

MAYOR DAN GELBER

January 24, 2022

Manny Diaz
Chair, Democratic Party
201 South Monroe Street, Suite 300
Tallahassee, FL 32301

Dear Chair Diaz:

For the entirety of my life, if you asked most Americans to identify the greatest threat facing our Nation, the answer would almost always be an external threat. For decades, perhaps the former Soviet Union and the nuclear arms race came to mind. More recently, the threat of high-order terrorism from non-state actors like Al Qaeda.

I'm not sure that still holds true. Today, the most pressing threat to our country is the internal political divide that increasingly pervades every aspect of our society. The threat has become so intense that one year ago our own Capitol was attacked by insurgent Americans attempting to violently overthrow an election. Even our response to the deadly pandemic has been significantly hampered because the measures science clearly indicates will curb the virus have become needlessly politicized. How many died simply because mask usage and vaccines somehow became political statements?

And there is no sense that this will change. Already the Republicans are becoming even more hardened, as otherwise reasonable conservatives are adopting the rhetoric and false narratives of the hard-right wing of their party. Or they sit silently. With the run up to the mid-term elections, the battle lines are already drawn. We are doing all we can to energize our base, as they do all they can to activate theirs.

No matter who prevails, it is but a certainty we will continue on this trajectory. I am not convinced our opponents are presently capable of breaking free from this vortex. Few seem willing to stand up to their putative leader. So, the horrible rhetoric will continue to be even more outrageous. Divisions more pronounced. Violence even more common, the inevitable endpoint being a Democracy that is too frayed and brittle to survive.

That is why I believe it is time for our State Party to do what it can to take steps to address this division and hyper-partisanship by reaching out to more than our own political base. Florida Democrats need to open up our statewide and partisan primaries to unaffiliated independent voters. About a full third of all voters are unaffiliated independents, who don't receive a single piece of mail, or phone call, or door knock until the primaries are decided. Democratic candidates in partisan races, especially those in statewide and swing seats, spend most of their

time and money competing in primaries courting the most hard-core, fully ignoring a wider swath of voters who are more representative of the electorate we will ultimately compete for. Ironically, these are the folks that unquestionably determine every close election, yet they are treated as an afterthought.

More importantly, broadening our reach will incent our candidates to listen and interact with a more diverse group of voters, and craft messages and policies that have broader appeal bringing into civil discourse citizens that often only participate for the few weeks after the primaries are settled. I agree that there will always be a group so hardened that they can never be appealed to. But for too long we have allowed the “red zones” of political parties to dominate the debate fully ignoring those who congregate closer to the middle.

The Republican Party will likely have difficulty stopping us from opening up primaries to these voters. In 1986, the Republican Party of Connecticut sought to open up its primaries in the same way despite a state statute forbidding it. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Tashjian v. Republican Party of Connecticut*, ruled in favor of the state Republican Party finding that that a party's First Amendment right to define its associational boundaries trumped state law. It's possible, of course, that the Republicans, will not want to cede a potential tactical disadvantage, and will follow suit by opening up their primaries to these same swing voters. I believe that would be an even better result, as it will mean both parties will begin to reach out to a broader band of citizens.

I'm weary of the vitriol and sanctimony which increasingly defines our public spaces. It has crowded out anything close to thoughtful discussion and fully prevented the bipartisanship so critical to effective governance. More significantly, it threatens the continued vitality of our Democracy. It must stop but I don't believe our political adversaries are in any place to take action. So, we need to.

Thanks for considering this proposal and for your service to our State.



Dan Gelber

cc: State Officers – Florida Democratic Party