

The Presidential Election and America’s Future

Update Report on the First Ten Presidential Debates and Children’s Issues as Part of the Presidential Political Dialogue

This report was developed by the Child and Family Policy Center on behalf of the 40+ member Children’s Policy Coalition, which has been working to raise children’s issues to prominence in the 2016 Presidential election in Iowa. In addition to doing any analysis of Presidential debate questions, CFPC, working with the Coalition, has produced: (1) an election guide on children’s issues – Securing America’s Future: Children and the 2016 Election; (2) an analysis and cross-tabulations from a voter survey on children’s issues conducted by Selzer & Co.; (3) an enumeration of the issues addressed within the issue sections of the major party candidate official websites; (4) unedited responses to six child policy questions from Presidential candidates (3 Democrat and 1 Republican, to date); and (5) reporting on two additional candidate forums (the Jack Kemp Forum on Expanding Opportunity and the Brown and Black Forum on Expanding Equality) that provided more candidate attention to issues of child security and opportunity. This information is available on the website, www.itsaboutourkids.org.

DEBATE QUESTIONS FROM MEDIA GUILTY OF CHILD NEGLECT

For the first ten Presidential debates (six Republican and four Democrat), the Child and Family Policy Center coded all primary questions posed by moderators to the candidates. Through these debates, there were a total of 501 questions raised, which CFPC then grouped into general subject categories. While candidates did not always respond to the questions posed nor did they limit their responses to the question subject matter (and sometimes interrupted to give responses to questions posed to others), these 501 questions shaped the bulk of the debate focus. Chart One below shows the results from that coding of questions.

CHART ONE: MODERATOR QUESTION TOPICS DURING FIRST SIX PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES (AUGUST THROUGH JANUARY 20, 2016)		
Topic Area	No. of Questions	Percent
Foreign Policy, Terrorism, National Security	183	36 %
Candidate Qualifications, Character and Integrity, Electability, Faith	92	18 %
Budget, Debt, Entitlements, Economy, Business Regulation, Jobs	84	17 %
High Visibility Social Issues (guns, marijuana, LBGT, vaccines, Planned Parenthood, common core, police violence)	55	11 %
Immigration	29	6 %
Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination	23	5 %
Environment and Global Warming	11	2 %
Health Care	10	2 %
Higher Education Affordability	8	2 %
General (three priorities, topics not discussed)	6	1 %
Child Health, Safety, School Readiness, and Educational Success	0	0 %
Total	501	100 %

While candidates made frequent mention of their own children and grandchildren in their opening and closing remarks and spoke to the need to equip children for the future, missing from the questions were any about the status and well-being of the nation’s children and what should be done to ensure their growth and development into productive adults. A good share of the questions posed by moderators focused upon specific statements or controversies around candidates and their character and electability; but at times in both Republican and Democrat debates, candidates themselves asked that there be more of a focus upon substantive issues facing the country.

Despite the fact that the federal government has substantial responsibilities in the areas of child health, child safety, education, and addressing disparities in child well-being by socio-economic status, race, and place, debate moderators failed to ask any questions in these areas. While there was some variation in questions asked in Republican versus Democrat debates (see Chart Four at end), neither the Republican nor Democrat debate moderators raised child policy issues at all. Currently, however, federal funding accounts for approximately 35 percent of all investments made in child health, safety, security, and education.

IOWA VOTERS WANT MORE ATTENTION GIVEN TO CHILDREN AND CHILD POLICY

In July, 2015, with the Every Child Matters Education Fund, the Child and Family Policy Center commissioned a poll, conducted by Selzer & Company, of Iowa voters and their views on child policy issues. The first questions on that poll provided a list of issues facing the country and whether they should be priorities for the next President to address. Chart Two shows the responses voters gave to which of these issues were the most important (the top one or two) for them, with “improving the health, education, and well-being of children” coming out on top.

CHART TWO: IOWA VOTER OPINION SURVEY RESPONSES ON MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT TO ADDRESS	
For the following issues, which are the one or two most important issues for the President to address (percentages total more than 100% because some voters provided two responses)?	
Improving the health, education, and well-being of children	29 %
Creating jobs and improving the economy	23 %
Pursuing terrorists in the U.S. and abroad	20 %
Balancing the federal budget and reducing the deficit	20 %
Ensuring economic security for senior citizens	13 %
Promoting moral values in our country	10 %
Reducing the size and scope of the federal government	9 %
Protecting the environment	9 %
Reducing poverty	9 %
Reducing income inequality	7 %
Improving America’s standing in the world economy	3 %
Selzer & Company poll of 500 Iowa voters, July, 2015	

The results from the poll present a very sharp disconnect between what issues voters are concerned about and what questions moderators have asked Presidential candidates. Current national and international incidents likely have increased the emphasis upon terrorism among voters, but the July poll remains relevant as to the importance voters give to child policy issues as compared with many other issues receiving much more attention in the Presidential debates to date.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND NEXT PRESIDENT MUST ADDRESS SIX CHILD POLICY AREAS

CFPC and the Every Child Matters Education Fund have been working with over forty Iowa organizations as part of a Children’s Policy Coalition to raise child policy issues during the First in the Nation caucuses in Iowa. *Securing America’s Future: Children and the 2016 Elections* has been provided to all candidates and the media. It provides background on six key federal child policy areas (see Chart Three) and the current need for attention to them by Presidential candidates. Public dialogue and discourse, where candidates articulate and develop their agendas in these areas, is essential to developing public will to address them and effective policies to produce better results.

CHART THREE:
SECURING AMERICA’S FUTURE QUESTIONS FOR PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

What actions will your administration take to:

1. (Health) Ensure all children have health coverage and this coverage is effective in responding to their needs for healthy growth and development?
2. (Early Learning) Close the “readiness gap” that appears before kids start school?
3. (School Success) Ensure the U.S. has a strong primary and secondary education system that meets every child’s needs?
4. (Safety and Permanence) Reduce the number of children who are subject to abuse and neglect, improve foster care, and ensure a promising future for those aging out of foster care?
5. (Economic Security) Reduce poverty among children and otherwise ensure that all children have the resources and supports they need to become successful adults?
6. (Equality and Opportunity) Ensure all children have equal opportunities for success and eliminate inequities that limit the in achieving their potential?

In some instances, candidates have presented their agendas on some of these issues in their own speeches – and they also have responded to questions at their own campaign events about children’s issues, when they are raised. The Every Child Matters Education Fund has and is continuing to track and record statements made by candidates on child policy issues across these areas of concern, available through its recently launched *Digital Dialogue* campaign. The Children’s Policy Coalition has released Democrat candidates open-ended responses to these six questions and is releasing Republican candidate responses, as they are provided.

Still, the current information on candidate positions on many of the pressing child policy concerns recognized by voters is sparse and certainly cannot be garnered from the first ten debates that candidates have had – where there is a critical opportunity to raise such issues to prominence.

CANDIDATE WEBSITES OFFER SLIM PICKINGS ON MOST MAJOR CHILD POLICY ISSUES

All Presidential candidates have official websites, and each of these websites contains an “issue” (or “stands on issues” or “goals”) section, where candidates offer some policy outlines. Of the fourteen candidates from the two major parties, most (11) have a statement on education, but this is the only child issue that receives attention from more than one candidate (one of the fourteen has a statement on the following: infant mortality, child hunger, and early childhood education). On issues most related to children, there are several issue statements on family values (4) and on family economic security (3). No candidate website has a specific issue section on children, on poverty, or on addressing of racial disparity.

CONCLUSION

At their best, Presidential elections can focus attention on critical issues facing the country and produce the political discourse needed to produce attention, mold consensus, and build public will for action. In general, children’s issues are not ones that are seen as “hot button” issues around which sound bites can be developed. They are not ones for which there are particularly easy, one-line solutions. At the same time, they ultimately are among the most important issues that face the country and require that public dialogue and discourse. Through the Children’s Policy Coalition, both the Child and Family Policy Center and the Every Child Matters Education Fund have sought to elevate children’s issues to the attention they deserve. Candidates, the media, and, most importantly, voters have both an opportunity and responsibility to give much greater attention to children and ensuring their health, safety, early learning, safety, economic security, and full and equal opportunity to succeed.

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CHART FOUR:
 MODERATOR QUESTION TOPICS DURING FIRST SIX
 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES – REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC DEBATES

Topic Area	Republican	Democrat
Foreign Policy, Terrorism, National Security	119	64
Candidate Qualifications, Character and Integrity, Electability, Faith	62	30
Budget, Debt, Entitlements, Economy, Business Regulation, Jobs	56	28
High Visibility Social Issues	32	23
Immigration	22	7
Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination	7	16
Environment and Global Warming	4	7
Health Care	1	10
Higher Education Affordability	1	7
General	0	6
Child Health, Safety, School Readiness, and Educational Success	0	0
Total	304	197