Some people were upset because there wasn't a question about climate change at the last Democratic debate. Admittedly, that's a lost opportunity to highlight the importance of the issue. But the significance of the candidates' various positions on climate change is limited. Let me start with what they *don't* tell us.

The main thing they don't tell us is what climate policies to expect if one of the seemingly countless Democratic candidates wins the White House. Basically, any dramatic climate initiatives are only remotely possible if the Democrats also win the Senate by a substantial margin. Why? Because they can't pass major climate legislation without a solid majority in the Senate. And dramatic initiatives by agencies like EPA probably won't hold up in court unless a Democratic President gets a chance to get judicial nominees confirmed. (And probably not even then, unless the Democrats get to do something more than replace some of the aging liberal Justices). So let's talk about the Senate.

In July, a political analyst in at the Washington Post asked, "Can Democrats take back the Senate in 2020? They'll need to have a dream election to do it." They would have to hold all of their current seats, including a couple of very iffy ones, and then flip four GOP seats. But as the Republicans discovered in 2017-2018, there are real limits to how much you can do with only a bare Senate majority. Part of the problem, of course, is the filibuster, but even getting fifty-one votes to pass major legislation is very tricky if you've only got fifty-one Senators to work with. Don't forget how John McCain's thumbs-down killed Obamacare repeal. We also saw how difficult it was to get major climate legislation through the Senate in Obama's first two-years, even though the Democrats had a sixty vote majority.

All this, I hasten to add, doesn't mean that the election is irrelevant to climate policy. For starters, a Democratic President could undo Trump's initiatives. And if Trump wins, we could easily end up with a 7-2 conservative majority on the Supreme Court and a complete end to federal climate regulation. Just about any elected Democrat anywhere in the country would be far better than Donald Trump on climate policy. Still, while a Democratic President might be able to accomplish a lot, it would be quite a bit less than the ambitious schemes promoted by most of the Democratic candidates.

Enough of what we *can't* learn from the candidates' climate policies. What *can* we learn? First, that all of the candidates think it is extremely important to take a strong stand on the issue. That's a tribute to the salience of the issue to Democratic voters. It also probably reflects the view that a strong climate stance won't hurt

their chances in the general election. We also learn something about whether they’re good at preparing position papers, a skill that’s important for formulating actual policy later on. And of course, we learn something about their political strategy — are they competing for the progressive vote or running toward the center?

But if you thought that these proposals are a foretaste of actual government policy, think again. Barring not just a blue wave, but a blue tsunami, most of the current round of proposals are doomed to remain nothing more than a gleam in the candidates’ eyes.