The Best and Worst Tech Policy Ideas From Each Presidential Candidate in September's Primary Debate

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OVERVIEW

Ten candidates have secured spots in the third debate in the Democratic presidential primary.[1] September 12 in Houston will be the first time all of the leading candidates appear on stage together. While tech policy issues so far have not received significant attention in the primary race, the candidates have expressed a wide variety of positions on these issues.

Below is a summary of what ITIF considers some of the best and worst tech policy positions (so far) from each candidate, either from the campaign trail or their time in government. We selected the policies that, in our assessment, would do the most to either drive or deter technological innovation and adoption in the United States. On virtually all of these ideas, ITIF has weighed in on the merits of the policy, and we have included links below for more details.

Every candidate approaches policy issues differently in their campaign: Some of these ideas are documented in extensive, well-developed policy proposals; others are ideas that candidates have discussed during interviews or speeches; and some are ideas they supported before they entered the presidential race. The ideas are not necessarily exclusive to one candidate—and indeed, it would be a welcome development for more candidates to seize on the better ideas from their peers, improve on them, and promote them further. While tech issues may not be driving most voters to the polls, they will have a significant impact on the U.S. economy, including jobs and economic growth.

Did we miss something important? Is there another idea that candidates should be talking about? Send us your thoughts on the best or worst tech policy ideas in the Democratic presidential primary on Twitter using the hashtag #TechPolicy2020.

JOE BIDEN

Best: Former Vice President Biden has vowed to work with allies to "get tough on China and its trade and technology abuses," including by pursuing and enforcing trade agreements similar to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to counter intellectual property theft and forced technology transfer.[2] ITIF has analyzed this issue extensively and has concluded that stronger trade agreements will help respond to Chinese "innovation mercantilism," which hurts U.S. innovation, creates unfair advantages for foreign firms, and undermines market-based competition.[3]

Worst: Biden, while serving as a U.S. senator, supported a number of laws that would weaken individuals' ability to communicate privately, including most notably the Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act (CALEA), which forces telecom carriers and equipment manufacturers to design their hardware and services to allow law enforcement surveillance.[4] ITIF's analysis is that forcing U.S. companies to implement backdoors in their hardware or software weakens the security of their products and makes U.S. companies less competitive.[5]

CORY BOOKER

Best: Senator Booker co-sponsored the bipartisan Developing and Growing the Internet of Things (DIGIT) Act which seeks to establish a plan on how to encourage IoT development and deployment throughout the United States.[6] ITIF's Center for Data Innovation has documented how a national strategy for the Internet of Things can help ensure that the technology develops quickly, that consumers and businesses do not face barriers to adoption, and that the public and private sectors benefit from smart devices.[7]

Worst: Booker co-sponsored the Algorithmic Accountability Act which would direct the Federal Trade Commission to create new rules targeting large firms that use software to automate business decisions, thereby holding decisions made by algorithms to different standards than those made by humans.[8] The Center for Data Innovation has studied this issue in depth and concluded that legislation such as this would disincentivize companies from using algorithms to automate certain processes, thereby limiting the potential boost to productivity.[9]

PETE BUTTIGIEG

Best: Mayor Buttigieg has pledged to create a network of "connected" rural communities using next-generation infrastructure, such as smart roads and water systems, by expanding the Transportation Department's Smart City Challenge initiative and the National Science Foundation's Smart and Connected Communities program to include rural communities.[10] This would be productive, as the Center for Data Innovation has found that federal support for smart infrastructure, including in rural communities, is necessary to accelerate the technology's adoption.[11]

Worst: Buttigieg has said that the United States should adopt the right to be forgotten, a European policy that allows individuals to request that third parties, such as search engines, delete information about them, including factual information that is in the public record.[12] ITIF's view is that the right to be forgotten not only undermines free speech, but undermines the public

right to know, allowing convicted sex offenders, disgraced politicians, and board-sanctioned doctors to hide their offenses from society.[13]

JULIÁN CASTRO

Best: Former Secretary Castro vowed to invest $2 billion in updating flood maps using Light Detection and Ranging, or LIDAR, an advanced method to generate precise topographical maps.[14] As the Center for Data Innovation has explained, collecting high-resolution 3D elevation data for the entire country will allow for more precise understanding of the risk from climate change and allow for better planning for development and disaster preparation.[15]

Worst: Castro has argued that the Department of Justice should evaluate mergers not only for their impact on consumers and prices, but also on how they would impact small businesses.[16] ITIF has studied this issue in depth and has concluded proposals such as this would be a deviation in antitrust policy that could reduce consumer welfare and economic growth.[17]

KAMALA HARRIS

Best: Senator Harris introduced legislation this year to bolster digital services in federal, state, and local government, providing additional funding for the U.S. Digital Services program and seed grants to state and local governments to establish and expand e-government services.[18] ITIF has conducted a comprehensive analysis of how U.S. government websites perform based on government and industry standards, and has concluded that more investment in digital services will allow government at all levels to improve the quality of the e-government services they offer to citizens and businesses.[19]

Worst: While Harris has been an outspoken crusader against revenge porn—both as attorney general of California, where she obtained the first major conviction, and in the U.S. senate, where she was one of the three co-sponsors of the first bill criminalizing the distribution of sexually explicit images or video of individuals without their consent—her parallel efforts to roll back Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act would negatively impact online platforms.[20] ITIF believes eliminating this liability protection would undermine free speech online and unnecessarily expose companies to significant legal risk.[21]

AMY KLOBUCHAR

Best: Senator Klobuchar has co-sponsored legislation that would require social media companies to increase transparency of paid political advertising on their platforms and make reasonable efforts to ensure foreign entities do not purchase political ads.[22] ITIF's view is this requirement would create parity between the transparency requirements for online and offline political ads and reduce the risk of foreign interference in U.S. elections.[23]

Worst: Klobuchar has proposed taxing companies for using or sharing consumer data.[24] ITIF's research has concluded this is a bad idea because it would pump the brakes on the data economy and make U.S. businesses less competitive.[25]

BETO O'ROURKE

Best: Former Congressman O'Rourke has called for raising the federal minimum wage to $15 and ending subminimum wages for tipped workers. This move would increase growth as more workers join the economy and firms invest more in technology to boost productivity.

Worst: O'Rourke has proposed amending Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act to allow lawsuits against Internet platforms that fail to enact policies and practices to combat hate speech and violence online.[26] ITIF believes this would be problematic, because it could expose these platforms to significant liability for lawful speech by their users.[27]

BERNIE SANDERS

Best: Senator Sanders has rejected the idea that automation and artificial intelligence will eliminate the need for workers and has argued that, instead of a universal basic income, government should provide a strong social safety net, including by making health care and higher education available to all.[28] As ITIF has argued, establishing policies that promote a full-employment economy and help dislocated workers make speedy and successful transitions is the best way to assist workers affected by technological change.[29]

Worst: Sanders wants to impose a complete ban at the federal, state, and local level on the use of facial recognition by law enforcement.[30] As ITIF has stated to Congress, a ban on facial recognition would make it more difficult for police to investigate crimes and improve public safety.[31]

ELIZABETH WARREN

Best: Senator Warren has called for better allocation of R&D investments across all parts of the country.[32] Ensuring funding does not just go to a handful of cities will help provide economic opportunities in every region. ITIF will be issuing a report this fall detailing a federal initiative to support more innovation hubs throughout the nation.

Worst: Warren has called for legislation to break up large tech platforms.[33] As ITIF has argued, this would reduce the efficiency and competitiveness of some of America's most successful companies.[34]

ANDREW YANG

Best: Yang has called for reviving the Office of Technology Assessment, an independent research organization dedicated to advising lawmakers in Congress on technology policy issues.[35] ITIF supports this idea, because as Congress faces more technology issues, it is in greater need of the kind of independent guidance an institution like OTA could provide.

Worst: Yang's central policy issue is a plan to establish a "Freedom Dividend"—a universal basic income that would provide all U.S. citizens over the age of 18 a guaranteed payment of $1,000 per month—to address the concern that technology and automation is eliminating too many

jobs.[36] But as ITIF has argued repeatedly, establishing a universal basic income would not only reinforce people's fears about automation, it would also lead workers to opt out of the labor market, leading to skill atrophy and a less effective labor force.[37]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Castro is vice president of ITIF and director of ITIF's Center for Data Innovation. His research interests include health IT, data privacy, e-commerce, e-government, electronic voting, information security, and accessibility. Before joining ITIF, Castro worked as an IT analyst at the Government Accountability Office, where he audited IT security and management controls at various government agencies. He has a B.S. in foreign service from Georgetown University and an M.S. in information security technology and management from Carnegie Mellon University.

ABOUT ITIF

The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational institute focusing on the intersection of technological innovation and public policy. Recognized as the world's leading science and technology think tanks, ITIF's mission is to formulate and promote policy solutions that accelerate innovation and boost productivity to spur growth, opportunity, and progress.

For more information, visit us at www.itif.org.

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