

INTERVIEW WITH TOM PEREZ

Tom Perez is an accomplished lawyer and leader who spent his entire career in public service. He recently completed a successful tenure as the Chair of the Democratic National Committee, and prior to that, served as the 26th U.S. Secretary of Labor during the second term of the Obama administration. He was a member of President Obama's economic team, and led efforts to expand opportunity for workers in a variety of settings.

Tom also served as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights at the Department of Justice during the first term of the Obama administration. He oversaw the transformation of civil rights enforcement, leading aggressive efforts in police reform and other settings. Prior to his service as Assistant Attorney General, he had numerous positions in federal, state, and local government.

The son of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Tom grew up in Buffalo, New York, where he learned hard work, integrity, service, and perseverance. He put himself through college earning tuition money on the back of a garbage truck. Tom received a bachelor's degree from Brown University in 1983. In 1987, he received a master's of public policy from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and a law degree from Harvard Law School. He lives in Maryland with his wife, Ann Marie, who is an attorney with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, and their three children.

How has your Latinx identity shaped who you are today?

I am a proud Dominican American. I refer to myself—when people ask about my identity—as proudly Buffalo-minican. I'm a Dominican American who grew up in Buffalo, New York, whose parents moved there because of the similarities between the weather of Buffalo and the Dominican Republic. Obviously not! My parents came here because they got kicked out. My maternal grandfather was the Ambassador to the United States from the Dominican Republic. He was actually a career Ambassador in the 1920s. When Rafael Trujillo took power in the Dominican Republic, and the question presented was what kind of leader would Trujillo turn out to be? It became acutely clear to my grandfather within a short period of time that he was a thug. He spoke out and was declared *non grata*. That's how my grandmother and her family ended up settling in the United States. It was the middle of the Great Depression, and we were refugees effectively. This country gave opportunities. My mother was the second youngest of nine, and four of her five male siblings served with great distinction as part of America's greatest generation. My father was part of what we would probably call here "The Student Movement". He had to leave as well. He was drafted, served with

pride as a legal immigrant in the United States Army, and then we settled in Buffalo after he left the Army because he got a job at the Veterans Affairs hospital. The majority of my extended family still lives in the Dominican Republic—almost 100% of my father’s side and probably 75% of my mother’s side. When I say I’m proud Dominican American, I learned the value of hard work. I think living in the United States in a bilingual-bicultural environment learning about not just cultural competence—I don’t like the word cultural competence—I think we should demand more than being competent in life. I like the word cultural proficiency. My children embrace the diversity around them. And I think a big part of that is growing up in a bilingual-bicultural setting. So, I’m proud to say that I am a Dominican American, and I’m equally proud to say that I was Buffalo-minican.

What are the important lessons that you learned from your position at the Democratic National Convention (DNC)?

I learned that it’s really important to engage with people. All politics is personal. If you engage any community in the six-week run-up to an election and expect them to have a long-term attachment to you, you’re going to have problems. And when I got to the DNC roughly four years ago, we had 15 governor seats. We now have 23. We didn’t have the Senate, didn’t have the House of Representatives, and didn’t have the White House. We now have 23 governors, we now have the Senate, we now have the House of Representatives, and we now have the White House. We’ve flipped over 400 seats in state legislatures. We’ve flipped eight legislative chambers, at the state level, from red to blue. We had about 17 or 18 Attorneys General back four years ago, and we now have 24. All of these are really, really important. The key that I’ve learned is that you’ve got to organize everywhere. You’ve got to build relationships everywhere. And our success in 2020, I would date back to investments that we made in 2017. The success in Georgia, in 2021, was built upon the foundation of investments that were made by the likes of Stacey Abrams and others in the ecosystem, as well as folks at the party level. I’m proud of what we have done to build an ecosystem where we are really connecting with voters. We’re listening. We have a DNC that reflects America. We had an every zip code strategy. I think it is important to talk to people, and again, not just going to the church the two Sundays before the election, but talking to people every day, understanding their hopes, their fears, their dreams, and then fighting for them and fielding candidates who look like the communities that we are trying to represent. Those are the things I’m proud of, and I think that’s a big part of our success. I want to be clear that our success wasn’t just us at the DNC. We’re part of a broader ecosystem, and we can’t do it without partner organizations. We work really closely with grassroots community groups and with so many others in the democratic ecosystem. What’s unique about the DNC is that we have a voter file. Eight thousand campaigns in 2020 used our data and technology infrastructure. We’re an important hub; we’re an important anchor in the broader

ecosystem. Frankly, if you have a voter file and other technology tools that are weak, that are antiquated, then you hurt candidates at scale. And they were weak when I got there. We spent a lot of time, effort, and resources rebuilding that infrastructure so that we could help campaigns, up and down the ballot, win. That's what I am proud of. We've built an every year everywhere party. That's what you have to do to win. Now we've got to sustain it.

What can be changed about the pathway to politics that enables more Latinx representation? What do you think was key to your political success?

Well, I think one of the most interesting case studies of the growth of Latinx representation is to look at Arizona. I know a little bit about Arizona, because 10 years ago, I was running the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. We were investigating a guy named Joe Arpaio. You may be familiar with Joe Arpaio. He's a former Sheriff of Maricopa County, who fancied himself—and these are his words—a “law and order sheriff.” He was actually a lawlessness and disorder sheriff. At the same time that Joe Arpaio was demonizing the Latino community, there were other efforts underway. There was a bill, SB 1070, which I also worked on, and that case went all the way up to the Supreme Court. That was a bill that was designed to basically allow people like Joe Arpaio to become immigration cops. It was a terrible idea. The reason I bring this up is sometimes moments like that catalyze movements and the activists at a community level, and we would not have had the success we had without the engagement of the community. Look at people now like Congressman Ruben Gallego and State Representative Raquel Terán. There are two members of the Phoenix City Council who were part of the movement, and the movement was so critical. They turned that moment—where Latinx communities were being demonized—into a movement, understanding that we need a seat at the table if we're going to win. Fast forward 10 years later to 2020. Joe Biden wins Arizona. Well, there were many reasons he won Arizona. The most important reason being the Latino vote, dramatically greater in turnout and percentage. Roughly 75% of the vote went to Joe Biden; 75% of a huge denominator, a significant increase from 2016 to 2020. I use Arizona again as a case study in moments becoming movements. I see this across the country where local Latinx community leaders are stepping up. They may have been the head of the nonprofit, they may have been on the school board, they may have been the PTA president, and they're stepping up. We're actively engaged in catalyzing that movement. Look at the picture of the incoming class back in 2019 of the U.S. House of Representatives. Look at the Democrats, and look at the Republicans. The Democrats reflect America, and the Republicans don't. That's because we've been very, very intentional about making sure that we are engaging communities, empowering communities. Raquel Terán is a great example of someone like that. She's now not only in the State House of Representatives there, but she was just elected Chair of

the Arizona Democratic Party. Again, it's really inspiring. I believe in what I call the irrelevance theory of leadership. What does that mean? I want to become as irrelevant as possible as soon as possible. I define success as inspiring, recruiting, nurturing the next generation of diverse talents, and then letting them leave. I am very proud of the diversity at the DNC that we had. In every job I've ever had, I've always had the opportunity and the privilege of surrounding myself with incredibly talented, diverse colleagues. Those are people now who are going on and running nonprofits and running for office. I think the future is bright, and I think you're going to see more and more Latinx leaders running for office. I have no doubt about it.

While there have been some amazing strides in Latinx representation, the vast majority of positions have been filled by men. What are your thoughts on this gender disparity?

Well, we were making a lot of progress in the U.S. House of Representatives. Look at where we were on gender in the U.S. House of Representatives 10 years ago, and look at where we were in 2019 with the incoming first term class of Democrats. I think there's real progress. But your point is a really important point, and I think we have to invest in making sure we're building pipelines. We are proud to partner with a number of organizations that have been doing just that. For instance, five years ago, Emerge was a lot smaller than they are now. Now they've become a real powerhouse in recruiting women to run. I have been a strong supporter of Emerge, and the DNC was a proud partner with Emerge. A lot of our senior talent at the DNC we recruited from places like EMILY's List. I think we have to continue to be really intentional in recruiting and supporting talent. I said to you before that our mission at the DNC is to elect Democrats up and down the ballot, and some of the things I am most proud of, in my four years, are helping to facilitate the election of down ballot candidates. In 2017, my first year on the DNC, in Virginia, we helped elect the first two Latinas to the Virginia House of Delegates. Then, a month or two later, I got a call from Nancy Pelosi. She was not yet Speaker. She was Minority Leader Pelosi, because this was early 2018. She asked me about one of the two people who we had just elected, and I said, "Oh, she's a wonderful person." The next thing I know, at the State of the Union, she's giving the Democratic response in Spanish. It was a real point of pride for me. Remember the irrelevance theory of leadership. These are the people who are going to run the state of Virginia, or this country. So, we must continue to invest in the talent pipeline. When women succeed, America succeeds. Nancy Pelosi has said that. Barack Obama stole that line. I've stolen that line, because I believe in it. And, budgets are moral documents. We've invested a lot. When someone says they care about something, look and see what they've done, because that's how you can really tell. We've made major investments in building that pipeline. The ecosystem has made major investments. We're not where we need to be, but we've got to keep fighting. We crossed a major barrier with the election of Kamala Har-

ris, and that is a real point of pride for us. Sitting there at the inauguration on January 20, 2021 brought tears to my eyes—tears of joy. So, more work to do, but the pipeline continues to be built.

How do you think we should address early education opportunity and achievement gaps for low-income, Black, and Latinx students?

I had the privilege of working with Janet Reno back in the Clinton administration in the Justice Department. You may wonder why I am addressing your question by talking about Janet Reno. We had this conversation many, many times. If you look at the evidence base about learning, zero to four is the most important period of our lives; our brains are expanding. There's study after study documenting that the number of words that you are exposed to at these young ages can have a lifetime impact on your trajectory. We know that so many people don't have a head start; they don't have a fair start. We need to invest in it. There needs to be universal pre-K across this country. You see part of the President Biden's investments right now. We need to invest significantly in childcare so that whether you're at home, or wherever you are, you're in that nurturing environment. We did a nanny share when our kids were really young, and we won the lottery. We had a woman who was Mary Poppins. I mean, they didn't have the TV on. She was reading to them all the time, and I'm so convinced that so much of my children's progress in life was that they had a fair start; they had a head start. I'm hard pressed to think of something more important for the long-term future of our country than these investments, especially as we get more and more diverse. You have to look at this issue through a racial equity lens, as well. This is where government can play such an important role in equalizing the playing field, because I firmly believe that zip code should never determine destiny—but I'm fully aware that it does right now. That is unconscionable. If you come to my home state of Maryland, and you go to the state Correctional Institution in Western Maryland, there's a number of them—and I've been there doing prior work when I represented some folks who are out there—something like 80% of the residents of those facilities come from four or five zip codes. You know where those zip codes are. We need to change that, and we change that by starting early, early, early.

How can Latinx representation in state positions, such as governorships, positively impact democracy?

I've had the privilege of serving in local government, state government, and the federal government. I've worked in the executive branch, the legislative branch, and I clerked for a federal judge when I left law school. So, I've had the privilege of being in all levels of government. I can tell you that the opportunities to make a difference everywhere are remarkable. When I was in local government, here in Maryland where I live, we initiated a program that was a partnership with a local hospital. There's a hospital five miles

from my house that delivers more babies by a factor of two than any hospital in Maryland. The majority of those babies are delivered to women of color, and a substantial percentage are women who are undocumented. We invested because it was the smart thing to do and the right thing to do. We invested in a partnership with county money, with some state money through emergency Medicaid, and with the hospital investing. That created pathways so that women, regardless of immigration status, could have access to effective prenatal care. This gets back to your previous question. It is not just zero to four. It's really the nine months leading up to zero that are just as important as well. I bring that up because I think it's really important. I had the privilege of being the first Latino ever elected to the Montgomery County Council. I want that to be a ho-hum development. I want it to be more like "okay, we've elected another Latino—great." It shouldn't be a headline. That's where I want to get it. It is so important to have the diversity in all of these offices. My school system, where my kids went to public school—one of the best in the country, and one of the most diverse in the country—having representation on that school board that reflects the community is indispensable to our success as a school system. I have a fear, living in D.C., that people think that the only place you can make a difference is going to work with the federal government. The work that I had the privilege of doing in the state and local level was work that I am as proud of as anything. So, I worked hard at the DNC to make sure that we were building that pipeline and that pipeline is definitely getting stronger. I showed you that example of Arizona. Arizona is a great case study of the emergence of Latino leadership up and down the ballot, and we're seeing that elsewhere. You need to be at the table. When our elected officials reflect the diversity of our communities, I think that leads to better outcomes.

What are your thoughts on mobilization of the Latinx vote, given the significant diversity and many communities that are often grouped together by political commentators?

That's a great question. When I hear the question, "Tom, tell me about the Latinx vote in 2020. What did the community do?" My first response is, you need to reframe the question. What did the communities *plural* do, because we have a remarkable diversity of experiences. The experience of a Mexican American family along the Rio Grande Valley is far different from the experience of a Venezuelan immigrant who arrived in South Florida. We also have to understand, and I think this is true with every voting bloc, we tend to oversimplify. Tell me about the Black vote. Well, you know what, there is diversity of opinions. There's diversity of perspectives. We need to understand that, and we did. We had investments. We had an initiative called *Mujeres Movilizado* motivating and organizing Latinx women. Because if you look at the data on voting patterns, right now, there are double digit disparities between Latinx men and Latinx women. That makes Latinx women much more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. So, we had both

investments that targeted Latinx women and investments and conversations that we were having with Latinx men. Same thing in the Black community, because there are also double digit disparities among voting patterns there. It's really important to understand that strategies in South Florida are far different than strategies in Arizona. We understood that. When you look at the aggregate data—I'll stick with presidential elections for sake of time—Joe Biden got more than two thirds of the Latinx vote in the aggregate. Now that was about the same, slightly under, but about the same as what Barack Obama got in 2012. What you'll see though, if you go to Arizona, is he got 75% or so of a huge denominator. Now in South Florida, we underperformed. Why is that? Because you have a larger Cuban American population. You had a number of both Venezuelan American and Colombian American voters. We're still learning from those experiences there. I have a call coming up next week with a group that was monitoring misinformation that was being disseminated. The whole issue of socialism that critique resonated significantly for certain South Florida Latinx communities, and it's a function of their shared experience. It's incumbent on us to educate voters more effectively in the future about the fact that Joe Biden isn't a socialist and if you want access to opportunity, that we believe that voting for a Democrat is going to get you access to that opportunity. But I think the most important point to understand is, it is the Latinx *communities*. That was a linchpin of our strategies. In our voter file, we did for the first time in this cycle, what we call subethnicity modeling. Here's what I mean by that: in 2016, if you met a person named Perez, just to use my name, and I was living in South Florida, and you wanted me to vote for Hillary Clinton, all that you knew about me was I was Tom Perez. I was likely Latinx, could have been Filipino, but likely Latinx. You didn't know who I was. But if you didn't know where my country of origin was and you wanted to persuade Perez from Florida to vote for Hillary Clinton, one of the most important things you want to know is Perez of Cuba, is Perez of Dominican Republic, is Perez of Venezuela. Where am I from? If you don't have that information, you don't have a sufficient sense of what their life experiences likely were. The two largest voting blocks of Latinx voters in Florida are Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Now, in 2020, we had that data. So, we were running a program talking about the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, and the failed response of the Trump administration to the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Trump throwing paper towels; that's a very powerful image for Puerto Rican voters in Florida. And we did very well. We were above 70% of the vote with Puerto Rican voters in Florida. Again, understanding that we are communities I think is critical moving forward. That's how I think we will be successful—meeting the voter where they are and understanding what those experiences are.

What do you think is the best strategy to achieve a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients?

Well, the threshold requirement for that was to elect Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. I've said throughout the campaign, that Dreamers were on the ballot and they were. There is well-settled case law regarding the plenary authority of the federal government on immigration issues. The Trump administration could have ended the program—if they had followed the right process—because of the plenary authority of the federal government. Because they so frequently didn't follow the right process, they frankly gave us a reprieve. The Supreme Court said you've got to go back and follow the right process. Fortunately, Joe Biden was elected president, because if Donald Trump had been reelected that program would have ended. Period. That for me, when you asked me what motivated me to get out of bed in the morning in the run up to the election, will always be on my top three list—helping Dreamers, helping immigrant communities generally who were scared to death as a result of President Trump. Now, you've already seen the executive action that the Biden administration has taken. What we really need is comprehensive immigration reform, where taking care of Dreamers is part of a broader package that provides that pathway to citizenship. The thing about immigration reform is, if you look back on all the versions of immigration reform—whether it was during Ronald Reagan, before and in the mid-1990s when I was working for Ted Kennedy—it was always bipartisan. When I was in the Judiciary Committee working for Senator Kennedy, during immigration reform in the mid-1990s, we probably had 80 to 85 amendments offered. I needed one hand to count the number of party line votes, because it was a shared understanding that we can be a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. We've lost that now. The party of Lincoln was once the party of civil rights. The party of Lincoln is dead. So, it's really hard to construct a comprehensive immigration reform bill when you have, frankly, Republican leadership that can't even muster the courage to decry Congresswoman Greene from Georgia. Passing immigration reform has gotten harder and harder, but I think we can do it. We can use what's called the budget reconciliation process, if necessary, which is what is being used to pass the stimulus bill. We can use that to get a significant amount, not all of it, but a significant amount of immigration reform, certainly the part helping Dreamers. I know that commitment is there. I know the Secretary of Homeland Security very well, Secretary Mayorkas, and this is a top priority for him. We're going to deliver on these promises to our immigrant communities. We can be a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. That's who we are.

What do you think is the greatest threat to U.S. democracy?

Well, I think we have multiple threats. I think two of them are *Citizens United* and gerrymandering—gerrymandering of the partisan variety and the racial variety. *Citizens United* ushered in an era of dark money that has

poisoned our politics. The challenge we have right now in Congress is true, frankly, on both the left and the right. I'll go back to immigration reform. In 2012, Barack Obama won reelection. In 2013, in the U.S. Senate by solid bipartisan margin, it was like 68 to 32, comprehensive immigration reform pass. There was very relentless work being done in the House of Representatives, which was in Republican hands at the time to pass that bill. It was hard, but there was a fragile consensus in 2014 emerging around that bill. Then here's what happened. There was a guy named Eric Cantor who was in House Republican leadership. He is from Virginia. He had his primary election in the summer of 2014, and he unexpectedly lost to a far right candidate. He lost his primary, and nobody expected it. It so scared Republicans that they said, even though the majority of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2014 would have voted for the Senate bill, we're not going to bring it up. The reason I bring that up in connection with your question is because those Republicans didn't fear losing to a Democrat, if they took that vote. They feared getting primaried by someone from their right. Why were they fearing that? Because there are so many districts that have been radically gerrymandered by Republicans and not as many Democratic districts. These radically gerrymandered districts enabled elected officials to pick their constituents, as opposed to how it should be, which is the opposite. The Supreme Court has given a green light to this. So, in these districts, they only fear a challenge to the right or in some cases a challenge to your left. It makes it really hard to get stuff done, like immigration reform. It makes it really hard to bring our democracy back to work. It's one of the reasons why, frankly, Kevin McCarthy and others on the Republican side are gutless, because these districts that they try to protect are hard right districts. If we had the ability to solve racial and partisan gerrymandering in an effective way, if we could control dark money, and if we could reauthorize the Voting Rights Act—so that it has the teeth that it had when I was enforcing it—I think we could rebuild our democracy in a very important way. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down the heart and soul of the Voting Rights Act, and enabled, frankly, and ushered in a period of radical retrenchment in a lot of Republican states. So, gerrymandering, dark money. If we could do away with all of those, I think we could really go a long way in restoring our democracy.

What advice do you have for young Latinx students who are figuring out their careers and maybe hoping to enter the political sphere or the law?

The two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you figure out why. You had nothing to do with the first and everything to do with the second. I'm very lucky. I think in part because I grew up in a Dominican American family and dinner table conversation was all about politics. When you get kicked out of a country as my parents did, and when politics so uproot your life, it becomes part of who you are. That's what my experience was. My parents taught me to whom much is given much is ex-

pected. I've had a remarkable run of good fortune over the course of the last 30 years in public service. I hope that all of you will figure out that why question. For me the why question, I was able to figure out relatively early. I wanted to make sure I expanded opportunity. I was a kid when my dad died. My parents taught me if you want to get to heaven, you got to have letters of reference from people living in the shadows. They didn't tell me how many, and they're both deceased now. So, I don't know how many. So, I've decided I want to get as many as possible. I've had the good fortune to work in positions that gave me the opportunity to help people and scale; those are priceless opportunities. The Latinx community is growing and growing and growing, and that is going to continue. I want to see a Latinx president in my lifetime, and I'm confident we will. I am equally confident that all of you at HLS, and I had the privilege of being there, have the opportunity to be part of that. We've had a conversation today about women in politics, and you correctly pointed out that there aren't enough. I hope many women step up. Now, it is not without risk. I didn't have a sugar daddy or a sugar mama, you know, I was a Pell Grant kid. My wife is a lawyer too. She is a legal aid lawyer—she works with people experiencing homelessness. So, we are not poor by any stretch. But, again, we don't have a trust fund that enables us to do whatever we want. We didn't need one. We made a judgment that this was the why for us. I hope that all students ask that question. I hope you look around. There's nothing more fulfilling than going to that hospital I mentioned near my house, and seeing women come out with their newborn. That newborn is going to have a fair opportunity because he or she had good prenatal care. There's nothing more fulfilling than talking to Dreamers after the November election as I did, and to sense the utter relief that they feel because they don't have to be in the shadows any longer. Public service is about helping people, and public service at a federal level is about helping people in scale. Whether it's local, state, or federal, you can make such a difference. I hope you will get involved. Because right now, we're at a really chaotic moment in our journey to form a more perfect union. We need your passion, your experience, your wisdom to push us forward. I really do think that your generation is one of the most altruistic in American history. You are your brother's keeper, you are your sister's keeper, you're not only worried about yourself, you're worried about your neighbor. That's what we need more of, leaders that understand that the common good is what we're fighting for. If you blow out your neighbor's candle, it doesn't make your candle shine any brighter. I think we've lost sight of that in all too many corners of this country. You ought to step up because, again, I want to see a Latinx president in my lifetime. I want to see more Latinx members of Congress. I want to see more Latinx school board members. I want to see more Latinx mayors. I think we can do it. I'm telling you, the non-monetary rewards have been priceless.

Question: What do you think is the next step for you in your career?

I'm trying to figure that out. I have a week or so left in my tenure with the DNC. From there I don't know where I am going to go. What I do know is that I will continue to try to pursue a career pathway that enables me to expand opportunity. Again, I feel blessed that I was able to answer the why question. While I have had a nonlinear pathway in my career, there has been connective tissue, and the connective tissue is expanding opportunity, especially in underserved communities. That is what civil rights is about. That is what the work in local government is about. That is what the labor secretary was about. So much of what we did was helping those who are in the shadows. So, I am going to try to figure out other ways to do that. It may be in public service like running for something. I live in Maryland, and we have an open governor's race next year. I am talking to people and listening in that area or maybe something else. I am really, right now, in the process of reflection, and I look forward to continuing on a pathway of service. How that service is carried out is to be determined.

