

# OPEN LETTER

To presidential candidates and consultants,  
debate moderators, political commentators and the media:



## If ever there were a time to center

## women's lives in the political debate,

## it's now.

**Women are 51 percent of the country's population and 53 percent of the country's voters, yet women's issues have been shockingly absent from the presidential campaign debates thus far.**

Seven nights and 12 hours of moderated debates have largely ignored policy discussions of issues that have an outsized impact on the lives of women and girls, such as equal pay, paid family and medical leave, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, child care, caregiving, and reproductive rights, health, and justice, including access to abortion.

Since 2016, there has been remarkable mobilization by women and girls who have marched in the streets and demanded a change in our culture, our institutions, and our laws. This led to a historic 2018 midterm election, which saw women, including women of color and LGBTQ women, running for office at extraordinary rates and winning an unprecedented number of seats in Congress, as well as governorships, state legislative seats and local offices. The gender justice movement is strong, diverse and vibrant, and women's activism, engagement, and energy continue to grow.

Despite the pivotal role that women play in our representative democracy, the presidential debates thus far have failed to speak to the central issues that impact women's lives.

According to TIME'S UP Now, there have been zero questions about sexual harassment, zero questions about child care, zero questions about paid family and medical leave during the first three presidential debates in 2019. In fact, historical research by TIME'S UP Now found zero questions about sexual harassment policy out of over 4,000 in two decades, and found that moderators haven't asked a substantive question about child care since 2004.

Moreover, women of color are increasingly among the most engaged voters, yet there have been no questions about how the intersection of race, gender, and ethnicity affects their wages and economic standing, access to health care, exposure to gender-based violence, opportunity to move up the career ladder, safety, educational opportunity, ability to access affordable child care, and more.

While moderators, pundits, candidates, and networks have rightly explored critical conversations on making health care more affordable and available, fighting the climate crisis, curtailing gun violence, achieving racial justice, addressing violence within and against our communities, treating immigrants humanely while fixing our broken immigration system, and creating an economy that works for all — it is imperative that they directly address how these issues uniquely affect women and girls, and in particular women and girls of color, including transgender women and girls of color.

On October 15, and in every primary and general election debate that follows, debate moderators must ask the candidates to speak about their plans to root out gender-based bias and inequities. Candidates should tell us how all of their policy proposals — including those that address women and girls — will positively affect women's economic security, health and safety, dignity and equity. Pundits should spend as much airtime assessing whether the candidates' proposals directly speak to the concerns of women as they do arguing about who "won" that night's debate.

Women will decide the next election, and we will not accept another presidential debate that ignores these issues. Our economic security, health, equality, dignity and success require more attention by those who seek to lead our nation.

**We are waiting to hear from you.**

Center for American Progress



national partnership  
for women & families



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