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Will the Real Democratic Presidential Candidates Please Stand Up?

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Senator Bernie Sanders' (I-Vt.) presidential campaign is crying foul after the Democratic National Committee (DNC) changed the format of the party's next presidential debate to one in which the candidates will be sitting rather than standing.

"Why does Joe Biden not want to stand toe-to-toe with Sen. Sanders on the debate stage March 15 and have an opportunity to defend his record and articulate his vision for the future?" Jeff Weaver, Sanders' senior advisor, asked Friday.

"The format for the next debate in Arizona — their first since Biden's blowout Super Tuesday victories — would have the candidates seated for the first time this election cycle and take multiple questions from the audience," reported [Politico](#). "In the prior 10 debates, the candidates stood at lecterns and nearly all questions were asked by the professional moderators."

The Biden campaign and the DNC said the party and CNN, which is moderating the debate, decided on the format. It will be similar to the format of some 2008 debates between then-Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

"After 10 debates, the DNC worked with its network partners to adapt the March debate to the smaller field of candidates and to give voters more of a voice. This format provides candidates longer response times, and for the first time, will incorporate questions from undecided voters in the audience," explained DNC spokeswoman Xochitl Hinojosa.

"We will participate in whatever debate CNN chooses to stage: standing, sitting, at podiums, or in a town hall," Biden's deputy campaign manager Kate Bedingfield said. "The problem for the Sanders campaign is not the staging of the debate, but rather, the weakness of Sen. Sanders' record and ideas."

Bedingfield said the Biden campaign "agreed to the format that CNN proposed in a joint call with the campaigns" Friday. The campaign accused Sanders of reneging on the deal, but Weaver told *Politico* "a 'junior staffer' was on the call, made no agreements and that the campaign promptly objected to CNN within an hour."

The Sanders campaign clearly believes the debate format is being rigged to favor Biden, which would hardly come as a surprise given that the DNC also [changed the rules](#) to prevent Hawaii Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard from participating in it. Sanders certainly hasn't forgotten how the party bigwigs fixed things in 2016 to keep him from winning the nomination over establishment favorite Clinton.

"Joe Biden does not want to go head-to-head with Bernie Sanders, stand there for two hours, and go



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back and forth with Bernie Sanders,” Weaver said. “He wants it broken up with audience questions because he knows in that environment, he won’t fare very well.”

The switch to a seated, town-hall format comes amid questions about both candidates’ health. Sanders, 78, had a heart attack last year. Biden, just a year younger, has been dogged by [accusations](#) of failing physical, and especially mental, health in recent weeks.

On Saturday, Sanders’ campaign manager, Faiz Shakir, [retweeted](#) a report that Biden spoke for just seven minutes at a weekend rally in St. Louis, noting, by contrast, “Bernie has three public events just today in two different states, each speaking engagement extending for close to an hour.”

The Biden camp, meanwhile, responded to Sanders’ complaints about the debate format by portraying him as inflexible.

“It is odd to see a campaign that says it is based on revolution arguing for the status quo because ‘this is how every other debate has been done,’” said Bedingfield. “Why is Sen. Sanders opposed to a little change?”

Still, it’s hard to view the debate change as anything but a sop to Biden. He, after all, seems perfectly happy with it. “Usually, in the murky world of backroom political deals, this means you’re in on it,” observed the [National Pulse](#).

The website also suggested that the new format “is designed to be seen by fewer people, with less action and more droning on,” perhaps because “the DNC hardly wants more Americans watching its favored [candidate] being torn apart by a communist with their logo affixed behind the two.”

There is, of course, still time for the DNC to change the format to one more amenable to Sanders; but if I were Bernie, I wouldn’t hold my breath.

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Michael Tennant is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The New American.



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