

# “We the People” forum: Platitudes and demagoguery from Democratic presidential candidates

By Patrick Martin  
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The presidential candidates of the Democratic Party are determined to avoid any engagement with significant political issues, either in contrast to the Trump administration or among themselves. That is the conclusion that any serious observer of Monday’s “We the People” forum in Washington would be compelled to draw.

The forum, a regular early-stage stop in the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, brought together eight declared candidates, including five senators—Cory Booker, Kirsten Gillibrand, Amy Klobuchar, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren—and Governor Jay Inslee of Washington, former Representative Beto O’Rourke of Texas and former Obama cabinet official Julian Castro.

The forum itself is an assemblage of Democratic Party activists, some drawn from the trade unions—the Service Employees International Union and the Communications Workers of America co-sponsored the event—from liberal groups like Move-on.org, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and Planned Parenthood, and representatives of the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters, espousing environmental concerns. There was a smattering of younger people from campus groups, particularly those engaged in the defense of so-called Dreamers, i.e., young undocumented immigrants brought to the US as children.

Only one of the top-tier candidates for the nomination, Senator Kamala Harris, failed to make an appearance at the Washington DC event, a calculated snub that appears intended to demonstrate to the Democratic Party establishment that she should be their choice if former Vice President Joe Biden decides not to enter the race.

Based on the fundraising figures reported through March 31, that top tier includes Sanders, O’Rourke, Warren and Harris, with Biden waiting in the wings. Booker, Gillibrand, Klobuchar and former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg are the second tier, in terms of fundraising and polling, with at least half a dozen others bringing up the rear.

The forum was not an actual debate, which the Democratic

National Committee will not permit until June. Each of the eight candidates made brief speeches, followed by largely gushing questions from the floor, frequently mini-speeches in themselves promoting the organizations to which the questioners were affiliated.

The questions had a certain significance, more by what they avoided than anything else. Either by decree of the conference organizers, or by the preference of the party activists themselves, the questions avoided any substantive political issues and were largely concerned with what changes should be made in the US electoral system to give the Democrats a better chance of winning. There was lengthy discussion of abolishing the Electoral College, strengthening protection of voting rights, and other technical measures to expand the electorate.

A list of questions not asked would be long and substantive. There was nothing at all on foreign policy, under conditions where the Trump administration is threatening to invade Venezuela and is blockading Iran economically and waging warfare using drone missiles and special forces across a vast swathe of northern Africa and the Middle East, from Niger to Afghanistan.

There was nothing on Israel or the Trump administration’s decision to recognize the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights; nothing on trade, either with China or any other country; nothing about US-Russian relations or the Mueller report, which has blown up the long-running Democratic Party fiction that Russian intervention in the 2016 election caused the election of Donald Trump.

Remarkably, there was not a single question about the US-Mexico border or the conflict with the White House over building Trump’s wall, which led to a 35-day shutdown of the federal government. There was no discussion of Trump’s declaration of a national emergency, his threat to close the US-Mexico border, or his policy of separating parents and children and otherwise abusing and persecuting immigrants and refugees.

Nor did any of the candidates volunteer their opinions on any of these subjects. These were eight candidates for the post of “commander in chief” of the most powerful imperialist state, but none of them gave the slightest indication of what they would do with that power. This only underscores that the Democratic Party is the mouthpiece of the military-intelligence apparatus, as it demonstrated during the anti-Russia campaign. A Democratic successor to Trump will do whatever the spymasters and generals demand.

Instead of any discussion of issues, relating either to the policies of the Trump administration or to disagreements among themselves, the candidates engaged in vacuous platitudes, praise of the audience for their “courage” and “commitment,” and suggestions of various methods for increasing Democratic turnout in the 2020 elections—anything but offering policies that actually address the needs of working people.

The hollowness of the entire proceeding was extraordinary. Elizabeth Warren, a Harvard law professor before she became a senator, called for a constitutional amendment to guarantee the individual right to vote and have that vote counted. Actually, the Fifteenth Amendment to the constitution, passed after the Civil War, does that already. It is simply not enforced by either Democratic or Republican administrations.

Warren declared that her central issue was “corruption,” the domination of US political institutions by the wealthy. But her solution was not to break up concentrated wealth, let alone expropriate the super-rich. It was to pass legislation prohibiting various forms of campaign contributions by the wealthy. She passed in silence over twin realities: that the Democratic Party itself is heavily financed by the super-rich, and that as long as the financial aristocracy controls the bulk of society’s wealth, it will necessarily dominate the government as well.

Her one reference to foreign policy—perhaps the only one in the seven-hour event—was to attack the Trump administration for its mishandling of security clearances for two dozen White House staffers, including Trump’s daughter and son-in-law. “The Trump administration is a walking, talking, living, breathing threat to our national security and we have to call it out,” Warren said, echoing the right-wing language of the failed anti-Russia campaign.

The candidate who has raised the most money and stands highest in the polls—at least among those who have officially begun their campaigns—is Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont. The former challenger to Hillary Clinton in 2016 appeared before the “We the People” forum as the frontrunner for their support, winning by far the most applause and attention.

Sanders made brief remarks boasting that issues he had

raised as a supposed radical outsider in 2016 had now become “mainstream,” ignoring the fact that none had been implemented. These included health care as a “basic right,” a \$15-an-hour minimum wage and free tuition for college education. As usual in his speeches, he laid out significant statistics on the decline of living standards and social rights for working people, while presenting the Democratic Party—a party controlled by the multimillionaires and dedicated to defending capitalism—as the political vehicle for fighting the domination of the super-rich.

He made only one reference to trade, where the Democrats are either in agreement with the trade war policies of the Trump administration or attack it from the right, demanding an even harder line on China.

Sanders and the other candidates went out of their way to emphasize their support for the right of workers to join unions—by which they mean the right of the union apparatus to collect money from captive workers and give it to Democratic Party politicians. But neither Sanders nor any of the others made the slightest reference to the actual struggles of workers in America, which have increasingly taken the form of incipient rebellions against the unions, with statewide wildcat strikes by public school teachers in West Virginia, Arizona and Oklahoma last year.

Sanders hailed his own intervention at Amazon, which ended with the self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” hailing Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man, for establishing a \$15-an-hour wage, which actually resulted in a wage cut for many workers since the company eliminated bonuses and other special payments.

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