

On Sunday night, the three remaining candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination took the stage in South Carolina for the third Democratic primary debate. I was pleased that one of the video questions of the night asked the candidates for their plan to address climate change. Although the Democratic candidates have discussed climate change policies in the previous debates as well, I felt like this was the first direct question on the subject all year. It seemed like debate moderators didn't even consider climate change worth mentioning. To see if I was right, I did a little research.\* It turned out that this was actually the third direct question on climate change during the four debates among the Democratic candidates. The Republican debates have featured three over the course of six debates (not counting the "undercard" debates). But these questions have generated little debate amongst the candidates - although the two parties differ drastically in their treatment of the issue, within each party the candidates generally agree.

This was not always the case. In 2008, the Republicans hosted fifteen primary debates, and there were fifteen direct questions on climate change, energy, and the environment. The Democrats hosted a whopping nineteen debates, and moderators asked about climate change, energy and the environment eighteen times. That year's general election featured three debates with three questions on climate change and energy (nothing on general environmental policy). That year, both parties averaged about one question per debate. So was the American public more interested in climate change and our energy system in 2008? Or were the moderators?

It might also have something to do with gas prices. In 2008, the country was facing \$4/gallon gas and a looming economic crisis. By 2012, when gas prices had dropped somewhat, there were only seven questions on energy and not one on climate change over the nineteen Republic primary debates, and only one question on energy during the three general election debates. 2008 also featured several questions on nuclear energy and the disposal of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain - an issue that has not even been mentioned this year, and I don't really remember having water-cooler conversations about back then either. But the fact that the moderators devoted an entire question to it, in a situation where time and questions are precious, made the issue seem salient.

The questions in 2008 were also varied and nuanced: would you change oil subsidies? do you support oil drilling in the Everglades? why are you against a mandatory cap on greenhouse gas emissions? should California be allowed to enact stricter emissions standards than the rest of the country? how will your policies influence individuals to reduce their energy consumption? The questions on climate change and energy thus far this year have essentially been the same general one: what will you do to address climate change? The exception was the interesting exchange at the second Republican debate, where the

question was closer to *should* you do anything about climate change. By failing to dive deeply into the various policy implications of “addressing climate change,” the moderators imply that the only relevant difference between candidates on climate change is whether they will do *anything*. And while I agree that’s an important place to start, it avoids the very tough choices the next commander-in-chief will need to make about the *how* of following through on those promises.

\*My methodology was extremely simple: I found transcripts of all the primary and general election debates [online](#), and then did a word search for “warming,” “climate,” “energy,” “environment,” and “renewable.” I only counted direct questions from the moderator, not comments from candidates brought up on their own (e.g., in discussions of how to create more jobs, saying they would spur investment in clean energy). I also did not count follow-up questions by the moderator, asking another candidate on stage to respond to the same question or asking a candidate to clarify something they had just said.