

November 13, 2017

The Honorable Charles Schumer
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
The Democratic National Committee

Dear Senator Schumer, Congresswoman Pelosi, and Members of the Committee:

We are engaged and committed Democrats, who anticipated the release of the Democratic National Committee's new platform this summer with the hopes of receiving an uplifting message of unification, steeped in our Party's most fundamental values: a message to lift us above the small thinking and bitterness of the prevailing political environment, while not only inspiring hope, but clearly articulating the Party's vision for the future of our country - the way forward for all Americans.

While a fine list of programs, A Better Deal is uninspiring. It does not stir passion or excitement. Perhaps most importantly, it will not drive voters to the polls. It will not win elections. **In short, we write to tell you that A Better Deal simply is not the answer.**

We very much want to win the 2018 mid-term elections and we absolutely must win the next presidential election in 2020. **Our democracy depends on it.** But victory is only possible if we are willing to boldly and unapologetically speak to our values, rooted first and foremost in human rights, fairness, justice and compassion for *all*. As so aptly stated by the late Senator Wellstone, "We all do better when we all do better." In this same vein, **the Party also must speak to voters' most fundamental concerns, explain clearly how a Democratic majority will translate into a better future not only for this country and all Americans, but for themselves and for their families.**

To this end, we believe that a return to a Democratic majority can and should be achieved with a united electorate. As borne out repeatedly throughout the history of this country, Democratic values are universal values, after all.

At the time of our country's founding and in times of difficulty since, our best leaders have worked to promote the common welfare, our common interests, and to insure justice for all. The tent has been broad and the goals ambitious: an end to the despicable institution of slavery, overcoming the staggering hardship of the Great Depression, enlisting the efforts of every citizen to end the Nazi scourge in Europe. To these we can add universal suffrage, protection of the environment, Social Security and Medicare for the elderly, Medicaid for the indigent, and marriage equality. The list goes on.

These were monumental and brilliant achievements, deeply rooted in shared purpose and universal benefit. And yet, we now face the reemergence of bitter partisanship among our leaders, the polarization of our people, the alienation of the white working class, the mass incarceration

tion and police killings of African Americans, the relentless degradation of our environment; and the horrendous, and dangerous presidency of Donald Trump. Under the present administration, the reputation of our country, once seen by much of the world as a symbol of progress, justice, and support for human rights, is being tarnished, perhaps irredeemably.

A Better Deal, in its current form, falls far short of the platform we need to mobilize and inspire all voters. We need the Democratic Party to set an example of what this country truly stands for, to capitalize on what has made America great throughout its history, and to take our country back, for its people. **We need a vision which will create hope, for our collective future.**

We implore our Democratic Party to explicitly resurrect and espouse the ethos of this Nation's founding. This Party must become an ardent proponent of ideas and values that reflect the longing of all Americans to know that they are both free and protected. **We need to lift all of the boats, and we need our Party to lead in that effort.**

From our most fundamental values - equality, justice, human rights, and compassion for all Americans, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, race, sexual orientation or creed - naturally flows a policy agenda which promises a better future for all Americans.

This is what we would like to see:

First and foremost, once and for all, get money out of politics. Virtually every item of the DNC's "A Better Deal" could be addressed by this single, unequivocal reform. The goals of insuring a living wage, protecting pensions and Social Security, fighting back against corporate profiteering, and lowering the crippling cost of prescription drugs — all mentioned in A Better Deal — would be swiftly achieved, if we simply shut down the unregulated legislative marketplace epitomized by *Citizens United*. **Money is destroying our democracy.**

It is not enough to reduce the power and influence of special interests and lobbyists. They must be eliminated. The disproportionate power of corporate interests in American politics inherently leads to policy-making that places profits before people. This is entirely undemocratic, leaving private citizens in many ways helpless to truly impact the legislative agenda. **It is unsurprising, then, that campaign finance reform is a unifying issue.**

That our government no longer strives to protect the best interests of its citizens is a sentiment shared acutely and widely by Americans across political persuasions. Donald Trump ran on, and in large part, was elected on his promise to, "Drain the swamp." Clearly, the current Administration has not lived up to its campaign promise - just the opposite. But the success of this rallying cry brings into focus a unique opportunity that it is incumbent upon the Democratic Party to seize. A recent poll by End Citizens United found that 71% of voters nationwide believe the amount of money that corporations and the wealthy spend on political campaigns impacts issues that impact their family. Seventy-five percent of voters have an unfavorable opinion of the *Citi-*

zens United decision.¹ The Democratic Party must lead the charge on true reform in Washington, stake out the moral high ground, and highlight the utter hypocrisy of the current Administration. **This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

Voter Suppression: The Republican Party has used gerrymandering and voter suppression as tools to win elections for decades. The Trump Administration is now pursuing an agenda of voter suppression with a vengeance. Unless Democrats fight State by State to support the voting rights of *all* citizens regardless of race, ethnicity or economic status, voter suppression, along with the egregious gerrymandering of voting districts at the State and Federal level, will continue to pervert the democratic process, deprive Citizens of their voice, and prevent our Party from regaining the majority. While we hope that soon, the Supreme Court will issue a ruling that limits or prohibits partisan gerrymandering based on its unconstitutional impact on the democratic process, regardless of the outcome of the case currently before the Court, we must continue to fight assaults on the concept of “one person, one vote,” so fundamental to our system of democracy. **This issue goes to the heart of restoring fairness, preserving the integrity of our democratic process, and taking back Statehouses and Congressional Districts across our country.**

Universal Healthcare: President Trump was elected on a platform that included a promise to provide “healthcare for everyone.” Amidst recent Congressional efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the heart-breaking stories of Americans facing financial ruin and even death due to the cost and inadequacy of medical care in this Country, were before us every day. A June 2017 USA Today/ Suffolk University Poll found that only 12% of the public supported the Senate’s plan to repeal and “replace” the ACA. Over half of the country now holds a favorable view of the ACA, and the majority of the public – regardless of partisanship – holds favorable views of Medicaid.² How is it possible that A Better Deal is silent on the topic of healthcare? **Be brave. Stand up for universal healthcare. This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

Protecting the Environment: While perhaps not all Americans “believe” in global warming, according to a poll conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Change, more than half (55%) of Americans ranked the environment as a top policy issue that President Donald Trump and Congress should tackle this year; and the majority of Americans in every State believe the United States should participate in the Paris Agreement.³ More significantly, adults younger than 30 — the very voters Democrats need to energize — are far more likely than those 65 and older to say that protecting the environment should be a top priority (64% vs. 48%), according to a January

¹Polling by End Citizens United, *available at* <http://endcitizensunited.org/in-the-news/new-polling-from-end-citizens-united/>.

² Kaiser Health Tracking Poll - June 2017, *available at* <http://www.kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kaiser-health-tracking-poll-june-2017-aca-replacement-plan-and-medicaid/>.

³ Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2016, *available at* <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us-2016/>.

2017 Pew Research Center Survey.⁴ It is also important to note that sustainable technologies will drive the job creation that lies at the heart of A Better Deal. Democrats must advocate a return to the Paris Climate Accords and push back against the de-legitimization of science. This year alone, we have seen catastrophic flooding in Texas, Puerto Rico devastated by the second Category Five hurricane of the season, and the worst wild fires in California's history, all of which have brought the grim realities of climate change home to millions of Americans, perhaps for the first time. **The Democratic Platform cannot afford to remain silent on the environment. Our future depends upon it. This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

Help for Families: Our Party needs to explain, clearly, what we are prepared to do to create a brighter future for America's families. Policy priorities on this point might include workplace and consumer protections, such as increasing the minimum wage; a national paid sick leave policy; affordable childcare for working families; and a national paid family leave policy, so that Americans can take care of their health, and their families, without worrying about losing their jobs. Family-friendly policies benefit our children; our mothers; our fathers; and our families. In the end, employers win out as absenteeism decreases, and employee productivity increases. A poll conducted by the Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, found bipartisan support for increasing the federal minimum wage. Recent trends also demonstrate increasing and widespread public support for some form of paid family leave. Since 2016, four States and the District of Columbia have passed their own paid family leave policies. **In order to strengthen our economy and ensure a better future for all Americans, we absolutely must take better care of our families. This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

Criminal Justice Reform/ Ending Mass Incarceration: The United States imprisons more people, per capita and in absolute terms, than any other country in the world. The private prison industry has profited handsomely from this trend. The public stock of Core Civic (formerly Corrections Corp. of America) and Geo Group, the country's two largest operators of private prisons, have more than doubled in price since the 2016 election. Attorney General Sessions' determination to incarcerate more people, as he pushes prosecutors to seek maximum sentences (already way out of line with the rest of the developed world) is poised to exacerbate the crisis facing our system of criminal justice. The cost of these policies lie not only in the human cost to those victimized by the system, but in the billions of tax payer dollars spent to house our inmates and run our prison system every year.⁵ The mass incarceration of entire populations of young men in our Country is also economically devastating to entire communities, and incredibly detrimental to millions of American children - the future of our country - whose families are torn apart.

⁴ Public's Policy Priorities for 2017, Pew Research Center, January 2017, *available at* <http://www.people-press.org/2017/01/24/after-seismic-political-shift-modest-changes-in-publics-policy-agenda/>

⁵ See, e.g., The Price of Prisons: *What Incarceration Costs Tax Payers*, Vera Institute of Justice 2012, *available at* https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/price-of-prisons-what-incarceration-costs-taxpayers/legacy_downloads/price-of-prisons-updated-version-021914.pdf.

As so aptly stated by the American Civil Liberties Union in its report: *Banking, Bondage, Private Prisons and Mass Incarceration*, “The imprisonment of human beings at record levels is both a moral failure and an economic one.” **Again, our criminal justice system is increasingly driven by profit - not by policy decisions which are in the best interest of American citizens. A fair and just criminal justice system cannot be built on the advice and recommendation of the for-profit criminal justice industry, which benefits directly from the mass incarceration of American citizens, in the billions of dollars each year. This issue goes to the heart of a fair and just society, ideals that are the foundation of our democracy and upon which our country was founded.**

According to a 2016 poll by The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, American voters clearly believe that there are too many drug offenders in federal prisons. Among every measured demographic, more Americans agreed that the United States imprisons too many non-violent drug offenders. This consensus was held by Democrats (70% vs. 27%), independents (61% vs. 35%), Republicans (51% vs. 44%), men (60% vs. 36%), women (62% vs. 34%), voters under age 40 (67% vs. 30%), voters aged 40-59 (62% vs. 34%), seniors 60 or older (54% vs. 40%), whites (57% vs. 37%), African-Americans (70% vs. 24%), Latinos (66% vs. 33%), violent crime victim households (66% vs. 30%), and even law enforcement households (57% vs. 39%). **This is not a partisan issue. This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

Education: Without question, the United States is falling behind the rest of the world in public education. This is harming our youth, our economy, and our collective future. The current Administration’s emphasis on charter, faith based and private schools will inevitably lead to the further deterioration of our once proud public school system. While options are desirable, all American children deserve the chance to attend excellent, free institutions of learning. In a poll on reducing poverty, the Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland found that 72 % of respondents favored public funding to make universal pre-kindergarten available to low-income families; and expanding the availability of Early Head Start programs to more children, ages three and under, from low-income families. This included 52% of Republicans and 90% of Democrats polled.

An equally pressing concern, the cost of higher education in the United States is becoming absolutely unmanageable, a problem only further exacerbated by the student lending industry. We have a looming if not imminent student debt crisis in this country: young people graduating from school with student loan debt that they may never be able to repay. The move toward tuition-free college now in place in New York and coming soon in several other states should be pursued nationally.

A high-quality and universally accessible system of public education, at the elementary, intermediate and college level, is essential for the United States to remain globally competitive. The strength of our public education system impacts our children, affects our families, and will large-

ly determine the future strength of our country's workforce and economy. **This is yet another policy area in which we all hold a stake. This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

A Moral Tax Agenda: Of course, the social programs necessary to improve American lives depend on adequate tax revenue. To that end, the implementation of a moral tax agenda is crucial. Tax dollars should be allocated to programs that improve the lives of American citizens – *not* to programs which, for instance, line the pockets of defense contractors.⁶ Just as importantly, our tax system is currently rigged in favor of wealthy individuals and corporations, who often pay little to no taxes. This must end. Zero tax cuts for the rich, and for corporations, should guide our tax policy. **Tax policy should reverse the disastrous trend of concentration of wealth with the top 1%, and should reduce inequality.** Unsurprisingly, a tax policy which ensures that the wealthy and corporations pay their fair share of taxes, is a unifying issue. An April 8, 2017 Gallup poll on taxes found that more than 6 in 10 Americans believe that corporations and upper income Americans do not pay their fair share of taxes. **This is an issue on which voters can agree. This is an issue that will win elections.**

Under the current political climate, Democrats have an incredible - and critical - opportunity to reassume the country's leadership. Let's not be afraid of trying to do that with a united electorate. After all, our Democratic values represent the most cherished ideals of our Republic.

But if we think we can simply stand by and watch the current government implode, if we merely accept, and react, to the terms of the national political debate as it has been defined by the other side, we don't have a prayer. **We must speak directly to the hearts of all voters and their most fundamental concerns. We must articulate our Party's vision of the way forward for this country, and how that path forward translates into a better future for all Americans.**

⁶ The Senate's proposed \$80,000,000.00 increase in military spending for 2018 is enough to fund tuition-free public college in the United States for the year. Over the next 10 years, this additional military spending could almost entirely pay off the student debt in this Country. If the Senate proposal becomes law, the United States will outspend its 10 closest rivals *combined*. See <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/18/the-senates-military-spending-increase-alone-is-enough-to-make-public-college-free/>.

There is no shame in beginning anew, or supplementing A Better Deal with a platform that will resonate, drive voters to the polls, and win elections. To that end, we hope this letter will serve to bolster the DNC platform and to inject it with the energy, optimism, and respect for our country's future that we in Long Island City** bring to our own activism.

Very Truly Yours

LIC Coalition
Long Island City, Queens

** LIC Coalition is a group of concerned citizens based in Long Island City, Queens, who first came together after the Women's March in D.C. to resist the Trump agenda, finally hold our elected representatives accountable, and work toward positive change at the city, state and federal levels. Our base quickly grew to include nearly 400 politically-engaged members of all ages and backgrounds. Our mission is twofold: to educate our community about their rights and the political landscape; and to take collective action to impact outcomes and hold our elected representatives accountable on priority issues, including health care, immigration, the environment, election reform, and social justice issues. To maximize our influence and impact, we regularly cross-collaborate, partnering with the broader New York City Indivisible Coalition, the Queens Solidarity Coalition, and with local community and social action organizations. www.liccoalition.org