

K E N B U R N S

To the Members of the DNC's Rules and Bylaws Committee,

I'm writing to you today both as a Granite Stater who has witnessed firsthand how New Hampshire's First in the Nation Primary has helped move our democracy forward, and a historical filmmaker who, in this particularly challenging moment, is concerned for the future of our country and believes that New Hampshire's citizen led, First in the Nation Primary remains indispensable for this moment.

As a filmmaker, I've worked to bring to life different periods in American history when our country was truly tested, and today, we face our own perilous moment. Our country is deeply divided, the forces of extremism are on the march, and we're in the midst of a sudden slouch toward authoritarianism, perhaps unlike any in American history. What concerns me in particular is not that our country is being tested – we have endured grave tests before – but that those in the highest positions of power in our country seem willing to abandon the ideals that defined our often-imperfect experiment of building a more perfect union.

My hope, however, is that we will overcome this perilous moment the same way we overcame similar challenges before: through the power and promise of everyday American citizens. We're the country who won our independence because an army of farmers and shopkeepers were willing to endure the snows of Valley Forge; who rid ourselves of slavery because abolitionists spoke out and kept their eyes on the prize even at the risk of their lives; who, in the span of one generation, lifted ourselves out of a Depression and freed Europe from Hitler's tyranny. Our country has had its share of good, though flawed, leaders; but at every pivot point in our history, it's been the uncommon courage and abiding hope of everyday citizens that kept the American experiment alive. It's from their example I find my optimism. Perhaps this was best said by Abraham Lincoln, who on the eve of the Civil War asked his fellow countrymen: "Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?"

Part of why I believe that New Hampshire's First in the Nation Primary is particularly important for this moment is because I know of no better way for the ultimate justice of the people to be heard. I've lived in Walpole, New Hampshire, for more than forty years and during that time have witnessed many primaries. I have seen firsthand how my fellow Granite Staters take their responsibilities as citizens to help pick our next President very seriously. In today's digital age, so often politics becomes nothing more than a sea of expensive attack ads and social media stunts. In such a climate, celebrity is king, not character, the dollars of donors speak louder than the voices of voters, and sensational extremism is a cheap ticket to electoral success. In New Hampshire, we do things differently. In a small state like ours, retail politics – talking to real people, face to face – is indispensable for any successful campaign. Elections are won and lost here, not just on the airwaves, but in town halls and on people's doorsteps.

I'm always amazed, though never surprised, with the pressing questions candidates get, even from high school kids too young to vote, who have no fear in holding their would-be presidents to account, because they know our democracy demands leaders who are truly worthy of its promise. This sense of civic responsibility runs deep here in the Live Free or Die State. We'd be wise to harness this spirit to help us pick our next President.

Right now, particularly in a moment when it truly matters that we find candidates who can turn our country on a better course, I know of no better way of doing so than through the citizen-led process of the New Hampshire Primary.

This year, we mark 250 years since American independence. Whether or not we continue our work of building a more perfect union remains an open question. At another anniversary of our independence, years ago, President Franklin Roosevelt, speaking at Thomas Jefferson's home of Monticello, called out to the crowd:

“Was the spirit of such men as Jefferson the spirit of a Golden Age gone now, and never to be repeated in our history? Was the feeling of fundamental freedom which lighted the fire of their ability a miracle we shall never see again? That is not my belief. It is not beyond our power to re-light that sacred fire. There are no limitations upon the Nation's capacity to obtain and maintain true freedom, no limitations except the strength of our Nation's desire and determination.”

I know of no people better suited to help begin the journey to maintain true freedom, to re-light that sacred fire, than the people of the Live Free or Die State. That's why we need New Hampshire's citizen led, First in the Nation Primary, where everyday people can be heard. For in the strength of everyday citizens, there is no better or equal hope in our world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ken Burns". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "K" and "B" being the most prominent letters.

Ken Burns