



Obama and Clinton, lead on poverty

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By turning out in record numbers to give unexpected victories to Barack Obama in Iowa and Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire, early-state voters have made clear that there's no sure path to the Democratic nomination, no magic slogan or checklist of positions that will automatically sway a majority.

That makes right now - the final weeks before a front-runner emerges - the perfect time to push the candidates to talk about entrenched poverty and what they plan to do about it if elected.

A new war on poverty should be a feature of every town hall meeting and debate, but it isn't. That's shameful.

Only John Edwards, the ex-senator from North Carolina who's now fading in most polls, has put poverty elimination front and center in his campaign, rightly calling it "the great moral issue of our time."

Clinton and Obama have been slower off the mark, talking more about tax cuts for the middle class than about rescuing the very poor from homelessness, malnutrition and medical neglect.

In the short term, that relative timidity is understandable: Middle-class voters turn out in much bigger numbers than their poorer neighbors. There just isn't much political upside to crusading against poverty.

But with one in five New Yorkers living below the poverty line and similar numbers in other big cities, it would be a disaster for the nation if the Dems - the party of Al Smith, FDR and Lyndon Johnson, which gave America the New Deal and the Great Society - treat the poor as an interest group entitled to little more than an occasional speech and a few modest promises.

"There's still a sense that welfare reform fixed poverty and joblessness," said David Jones, president of the Community Service Society, one of the nation's oldest and most effective anti-poverty agencies. "That's a fairly widespread perception, and it's wrong."

A decade after welfare reform moved hundreds of thousands of people off the dole - and out of many headlines - a large class of working poor is still struggling to pay for housing, medical care and other basics.

Last year, Jones got Edwards, Clinton and Obama to lay out anti-poverty proposals before his group. "With the exception of Edwards, no one put a broad vision out," Jones said.

Edwards is calling for a million housing subsidy vouchers for low-income renters and a national jobs program for unemployed youth modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s.

The other candidates' proposals attack the problem of poverty without promising a knockout blow.

Yes, Clinton's signature issue, universal health insurance, would help a great many poor Americans remain healthy and able to work. Clinton has also jumped into the mortgage mess with both feet, calling for a moratorium on foreclosures.

And Obama, for his part, favors creating 20 so-called Promise Neighborhoods, modeled on the Harlem-based Children's Zone, in which early childhood education, violence prevention and after-school programs are concentrated in low-income communities. He also wants to expand government investments in community development financial institutions like credit unions and loan funds, which would bring much-needed capital into inner-city neighborhoods.

Those are worthy proposals, but they won't transform America the way the Edwards plan would.

And the leading candidates are also reluctant to prepare America for the price tag - which would be steep, but well worth every penny. "The cost of fixing this is going to be big-time stuff," Jones said. "Where are they going to get the cash from, especially with the war in Iraq?"

That's a good question. Let's see if Clinton and Obama have an answer.