How the Democrats might avoid eating their own

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With the entrance of Vice President Joe Biden into the 2020 presidential race, there now are 21 candidates vying for the Democratic nomination — something that poses unique logistical and political challenges for the would-be nominees, as well as for the party.

By definition, the presidential nominating process is a winnowing one. Each of the current Democratic candidates are searching — and must search — for rhetorically effective ways to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Consider recent comments by Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Representing the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, they explicitly claim or at least imply that Joe Biden, who represents the establishment arm of the party, accepts corporate donations that likely will influence his policy decisions.

Many political analysts worry these critiques — one Democratic candidate of another — will only accelerate, creating a highly negative environment in which the Democrats eat their own and resulting in a weakened, vulnerable Democratic nominee with substantially diminished chances of defeating President Trump.

As a communication professor who has studied and taught political rhetoric and argumentation for over 40 years, I offer a potential remedy — one that resonates with and extends the "We are Indivisible" pledge. Some might call my proposal idealistic or naïve, but I think it’s doable: Prior to the first
debate in June — and perhaps subsequent ones — all the Democratic candidates should convene an event broadcast on television nationally and streamed live. The Democratic National Committee then could run portions of this as an advertisement during the general election campaign, regardless of the chosen nominee.

The message communicated in such a convening would be: “We are here tonight to make clear that, despite our differences which no doubt will emerge in the upcoming debates, as Democrats we are united on some of the most important domestic and foreign policy issues facing the nation, as well as in a sincere belief that our democracy and Constitutional norms can ill afford six more years of Donald Trump. That is why we refuse to be divided — no matter what Trump and his supporters say or do. This evening we shall discuss Democratic solutions for each of these issues, sharing our profound agreements. We also pledge that following the primaries and caucuses, all of us will campaign enthusiastically for our party’s nominee.”

To be clear, this would not be a public relations stunt and would not be designed to minimize the important differences among the candidates — differences that necessarily must be articulated in the debates. It would go well beyond the “Indivisible Pledge” that many of the candidates have already supported.

Imagine the potential persuasive effect. First, it might lessen what some predict will be a bitter rhetorical fight among the Democratic aspirants. Second, it will underscore how the Democrats’ policy differences are far less severe than currently portrayed by the media; it would demonstrate that their disagreements pale by comparison to their commonalities, not to mention their sharp contrast in substance and style to President Trump. Third, the rhetorical act of the event itself would communicate emphatically just how unique and important the 2020 election is. Perhaps this might propel those who normally are disaffected by politics — and view campaigns as negative if not toxic — to the voting booth.

I think the public would see this as welcome and refreshing. Tom Perez and the Democratic National Committee could convince the candidates to participate.
Beyond the 2020 election, this new practice might also establish a powerful precedent helping the country to transcend the rancorous and polarized political environment which currently paralyzes our democracy and makes it hard to govern effectively.

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