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Opinion

For Lester Holt, one must-ask question for the Hofstra presidential debate

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NBC Nightly News anchor Lester Holt will moderate the first presidential debate of the 2016 election cycle on Sept. 26 at Hofstra University. Photo Credit: AP / Jose Luis Villegas

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Twenty-one times during the presidential primaries, candidates took the stage to debate issues important to the American people. Twenty-one times, they faced questions on foreign and domestic policy, on America's role in the world and on the philosophy each would bring to the Oval Office. And on none of those 21 occasions were they asked to debate the single most important challenge facing the country: the health of our American democracy.

The Republican and Democratic nominees for U.S. president will meet on Sept. 26 for what may be the most-watched debate in the country's history. As moderator, Lester Holt of NBC News has an obligation — indeed a patriotic duty — to demand answers to the most fundamental American question: Do you believe in the essential equality of each American and

if so, what specifically are you going to do to ensure that each citizen has equal political power?

For the first time in more than a century, our democracy is narrowing. We are engaged in a battle for the soul of the country. We see it in Ferguson, Missouri, and Flint, Michigan, in Baltimore and Chicago. We see it on Wall Street, in board rooms, in Congress.



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This is a fight not only for equality under the law, but also for equality in the hearts and minds and actions of every man woman and child in these United States. It is a fight for opportunity not just in theory, or on paper, but also in practice and in experience.

White supremacists have emerged from the shadows, gleefully claiming a prominent place in American politics. Racism has always been a thinly veiled political strategy, but now those in power have tossed the veil aside. From voter identification laws to registration restrictions to voter purges, those with power grab for even more.

And the money. Pouring from the pockets of billionaires to the coffers of Super PACs. America's wealthiest citizens no longer even feel any pressure to hide their intentions. They want to own Washington, the public be damned.

The gap between the powerful and the powerless is widening into a yawning sinkhole that threatens to swallow the country whole.

Yes, we must first debate democracy itself. How will each of these nominees address questions of power and equality in America? How will they respond to the gaps between the rich and the poor, between black, brown and white, between the powerful and the powerless? How deep is their commitment to the great American experiment of democracy that began 240

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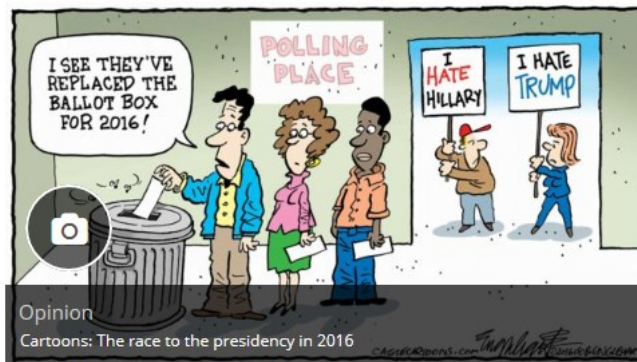
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years ago?



We are different from almost any other country in the world. We are not united by a common ethnic or religious heritage, but rather by an idea. The strongest, wealthiest, most-diverse, most innovative country in the history of the world is held together by the promise of equality. It is the essence of our national purpose. However imperfect our process has been in realizing that equality, for most of our history we have lurched awkwardly toward a more perfect union, toward more political power shared among more people.

Until now.

Almost a quarter-century later, we still have not accomplished what we set out to do. It is long past time we did.

There are dozens of topics to tackle that will lay bare the candidates' commitment to our uniquely American promise. Whether Holt asks about voting rights or gerrymandering, campaign contributions or executive powers, the nominees' answers will reveal their underlying commitment to equality, and to democracy itself.

Will they make the years ahead the best chapter in the American story, one defined by a national commitment to human dignity and justice that only true equality can realize? Or will they close the book forever on what could have been?

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