



THIS ELECTION HAS CONSEQUENCES

Contrasting Party Positions on Key Policy Issues

BY DENNIS KALOB, PH.D.

Elections have consequences, the saying goes. Indeed, that is very true. Sometimes the consequences are not substantial, and then there are times like these when the election would appear to have very significant consequences for our nation and world.

In this article, I summarize the positions of the two major political parties on a few key issues, although, strangely, there is no 2020 Republican Party platform and they are relying on the one from 2016.¹ I focus on issues related to the environment, health care, labor, voting rights, and help for those in need—issues that we in JSRI have addressed over the years and about which we care deeply.

Climate Change

Certainly we need to take dramatic action to address climate change and the existential threat it poses to virtually all of Creation, which Pope Francis wrote about persuasively in *Laudato Si'*, his 2015 encyclical on the environment. Yet, the GOP is unmoved by the scientific evidence and international consensus. The Trump administration has withdrawn the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement leaving us virtually alone in the world.²

The Democrats, on the other hand, would bring us back into the Paris Agreement; and they pledge to take significant action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Their platform, however, falls short of endorsing a Green New Deal.³

Health Care

The Republican platform continues to call for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The Trump administration is currently arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court that the law should be declared unconstitutional. If successful, this case would likely cause 20 million people to lose their insurance. As for Republican plans for a replacement, there is great uncertainty. Various ideas have been proposed, such as giving states block grants to fund health care for low income people. Their most recent platform position on Medicaid, overall, supports “block-granting the program without strings.”⁴

The Democratic platform expresses support for protecting and expanding the ACA and that health care is a right. They support the creation of a public option in the health insurance exchanges and lowering of the eligibility age for Medicare to 60. The platform does stop short of promising to pursue Medicare for All.⁵

Minimum Wage

The last time the federal minimum wage was increased was July 2009, over 11 years ago. If the minimum wage had kept up with inflation since 1968, the year the value of the wage peaked, the current minimum wage would be over \$12 per hour.⁶

The Republican Party has become quite adamant against increases. Many would just as soon eliminate the requirement of a minimum wage altogether, as they see it as an intrusion into the free market. The platform has them on record as opposing federal increases and stating that they would leave it up to the individual states and local communities.⁷

Indeed, most of the states have taken their own action on the minimum wage. There are now 29 states, plus the District of Columbia, that have instituted higher minimum wages (Virginia is set to become the 30th state in 2021). In fact, 18 states and D.C. have minimum wages of \$10 or more.⁸ Republican-controlled states are the most resistant to increases, and many preempt cities from raising local minimums.

Of the five Gulf South states, only Florida has a minimum wage above \$7.25 (currently \$8.56).⁹

The Democratic Party platform calls for phasing in a national \$15 minimum wage.¹⁰

Voting Rights

The Democratic Party supports restoring/strengthening the Voting Rights Act, which had been watered down by the Supreme Court. They also note in their platform many additional ways they would make voting more accessible and easier, such as expanding mail-in and early voting and allowing same-day registration. They also favor making Election Day a national holiday.¹¹

The Republican Party appears uninterested in pursuing any of the above. Rather, they have been engaging in efforts to suppress voter turnout. Donald Trump even publicly admitted that he would like to keep the United States Postal Service underfunded so it would be incapable of adequately handling the expected deluge of absentee ballots this fall, thereby casting doubt over the election results.¹²

COVID-19 Response—HEROES Act and HEALS Act

The HEROES Act was passed by the Democratic House of Representatives in May. It included a 15% increase in the maximum SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) monthly benefit, something Democrats have recognized as particularly important in this time of mass unemployment and increased poverty and hunger. The HEROES Act also includes a continuation of the emergency \$600 federal benefit added to weekly state unemployment payments, another round of stimulus checks, and aid to state and local governments.¹³

The Republicans' earlier support for emergency assistance ground to a halt in face of the HEROES Act—the Republican-

controlled Senate has refused to take it up. At the time of this writing, they were offering the HEALS Act, a much smaller bill, which they have yet to vote on. The HEALS Act would provide no additional SNAP benefit¹⁴ and only a much diminished weekly federal unemployment benefit.¹⁵ It also provides virtually no assistance to state and local governments.¹⁶

The differences in responses to our current crisis fit the overall ideologies of the two parties. Republicans have been reluctant to spend resources on programs addressing the needs of our nation's most vulnerable. They support limited government. Or as Ronald Reagan said at his inaugural address in 1981, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."¹⁷ Democrats, on the other hand, are clearly in favor of federal action to address human needs.

Conclusion

Platform positions and the public policies that spring from them are not just exercises in civics, but are essentially expressions of our morality. The Church demands of us to work for the common good and to hear "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."¹⁸ Policies that promote the common good or address the needs of a suffering planet or those at the margins of society are moral policies that we are called to support. Policies that put profits or narrow private interests ahead of the common good or that ignore or harm the earth or the poor are immoral and must be opposed.

For more information on Catholic social teaching and public policy, check out NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby. This group of women religious has been a force for justice in this country for nearly 50 years. Their *2020 Election Toolkit* (networkadvocates.org/2020election) may be helpful as you discern the political and moral options in this year's elections.

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