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Editors' Note

We are pleased to present our election-year “presidential issue” devoted to exploring the positions that the candidates are advancing on matters of poverty, mobility, and inequality. This issue encompasses three types of articles: The guest editor for the issue, Ron Haskins, provides a just-the-facts scorecard on how the candidates stack up on their poverty and mobility policy; the next two articles, authored by Harry J. Holzer and Douglas Holtz-Eakin, make an explicitly partisan case for fighting poverty the “Democratic way” and the “Republican way”; and the final two pieces, authored by Jeff Manza, Clem Brooks, Andrew Gelman, and Leslie McCall, are broader speculative essays about how the public and politicians will come to package their poverty and inequality views in the future.

If there is any lesson to be gleaned from this exercise, it is that presidential candidates no longer have a premade playbook on poverty and inequality issues. The old playbook is of course pretty stock. If you were a Republican, you knew that you had to argue that economic growth goes a long way toward solving the poverty problem, that it is all-important to design a safety net that incentivizes work, and that states are better equipped than the federal government to devise programs that reflect local exigencies. If you were a Democrat, you had to argue, by contrast, that poverty is actively generated by our economic institutions, that growing the economy will therefore not change the deeper forces making for poverty, and that aggressive federal poverty-reducing programs are accordingly the best way forward.

It is not as if this simple playbook has disappeared. It still shows up rather prominently in the platforms of the candidates and in our two partisan essays on the Democratic and Republican ways of addressing poverty. There is, however, all manner of evidence suggesting that the stock formulas are breaking down, with Democrats and Republicans alike having to contend with potentially playbook-busting questions:

- Are growing worries about the decline of prime-age employment and automation-induced joblessness just “Luddite fallacy” or real and legitimate bases for new policy? Which party, if either, will embrace those concerns?
- Is the precipitous rise of complicated and non-standard family forms changing the poverty debate? Are even Democrats now starting to worry about the effects of family structure on poverty?
- Will the conventional focus on poverty policy increasingly come to be supplemented with policies that explicitly address inequality? If, for example, it's found that bottlenecks, sweetheart deals, and other uncompetitive practices account for some of the takeoff in income inequality, might Republicans come to back inequality-reducing policy that's all about ridding the economy of these various forms of “rent”? Will all the candidates of the future thus have at least *some* type of inequality policy (just like most now have some type of poverty policy)?

The age-old question that lies behind all this ferment is whether our political ideologies will constrain our responses or instead be transformed by them. Although it's fashionable to complain about the strong hold of partisan mantras, we can't rule out the possibility that automation, relentlessly increasing inequality, and related big-ticket forces are so transformative that they'll ultimately reshape the playbook.

—David B. Grusky, Ron Haskins, and Charles Varner