition for every other issue’s existence.

Naomi Klein

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A girl holds a sign that reads “pull the emergency brake” at a ceremony to commemorate the Okjökull glacier in Iceland, on Aug. 18, 2019. Photo: Felipe Dana/AP

DEAR MEMBERS OF THE DNC:

Your meeting in San Francisco this weekend takes place against a backdrop that is literally on fire. You are gathering one month after the hottest month ever [recorded](#) in human history. You are meeting on the same week that smoke from a record number of wildfires in the Amazon rainforest turned [day into night](#) in the Brazilian megapolis of São Paulo. And you are meeting just days after Iceland’s prime minister led her country in its first [funeral service](#) for a major glacier lost to climate change.

This is the terrifying context in which you will vote on a [series](#) of resolutions to determine whether the presidential primaries will include a dedicated debate about the climate emergency. Not the already scheduled climate “forum” or climate “town hall,” which will surely be fascinating for those who seek them out – but a formal televised debate among the top candidates vying to lead your party and the country.

I am writing to add my voice to the hundreds of thousands of [others](#) who have called on you to use your power to turn that debate into a reality.

[Many](#) of you are already on board, including the chairs of several

state parties, but you are up against some powerful opponents. Let's take on their two main counterarguments in turn. ≡

First, you will hear that the rules on debates are already set. And, as DNC Chair Tom Perez has [declared](#), the party “will not be holding entire debates on a single issue area.” But here’s the thing: Having a habitable Earth is not a “single issue”; it is the single precondition for every other issue’s existence. Humbling as it may be, our shared climate is the frame inside which all of our lives, causes, and struggles unfold.

More immediately, climate breakdown is already pouring fuel on every evil that humans are capable of conjuring, from deadly wars to [femicide](#) to unmasked white supremacy and colonialism. Indeed, President Donald Trump is currently throwing a [tantrum](#) because he is being denied what he perceives as the United States’s manifest destiny to purchase the Indigenous-governed territory of Greenland, which has become increasingly valuable because of the wealth made accessible by melting ice. In short, there is nothing singular about planetary breakdown – it encompasses, quite literally, everything.

Other members of the DNC will argue that the climate debate must be shut down because if you give in to this [wave](#) of pressure, spearheaded by the Sunrise Movement, it will open up the floodgates for every progressive constituency demanding a dedicated debate of their own.





Members of the Sunrise Movement hubs from across New York gathered for a rally on Aug. 13, 2019, outside the DNC headquarters in New York City to pressure the state members to vote for a climate debate. Photo: Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images

In truth, that will probably happen. And in retrospect, it probably would have served the country better to have a series of issue-based debates, rather than the incoherent free-for-alls we've been treated to so far. But the political and bureaucratic hassles you will face should you greenlight a climate debate need to be weighed against something far more important: the fact that, by breaking your own rules, you have a critical chance to model what it means to treat climate breakdown like a true emergency, which is precisely what the next administration needs to do if our species is going to have a fighting chance. And when you think about it (and I hope you do), that is a pretty fearsome responsibility.

Here is why setting an emergency tone at this crossroads is so important. Imagine that the party does absolutely everything right between now and November 2020. It elects a beloved candidate to lead the party with a bold and positive platform; that candidate goes on to defeat Trump in the general election; other galvanizing candidates succeed in taking the Senate and keeping the House for your party. Even in that long-shot, best-case scenario, a new

administration would come to power with the climate clock so close to midnight that it will need to have earned an overwhelming democratic mandate to leap into transformative action on day one. ≡

The timeline we face is nonnegotiable. According to the fateful [report](#) issued by the International Panel on Climate Change last October, if humanity is to stand a fighting chance of keeping warming below catastrophic levels, global emissions need to be slashed in half in the decade that follows a new U.S. administration taking office. Not 10 years to agree on a plan or 10 years to get started on the plan. It will have 10 years to *get the job done*.

According to the IPCC report, there is no historical precedent for change of that speed and scale, though it is technically possible. Some pathways are much more democratic than others. Some are much fairer than others – to workers, migrants, and the front-line communities that have already been forced to bear the toxic burden of our collective addiction to fossil fuels. There are big choices to be made about what path to take, and they must to be explained and debated before millions of Americans.

But let's be clear about one thing: There is no pathway that stands a chance of cutting emissions in time that does not begin with treating the climate crisis like a true emergency. That has little to do with the words we use – all kinds of governments, from local to national, are declaring “climate emergencies” and then continuing on pretty much as before. Several of the candidates running for president have talked about the “climate emergency” – but it barely earns more than a passing mention in their stump speeches.

What matters is that we *act* like we're in an emergency. Because it is only during true emergencies that we discover what we are capable of. During emergencies, we stop all procrastination and delay. We no

longer do things just because that's the way they have always been done – instead, we suspend business as usual and do whatever it takes to get the job done.

≡

Which brings us to your deliberations this week: A very good place to show the country what this actually looks like is to vote to have a climate debate, precedents and procedures be damned.



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There will be objections and they will be legitimate. The climate crisis is not the only emergency we face, and many Americans are in the grips of multiple existential emergencies at once. The Trump administration's brutality against migrants is a full-blown emergency. Mass incarceration and police violence against African Americans is a five-alarm fire. Attacks on women's rights and bodies are an emergency. Economic inequality is an emergency. Trump himself is a rolling emergency. All of that is true and more.

It does not help the case for this debate that much of the mainstream climate movement has done a poor job of making clear links between the ways that the wealthiest and most powerful interests in our economy are assaulting the earth, assaulting democracy, and assaulting the most vulnerable among us all at the same time and to serve the same profitable goals.

The reasons behind these failures to connect are many. There's the blinding whiteness of too much of the climate movement. There's the fact that dependence on philanthropic dollars has fostered an

atmosphere of scarcity and competition between movements that should, by all rights, be working in common cause. There's the long historical tail of the Red Scare, which has made a great many "progressives" unwilling to align themselves with a coherent left-wing worldview that would make these connections legible. All of these forces have succeeded in divided interlocking struggles into safe, "single-issue" silos, built to contain and restrain us. ≡

Thanks to the climate justice movement and the [momentum for a Green New Deal](#), awareness is growing about the ways that our crises overlap and intersect, which is why the calls for a climate debate have been endorsed by diverse groups including the NAACP, United We Dream, Fight for \$15, and more. But we have a long way to go before we can honestly say that we have built a truly intersectional climate movement.

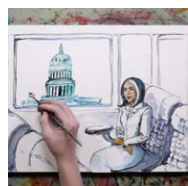


Emergency personnel work to extinguish a wildfire near Cardigos village in Portugal, on July 21, 2019. Portugal has long had recurring forest fires; climate change has now

brought hotter, drier, and longer summers. Photo: Sergio Azenha/AP



None of this, however, absolves you of the historic responsibility you carry as you meet to set key rules for the Democratic Party this week. If anything, it heightens your responsibility because you have the power not only to approve a defining climate debate, but to challenge the candidates and moderators to craft the discussion so that it spans the full spectrum of issues involved in both climate breakdown and potential climate solutions. As 17-year-old climate justice organizer Xiye Bastida [tweeted](#) to your chair recently: The climate crisis “encompasses economic, health, ecological, racial, labor, energy, **GENERATIONAL**, and many more issues.” It’s only “single issue” if you allow it to be.



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As you search your consciences to decide how to vote, it is worth remembering that 16-year-old Greta Thunberg is currently on a harrowingly small sailboat in the middle of the Atlantic, making her way to New York’s harbor. This week marks exactly one year since she began her “school strike for climate,” an example that has inspired a movement of young people that now spans the globe. In March, an estimated 1.6 million students joined the climate strike (and on the week of September 20, adults worldwide have been [asked](#) to join).

I am betting that most of you have appreciated Greta’s speeches over the last few months; many of you probably shared them on social media. But Greta has been very clear that she knows her actions —

whether refusing to go to school or refusing to fly – are not going to lower emissions at anything like the speed or scale required. Rather, she is trying to show you what emergency action looks like. And that begins with refusing to behave like everything is normal when the house is on fire.

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For Greta, that has meant breaking the rules of what it means to be a child and going on strike from school. For you, this weekend, it should mean setting aside the rulebook and endorsing a climate debate, one thoughtfully designed to hold within it the many intersecting emergencies roiling our world. Making that choice would not solve the climate crisis. But it would send a powerful signal to the country and the world that we are in extraordinary times calling for truly extraordinary measures.

And that's a very big deal. Because as Greta [says](#), “We cannot solve an emergency without treating it like an emergency.”

Sincerely,

Naomi Klein

Naomi Klein's book “[On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal](#)” will be published in September by Simon & Schuster. On September 9, she will appear with Greta Thunberg at an [event](#) hosted by The Intercept.