

To the Would-Be Presidents: Don't Forget the City Issues

By [CLYDE HABERMAN](#)

Between them, the Republicans and Democrats have held something like 17 presidential debates. That's a lot of yakking, and we still have three months to go before anyone votes in this endless campaign.

Many debates have had specific themes. Candidates have appealed to union members, to Latinos, to African-Americans, to older people, to bloggers, to "values voters" (whatever that means). One thing they have managed not to do is focus on a bunch of issues that intimately affect the single largest group of Americans.

We're talking about people who live in cities and their suburbs. We're talking about more than 80 percent of the population.

Oh, sure, the two parties have hardly ignored issues that matter to urban and suburban America, like the economy and education.

They've discussed the elderly, and cities have plenty of them. They've talked about minorities. Cities are loaded with them, too. Taxes? No one pays more than city people. Health care? City types get sick. Terror and security? Cities are more likely targets than farms are.

All these topics have popped up in the debates — but not issues that speak directly to everyday life in big cities and surrounding towns. Those have been shunted aside.

What are the candidates' thoughts on mass transit, pollution, homelessness, poverty, the fast-growing [Medicaid](#) burden, the future of public hospitals, housing that a working stiff can afford, not to mention roads and bridges that are falling apart?

Don't feel bad if you haven't a clue what they think. They have not been asked to debate these questions, and for the most part they have not strayed from the script to offer an idea or two of their own.

Republicans or Democrats, "they're in a bubble of avoidance" on issues that "apply to 95 percent of people's lives day to day," said Liz J. Abzug, a New York political consultant.

This is, for sure, a lament that also arose in past elections. But there is added poignancy to it this time, given who is running.

In both parties, the front-runners are New Yorkers: former Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) and Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#). Who better than they to raise the banner of urban America? The same might be said about Representative [Dennis J. Kucinich](#), a former mayor of Cleveland.

While we're at it, the Republicans will hold their 2008 national convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul. After the horrific [bridge collapse](#) in Minneapolis in August, who better than they to discuss the federal role in repairing urban America's worn infrastructure? There's been not a peep about it in the debates.

Well, some experts say, what else can you expect?

“We don’t pay attention to cities unless there’s a riot,” said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#). “It’s a terrible thing to say, but that’s the truth. It takes a riot to put cities on the national agenda.”

The calendar is also an inescapable reality, said John H. Mollenkopf, a political scientist at the [City University of New York](#) Graduate Center. Despite the rush of big states to hold primaries on Super-Duper Tuesday, Feb. 5, attention for now is fixed, as ever, on the nonurban early birds of Iowa and New Hampshire.

ONE result, Professor Mollenkopf said, is that candidates “hit the themes that are highest on sort of a generic public opinion poll of what the top issues are: terrorism, security, health care.”

Fred Siegel, a historian at Cooper Union, describes himself as a fan of both Mr. Giuliani and Mrs. Clinton. Neither, he says, has much to gain by concentrating on big-city issues. “Hillary’s more worried about Methodists in Ohio,” Professor Siegel said. And while “Rudy is playing up his achievements in New York,” he also “wants to cast himself as a national, not a local, figure.”

But to Bruce Katz, the director of metropolitan policy at the [Brookings Institution](#), “the political class at the national level is about 20 years out of date as to how the country has changed because of population growth, demographic diversity and economic restructuring.”

“We’re a metro nation,” Mr. Katz said. “It’s time to start acting like one.” For him, that means discussing, preferably sooner than later, issues like [climate change](#), housing, infrastructure and transportation.

“If you’re not talking about cities and suburbs, you might as well not be having the conversation,” he said, “because these are the places where all this really comes together.”