



Presidential politics enters a new arena

The African-American vote was up 25% in the 2004 election. Similarly, the influence of Hispanic voters all across America has become a giant force to be reckoned with. Suddenly, politicians and the media are waking up to this fact: People of color deserve better.

Thursday night, there will be more than lip service in halting Spanish, a speech at an organization convention or a photo op at a black church. The All-American Presidential Forum with all major Democratic candidates at Howard University will be broadcast live in primetime on PBS. Never in our history since Lincoln-Douglas popularized this tradition in 1858 have three journalists of color, as well as a moderator of color, posed questions to presidential candidates. In September, GOP candidates will gather at a similar forum in Baltimore.

Why does it matter that people of color are represented? It is hard to find a better response than a letter I recently received from Carol Walker of Memphis.

Walker wrote that three years ago she started a summer reading club for her teenage nephews. This summer, they decided to expand the subject matter to politics. She wrote, "Each nephew had to select a candidate and follow their campaign platform. We all watched the (first 2008 presidential) debate held at South Carolina State (in April). Afterward, we held a conference call and discussed the issues. Everyone wanted to defend their candidates' ideas and comments. It was ... rewarding to hear these 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds, who society says are 'high risk,' debate on this subject. ... I am determined that they will succeed and persevere with God on their side. We also watched a Republican debate." She concluded, "The culmination of this summer project is to join you at Howard University to hear the candidates in person."

These young men and their aunt will be seated in the VIP row at the forum. I know that it's important for these young men and thousands like them to see presidential candidates take on the issues that matter most for people. I also know that when we make Black America better, we make all of America better.

TV and radio host Tavis Smiley will moderate the All-American Presidential Forums. The panelists will be Michel Martin of NPR, DeWayne Wickham (weekly USA TODAY columnist) and Ruben Navarrette (an occasional USA TODAY contributor). Smiley's latest book is What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing up in America.