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Pro Tip For The 2020 Candidates: Talk About Climate Action As Infrastructure—They Are The Same Thing

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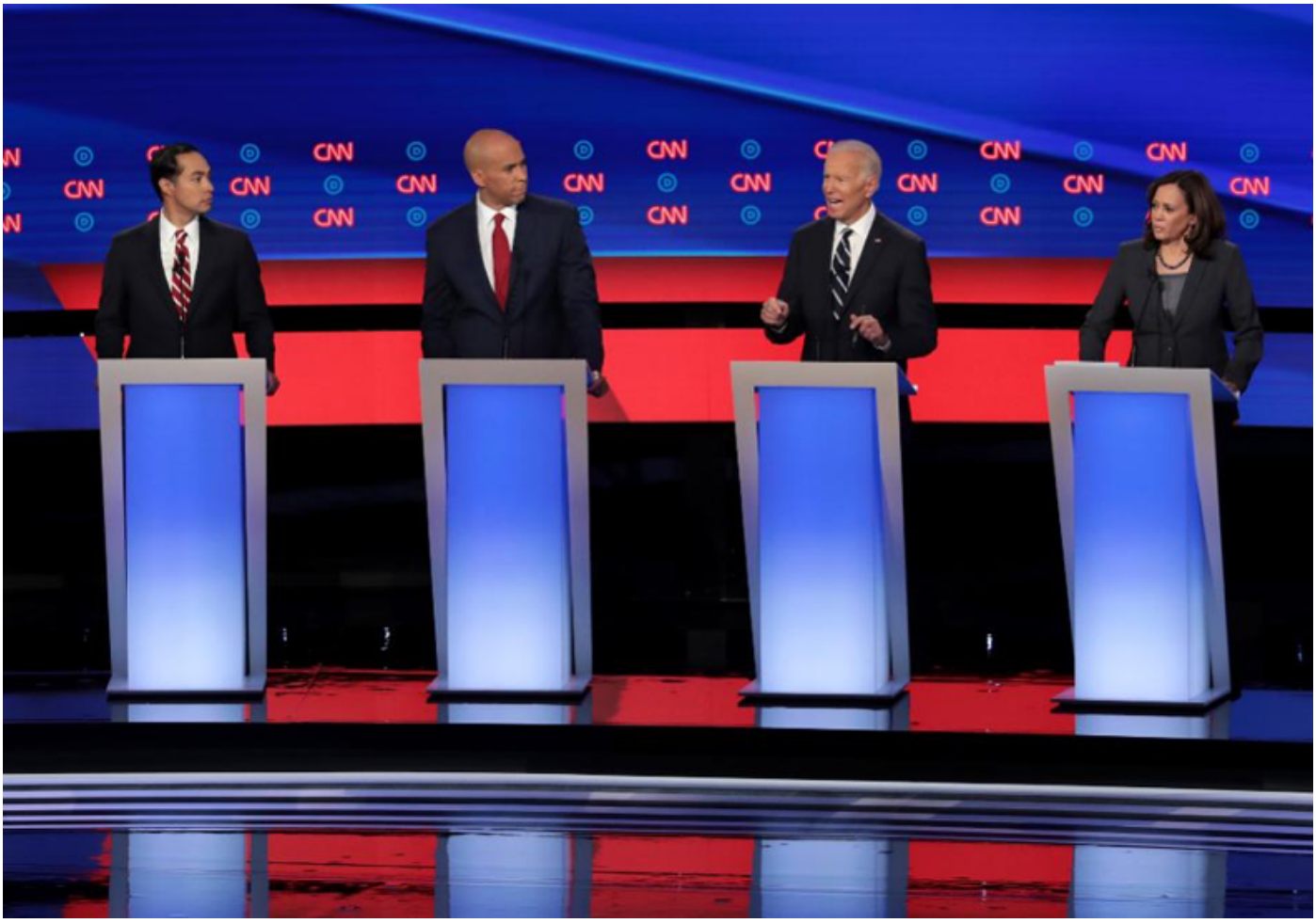

DETROIT, MICHIGAN - JULY 31: Democratic presidential candidate former Vice President Joe Biden (2nd R) speaks while Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) (R), Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) and former housing secretary Julian Castro listen during the Democratic

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This week we heard from ten of the 2020 Presidential candidates about their

views on climate change during a marathon CNN townhall style telecast. Several of them included infrastructure development as among their solutions. This is sound but I recommend they take it a step further. Talk about climate action as infrastructure because they are effectively the same thing.

The political discourse about climate change and infrastructure treats these two issues as separate. But climate action is largely about civil infrastructure choices as infrastructure development can either be the main tool in addressing climate change or it can affirmatively worsen it. American politician of all persuasions will also talk separately about infrastructure as though it's all good and we need a lot more of it. They are only half correct in this regard.

Meanwhile, climate change activists often lose traction when they seem to be calling for individual action—driving less, flying less, eating less meat—when in fact only collective action will make a meaningful difference. Addressing climate change will take massive changes in patterns of commerce and lifestyles internationally, country by country, and the tools are clear: carbon taxes, which many of the 2020 candidates support, to provide pricing indicators that shape patterns of behavior but also physical infrastructure that facilitates that behavior.

After World War II, America built a vast interstate highway system and then proceeded to neglect its passenger and freight rail systems. This was no accident. The automotive industry worked with the Federal government to advance driving and succeeded through the installation of facilitating infrastructure. This legacy is part of the challenge we face today.

When politicians talk specifically about infrastructure, they usually mention roads and bridges. Two favorites. And the public understands this. The American road system has been chronically neglected since the 1970s and is in need of emergency repairs, and many bridges are dangerously in need of repair or replacement. No question, this all needs immediate attention, and

that will also have a positive climate impact.

But do we need more roads and bridges? The opposite is true in the United States. To provide America's contribution to global climate action we will need more and better mass transit to get people out of their cars and to encourage greater population density in urban areas to reduce the distance people need to travel to work. This will require more urban infrastructure such as urban parks and cultural centers such as museums to improve the quality of urban life so it can compete with the backyard and two car garage of the post-World War Two American Dream. Consider the climate implications of funding a children's museum in an inner city rather than a new exit ramp on a superhighway.

Energy production and consumption are of course central issues in the climate change discussion, but the alternatives are used as sound bites and the true underlying issue is lost. The production and consumption of carbon-based energy is driven by the infrastructure that supports it, from refineries to pipelines to filling stations. Change the infrastructure and consumption patterns will all change.

The most obvious candidate, and the usual sound bite, is renewable energy: wind and solar. True enough. But regardless of how many solar farms are built or roof top panels are installed, until we build transmission lines to carry that power to its users and install smart grid technology that allows for distributed rooftop installations to integrate with the grid, we will never get there—hopefully this is what Amy Klobuchar was referring to when she discussed investing in energy infrastructure. Similarly, no matter how inexpensive electric cars become, as Joe Biden desires, they will never be more than an oddity until there are high speed charging stations throughout the road system and all over every densely populated area to support their use.

Carbon capture is another area where infrastructure will make a difference: collecting carbon dioxide produced by industries such as manufacturing,

steel production, and chemicals, including fertilizers for agricultural use, and injecting them into deep aquifers in the earth. To accomplish this at scale will require vast systems of pipelines and storage areas. Without carbon capture, regardless of how we produce and consume energy, we will never approach zero emissions, as Corey Booker proposes we achieve by 2050.

The responses to climate change and the needs for infrastructure do not overlap 100%. In addition to carbon pricing, research and development will play a big role in addressing climate change. There are also stand-alone infrastructure needs, like drinkable water, that are separate from climate change. But the overlap is so great that it's absurd to keep thinking of these issues as distinct.

This massive infrastructure build-out need not all be public funds outlays. There are many ways to capitalize private funds for these projects. But this scale of infrastructure requires government to lead by making the policy choices and planning decisions, regardless of how the capital is raised. This will not happen by encouraging tax policy or allowing the free market to respond. Government must act.

Fortunately, infrastructure development is generally popular with the voting public and approaching the long-debated infrastructure challenge from the perspective of climate change provides the most needed element in the discussion: a policy purpose. Just saying "more" is worse than insufficient. When it suggests more of the same, it's simply wrong.

Framing climate action from the perspective of civil infrastructure moves the discussion away from questions of personal choice and brings into focus the fact that massive government level action is what is required. Effective climate action will not look like the anti-littering campaign of the 1960s. It must be a global government driven modification to the way we all live. It will be largely about the infrastructure we will build.