

State of Mexico. President Peña Nieto, the moderator, and some reporters spoke in Spanish, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Remarks at a Democratic Governors Association Dinner *February 20, 2014*

Hello, everybody. Thank you. Thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat. Have a seat. Well, it is wonderful to see all of you. It is always a great weekend when the Governors come into town. And tonight we're with some of the best and a few of their better halves. And I'm so grateful to all of you for all the great work you're doing.

And I'm grateful for the people who are here to support our outstanding Governors. I want to thank our DGA chair, Peter Shumlin, for the great work that he's doing up in Vermont. His neighbor Maggie Hassan, who is the vice chair and the first time I saw her was another State senator just like me. And she's doing great up in New Hampshire, so we are very, very proud of her.

I'm not going to give a long speech because I think we want to make this more of a conversation. I want to take out some time for questions and answers. But the main thing I wanted to do is just to say thank you for all of you coming out and supporting Democratic Governors.

And Peter alluded to this, but let me underscore it. Folks here in Washington like to talk abstractions. You get into a lot of ideological debates. The problem for Governors is that they actually have to do something and they just can't talk. And they have to be practical. They have to understand a wide range of issues that are affecting a wide range of constituents. And the work that these Governors do each and every day are having a concrete impact in helping to shape the debate in ways that are extraordinary.

And the challenge we have sometimes in politics is that the national politicians and the national races get all the attention. But so often, the action—how our policies are actually impacting our constituents day to day—are being determined by Governors and State legislatures.

And if there's one message I want to deliver today to every Democrat and every person who's interested in supporting Democratic policies, it's that you got to pay attention to the States. You have to stay focused on what's happening in the States, and you have—you especially have to pay attention to what's happening in the States during midterm elections. Because we know how to win national elections, but all too often, it's during these midterms where we end up getting ourselves into trouble, because, I guess, we don't think it's sexy enough. But the fact of the matter is, is that that's where so much of the action is.

And Democratic Governors are testing ideas, and they are innovating and implementing critical policies all across the board. And that's work that obviously is made tougher when you don't always have a Congress that is cooperating. And what binds together all these Democratic Governors is a pretty simple idea, and that's the idea of opportunity: the idea that if you work hard in this country, no matter who you are, where you come from, what you look like, what your last name is, you can make it.

And we recognize as Democrats and you recognize as Governors that government can't do it all or shouldn't—you shouldn't even try to do it all. But government has a critical role to play in helping provide communities and families the tools they need to succeed, if they're willing to work hard, if they're acting responsibly.

And that's as important as ever today, because what we are seeing right now is the economy is slowly healing from what was the worst crisis since the Great Depression. We've now created over 8.5 million jobs since the depths of the recession. Businesses are optimistic this year. CEOs say they want to start reinvesting. We've got an unemployment rate that is as low as it's been since 2005 and is continuing to drop.

But despite all that, for ordinary families—for a whole lot of the constituents of these Governors here—folks are still worried. They're still anxious, in part because if they do have a job, their wages and their incomes have flatlined for over a decade now. They don't feel as if they're getting ahead. In fact, they feel like they're working harder and harder just to stay in place or to avoid slipping back.

And if you look at it statistically—everybody here knows some of the numbers—folks at the very top are doing better and better, but ordinary folks, that middle class that's always been the core of our society and made America different, they're still feeling squeezed. And so everything we do this year, next year, the year after that, and as long as we have the opportunity to serve has to be focused on how are we expanding opportunity; how are we growing that middle class; how are we building an economy that is good for everybody, not just some; how are we making sure that folks, whatever their station in life, can succeed if they're willing to work hard.

And fortunately, we've got a bunch of Democratic Governors who have been willing to implement what I've called an opportunity agenda and that I talked about in the State of the Union. Number one, that we're creating more good jobs out here through manufacturing and clean energy and making sure that we're rebuilding our infrastructure—our bridges, our roads, our ports—all across the country. Number two, making sure that we are giving every child in this country the best education they can get, because we know in the 21st century, that's what it's going to take for them to compete. Number three, training folks throughout their lives with the skills they need to get those good jobs. Number four, making sure that work pays, that if you're out working hard, you're not in poverty and you have a chance to get ahead.

And those simple precepts should be guiding everything that we do this year and for years to come, and that's what we should be talking about as we're supporting incumbent Democratic Governors and candidates for

Democratic Governors across the country, open seats.

Now, unfortunately, State by State, Republican Governors are implementing a different agenda. They're pursuing the same top-down, failed economic policies that don't help Americans get ahead. They're paying for it by cutting investments in the middle class, oftentimes doing everything they can to squeeze folks who are bargaining on behalf of workers. Some of them, their economies have improved in part because the overall economy has improved, and then they take credit for it instead of saying that Obama had anything to do with it. I get that. There's nothing wrong with that. But they're making it harder for working families to access health care. In some States, they're making it harder even for Americans to exercise their right to vote.

And we've got a Congress that prefers to say no rather than yes right now. They don't have an affirmative agenda. Their main strategy is to just try to do nothing and see if they can—falsely—give people a sense that somehow the policies that we're trying to pursue aren't working for them.

So the good news is that we are now talking about the issues that are on the minds of people every single day around the kitchen table. And I'll just give you a couple ideas—couple of examples of where I see significant progress all across the country, even if it hasn't been realized in every State.

Number one is on the minimum wage. You've got three out of four Americans support raising the minimum wage. The majority of not just Democrats, but Independents and Republicans, think it's important for us to make sure that if you work full time, you're not in poverty. And we've been seeing businesses around the country that are starting to recognize it's good for their bottom lines to do right by their employees. Yesterday the Gap became the latest business to raise wages for its U.S. employees.

But even though more than half of Republicans in America support raising the minimum wage, Republicans in Congress don't want to vote for it, even though the current proposal in Congress would give more than 16 million

Americans a raise. So I recently required Federal contractors to pay their employees a wage of at least \$10.10 an hour. We've got Democratic Governors that are doing their part.

So last year, Jerry Brown signed America's first 10-dollar-an-hour minimum wage into law in California. Dan Malloy in Connecticut and Martin O'Malley in Maryland, who are both here tonight, they are fighting to raise their States' wages as well. It's no surprise then that most of the States that have a higher minimum wage, higher than the Federal minimum wage, are governed by Democrats.

Republican Governors are out of touch with their own citizens on this. Just last November, you had a ballot initiative to raise the minimum wage in New Jersey. Governor Christie opposed it. It got 60 percent of the vote because voters understood this is the right thing to do and it will be good for the economy, not bad for the economy. It will be good because suddenly workers now have a little more money in their pockets and they're out there and businesses have more customers.

And when it comes to making sure that Americans have access to affordable health care, we're seeing the same pattern. Peter alluded to it. Right now we've already got close to 4 million Americans who have signed up for exchanges. We've got 3 million Americans who were able to stay on their parent's plan because of the law. We've got close to 7 million Americans who have access to health care for the first time because of Medicaid expansion. So we've already got well over 10 million Americans just in the first few months, despite problems with healthcare.gov in the first month and a half, who suddenly have the financial security that, in some cases, they've never known before.

And we're doing it while reducing the costs, the health care inflation that's out there and that's been plaguing us and hurting our businesses, our families, and our economies for a very long time. We've seen now three consecutive years of the lowest increase in health care

inflation in the last 50, even as we're covering more people.

Now, as you know, there have been a lot of Governors and State legislators that are still resisting doing right by their people. But the good news is, is that we've got a bunch of Democratic Governors who are willing to take on this fight. Terry McAuliffe in Virginia, I know that he is fighting this good fight. And we want to make sure that all across the country, we are supporting Governors who are saying, I'm going to set politics aside, I'm going to do what's right for my constituents.

And ultimately, that's what the American people are interested in. They're not interested in ideological battles. What they're interested in is action that is focused on their lives, on their hopes, on their aspirations. That's what they want us to focus on each and every day. And that's what we are offering: more jobs, better training, better education, better pay, more ladders of opportunity for folks who currently don't have opportunity. That's what our agenda is about, and it is an agenda that resonates with the American people.

But we're going to need your help to make sure that it moves forward. And we wouldn't be able to do that unless we had already some outstanding Democratic Governors who are here and have made me very proud. They are great partners with me.

I appreciate Peter's sentiment. In some cases, in some States, there are some fierce battles when you expand something like health care. The fact that you guys on the frontlines are willing to stand up courageously means the world to me. More importantly, it's going to mean the world to your constituents and future generations.

So thank you, everybody. Appreciate it. I'm proud of you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:39 p.m. at the St. Regis Washington, D.C. hotel.