

Domestic Issues Frame Democratic Debate

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The Democratic presidential hopefuls appeared Thursday night at Howard University for their third debate. It was televised nationally by PBS.

By [ADAM NAGOURNEY](#) and [JEFF ZELENY](#)
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WASHINGTON, June 28 — For 90 minutes Thursday night, eight Democratic candidates debated before an audience made up largely of one of their party's most reliable and liberal constituencies, African-American voters, and used the stage to urge a revitalization of domestic programs they said had faltered under President Bush.

They called for spending more on schools in poor neighborhoods to lower class sizes and raising salaries for teachers to prevent a drain of educators from inner-city schools. They called for rolling back tax cuts on the wealthy to pay for expanded health care and provide job training.

The debate was held here on the campus of Howard University, a historically black college. It was the third Democratic presidential debate of the campaign, but the first one dedicated largely to domestic issues and particularly the problems facing minorities.

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The foreign policy flash points that had produced conflict between the Democrats at their earlier debates — in particular, the war in Iraq — were largely absent as the candidates spoke easily, finishing one another's sentences and offering jokes and compliments.

"Let me finish John's thought because it was an important one," Senator [Barack Obama](#) said, finishing a response by [John Edwards](#), who was criticizing the White House for the way it responded to Hurricane Katrina. "There are potential Katrinas all across this country that have been neglected."

The foreign policy issue of the night was how to end the genocide in Darfur; the candidates generally agreed that the policies of the Bush administration have neglected the crisis there.

"Let's face it, if Darfur had a large supply of oil, this administration would be occupying it

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right now,” said Representative [Dennis J. Kucinich](#) of Ohio.

The forum was restrictive, with each of the eight candidates offered one minute to respond to a question. There was no opportunity for follow-up and the candidates were not able to engage one another.

The audience was filled with prominent black leaders, and the candidates — including a black man, a Latino man and a woman — did not begin talking until after 14 minutes of speeches and introductions. Tavis Smiley, a host of a [PBS](#) talk show devoted to black issues, moderated the debate.

Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) of New York drew loud applause when she denounced the White House for its response to the [AIDS](#) epidemic in black America, moments after Gov. [Bill Richardson](#) of New Mexico complimented Mr. Bush’s effort to finance a campaign to curb H.I.V. infection in Africa.

“You know, it is hard to disagree with anything that has been said, but let me just put this in perspective,” Mrs. Clinton said. “If H.I.V./AIDS were the leading cause of death of white women between the ages of 25 and 34, there would be an outraged outcry in this country.”

“If we don’t begin to take it seriously and address it the way we did back in the ‘90s, when it was primarily a gay men’s disease,” Mrs. Clinton said, “we will never get the services and the public education that we need.”

Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) of Delaware announced to the audience that he and Mr. Obama had been tested for H.I.V., the virus that caused AIDS. Mr. Obama peered quizzically at Mr. Biden as he shared this information.

“I got tested for AIDS, I know Barack got tested for AIDS,” he said. “There’s no shame in being tested for AIDS. It’s an important thing.”

When it was Mr. Obama’s turn to talk he clarified what Mr. Biden had referred to. “Tavis, Tavis, Tavis, I just got to make clear — I got tested with Michelle,” referring to his wife. The test came on a visit last summer to Kenya in which Mr. Obama highlighted the necessity for widespread testing to slow the spread of the disease.

“I don’t want any confusion here about what’s going on,” Mr. Obama said with a grin.

Mr. Biden responded: “And I got tested to save my life, because I had 13 pints of blood transfusion.”

The forum opened with Gov. Deval Patrick of Massachusetts, the state’s first black governor, introducing the candidates.

None of the candidates appeared to stand out, and each of the best-known ones drew relatively similar reactions from the audience.

The candidates were pressed to respond to a [Supreme Court](#) decision earlier in the day that barred public school systems from explicitly using race to achieve or maintain integration. The candidates were unified in denouncing the decision as a setback.

Mr. Obama cast himself as a product of the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that found school segregation unconstitutional. And he reminded his audience that it was on the Howard campus that the arguments that prevailed in *Brown* were developed by Thurgood Marshall, then the chief counsel for the [N.A.A.C.P.](#), later the first black Supreme Court justice.

“If it hadn’t been for them, I would not be standing here today,” Mr. Obama said. “And it was their fundamental recognition that for us to achieve racial equality was not simply good for African-Americans, but it was good for America as a whole.”

Mr. Richardson said: “Issues of diversity for me — the first Latino to run for president — aren’t talking points. They are facts of life.”

On the economy, the candidates were unified in calling for a change in policies that they said had hurt the middle class and poor Americans to favor wealthy ones.

"People who have done well ought to have more responsibility to pay back to the country and to the community and those around them," Mr. Edwards said.

Issues of crime and punishment also were raised, with each of the candidates calling for an end to racial disparities in sentencing laws and policing. "We'll get better justice with Democrats in the White House," said Senator [Christopher J. Dodd](#) of Connecticut.

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