This is a patriotism check: Political economy, corruption, and duty to America in the 2020 primary debates

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“This is a patriotism check: Political economy, corruption, and duty to America in the 2020 primary debates”

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Abstract: The 2020 Democratic presidential primaries involved the largest and most diverse slate of candidates in the modern era of party nominee selection, a diversity that allowed some candidates to reject neoliberal discourses endemic to American politics. In this essay, we analyze the 2020 Democratic primary debates to demonstrate the emergence of an alternative political economy that stands in opposition to standard economic orthodoxy. Candidates organized their critiques of the extant political economy around corruption, presenting it as rot at the heart of the present capitalist order, with Donald Trump more symptom than cause of America’s unjust and deeply flawed economic system. That rot compelled candidates to present an alternative in “economic patriotism” which posited obligation to the collective above and in opposition to neoliberal profit. The essay concludes by unpacking the implications of this break from orthodoxy in the campaign debate context.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; Economic Rhetoric; Work; Trump; Biden
The 2020 Democratic presidential primaries involved the largest and most diverse slate of candidates in the modern era of party nominee selection. Not only did candidates showcase more racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender diversity than in any prior election, they also offered a wider range of viewpoints on major issues. Candidates like Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), former CEO Andrew Yang, and Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) put forth proposals on healthcare, universal basic income, and student loan forgiveness that broke from Democratic orthodoxy while former Vice President Joe Biden and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, among others, advanced economic platforms hewing closely to recent Democratic administrations. The diversity of viewpoints within the Democratic Party was on full display during the 2020 presidential primary debates.

Debates are focal points of campaigns (Carlin, 1992), and in 2020, primary debates were the second most watched form of intraparty political communication, trailing only the party conventions (Koblin, 2020). 2020 saw broken viewership records for Democratic primary debates with the second and ninth debates drawing audiences of approaching 20 million viewers. In addition to drawing large audiences, primary debates stand apart in their ability to affect vote choice and shape election outcomes. Empirical research has detailed more pronounced effects of primary debates than general election debates on voter learning, confidence, and vote choice (Jennings et al., 2017; McKinney & Warner, 2013; Warner et al., 2017). As primary debates influence the public’s understanding of the candidates themselves, they also have the capacity to shape party identity and reframe public discourse.

While the preponderance of presidential debate scholarship continues to focus on debate effects, debates offer a unique window into the argumentation that (re)shapes American politics (Murphy, 1992). Primary debates are rhetorical events that offer critics opportunity to investigate
American elections and the communication of major policy issues. In an era where party conventions have transformed from intraparty contests to orchestrated coronations (Wrighton, 2007), primary debates offer the most visible and impactful media representations of intraparty disagreement in American politics. Primary debates serve additional roles, both by introducing candidates to the electorate, and by allowing politicians to advance their competing visions of the respective party (Greenwood & Coker, 2016). As John Murphy (1992) suggests, “Debates contribute to ongoing public discourse concerning social change by offering candidates a uniquely prominent forum for developing lines of argument that urge acceptance or rejection of reforms” (p. 220). We heed Murphy’s call for deeper analysis of campaign debates by focusing on the issue that has dominated presidential debates in the modern era: the economy, and the actors who have corrupted its effectiveness.

In this essay, we suggest corruption served as the organizing term of the 2020 primary debates. In one sense, the emphasis on corruption in the debates was unsurprising given the record of the incumbent administration. President Trump’s tenure had been marred in allegations of corruption. Immediately following the 2016 presidential election, Trump made clear his intention not to divest from his companies nor place his assets in a blind trust, sparking concerns that Trump would be in violation of the emoluments clause of the U.S. constitution upon taking office (Eisen, Painter, & Tribe, 2016). Four years later, Americans had witnessed the indictment and conviction of Trump’s foreign policy aid George Papadopoulos, personal attorney Michael Cohen, campaign chairman Paul Manafort, deputy campaign chairman Rick Gates, national security advisor Michael Flynn, chief White House strategist Steve Bannon, and longtime adviser and personal friend Roger Stone, among others on a litany of charges. Trump himself faced allegations of using his presidency to enrich his own companies (Kravitz, 2019) and was
ultimately impeached twice by the U.S. House of Representatives, the first time for soliciting interference from a foreign government in the 2020 presidential election.

While candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary debates certainly delved into the allegations against President Trump, corruption also structured discussion of the economy. Participants framed corruption not only as a feature of the Trump Administration, but as a fundamental failure of a deeply entrenched neoliberal order that affects nearly every facet of modern American life. Corruption, as evinced by misplaced priorities and greed, was presented as a foundational rot at the heart of the present capitalist order, with Donald Trump more symptom than cause of America’s unjust and flawed economic system.

This arrangement is notable because the rhetoric of corruption precluded otherwise hegemonic economic discourses of individualism and personal responsibility that frequently permeate political campaign communication in the United States (Brown, 2015). Defenders of the current economic arrangement who did not account for corruption and greed were dismissed as failing to diagnose the underlying ill. In some cases, candidates borrowing from more traditional neoliberal discourses, like John Delaney, were seemingly laughed off the debate stage (Harvey, 2019). The novel approach to corruption presented in the debates went beyond political economy; it articulated a new relationship centered on patriotic duty, a sort of trickle-down social arrangement that would account for the lived experiences of so many Americans in 2020. In this formulation, the ever-sharpening economic divisions in the nation are accompanied, even facilitated by, corresponding moral divisions that threaten the fabric and character of America. By breaking from neoliberal orthodoxy, some candidates articulated a vision of the economy that rectifies inequality and grift through a form of economic patriotism that centers our obligation to each other.
In the following sections, we provide greater depth on the intersection of economic rhetoric and political discourse. We then turn to the rhetoric of the 2020 primary debates and how candidates eschewed traditional economic discourse to articulate a new social arrangement. Finally, we discuss a new patriotism derived from 2020 campaign discourse that centers obligations to others and suggests re-organizing the relationship between government and the economy.

Political Economy in the 2020 Primary Debates

Candidates in the Democratic primary debates contested the nature of the economy, and what emerged from that contest was a vision of capitalism mired in corruption that could be made better by centering patriotic responsibility. As a precursor to our analysis, we highlight scholarship on economic rhetoric in politics and primary debates. The section concludes by distinguishing between the comparatively limited programmatic impacts of economic rhetoric in the debates, and the wider rhetorical implications of the analysis.

The study of economic rhetoric has expanded dramatically since Dierdre McCloskey’s (1983; 1998) foundational work on the subject. McCloskey’s “The Rhetoric of Economics” went beyond the limited inquiry of her peers; rather than focus on attempts of public figures to move opinion on economic matters, her work addressed rhetorical dynamics in the field of economics itself. Despite both the perceptions of and insistence by economists that their arguments were “on the basis of certain limited matters of statistical inference, on grounds of positive economics, operationalism, behaviorism, and other positivistic enthusiasms of the 1930s and 1940s,” the field was and is engaged in a rhetorical project concerned as much with persuasion and metaphor as with statistics (McCloskey, 1983, p. 483). In the decades since, a litany of scholars have addressed the rhetorical dimensions of economic theory to explain audience responses and
uptakes (e. g. Columbini, 2015; Houck, 2000), the dominance of tropes such as the state threatening the free market (e. g. Aune, 2002; Foley, 2012; Squires, 2011), and the ontological implications of theories at the center of modern economic thought (e.g. Hanan, Ghosh & Brooks, 2014).

Beyond the rhetoric of economic theory, one pressing area of expansion has occurred in what Christopher Duerringer (2017) calls the “rhetoric of economics in popular culture.” When economic concepts are dissected in public by pundits and politicians, scholars attending to that discourse can outline the ways tropes or assumptions are (re)circulated as explanations for events or justifications for paths forward. Jillian Báez and Mari Castañeda (2015), for example, convincingly demonstrate how criticism of minority homeownership initiatives in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession used scapegoating to exclude BIPOC from the American dream. By explaining the housing bubble’s burst in individual terms, the risky decisions of those with something to gain from sub-prime mortgages recedes to blame homeowners for their own foreclosures.

When politicians speak about job creation, productivity, or the dignity of work, they are willing into existence a vision of the economy that is sustained or disrupted by rhetoric. Those visions draw from popular representations of the economy and can be refuted in the context of something like a political campaign. David Levasseur and Lisa Gring-Pemble (2015), for instance, demonstrate that Mitt Romney’s 2012 bid for the presidency was complicated by his past in venture capital. Despite an American permissiveness towards greed and underhanded business tactics, Romney’s success in finance did not translate into voters spotting him political acumen. The authors isolate the difference between the speculative and tangible economies, Wall Street versus Main Street, as partial explanation. The Obama campaign used Romney’s record
against him, his business success a demonstration of what was wrong with the modern economy. In part, that success hinged on the tension between the unfeeling neoliberalism at the center of Romney’s appeal versus the economic reality encountered by a plurality of Americans (Coker, 2017b). Calvin Coker (2017b) highlights the multiple meanings ascribed to Romney’s 47% gaffe as evidence of how competing economic narratives can constrain campaigns or empower lines of attack from political opponents.

Of specific interest to the present project is how visions of the economy, and the role of government, are negotiated in the campaign debate space. Those publicly circulated messages beg moral and practical questions at the center of public policy and contribute to what John Murphy (2009) calls political economy, not in the Marxian sense, but in the way the polity view the government’s role in regulating the economy. To be sure, the emphasis on the economy, and by extension corruption, has inherent political strategy in 2020. In the time between the first and last Democratic Primary debates, President Trump was impeached for the first time by the US House of Representatives, and a series of high-profile stories on soaring wealth inequality in the United States created easy targets for politicians. Beyond the micro level politicking, however, the emphasis on corruption and the economy has a wider rhetorical implication. By diagnosing the illness of the modern economy and prescribing government solutions, politicians in the Democratic primary debates describe relationships between the state, the people, and economic structures to emphasize where and why failures have occurred. This emphasis shapes both the rhetorical and policy possibilities of the Democratic field and forecloses on otherwise hegemonic neoliberal economic discourse in American politics. By highlighting the twofold problem of greed and corruption in preventing the government from ensuring the dignity of work and economic security for all Americans, participants in the Democratic primary advanced a cogent
critique of economic tropes at the center of American political discourse (e.g. Aune, 2002; Brown, 2015; Levasseur & Gring-Pemble, 2015). As we show in the analysis, economic rhetoric in the debates shifted the locus of economic talk away from personal responsibility toward justice and a more equitable ethos for both the individual, and the state. That ethos undermines the material and rhetorical tenets of the Trump administration while empowering and justifying Democrats’ eventual defense of a more equitable relationship between the government, the people, and the economy.

“Capitalism forgets that life is social”

In this section, we turn our attention to analysis of the debates. The 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary featured eleven total debates spanning from late June 2019 to mid-March 2020. To accommodate the large number of candidates qualified for the early debates, the first two contests were split across two nights. All told, twenty-three of the twenty-nine Democratic candidates participated in one or more debates. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and former Vice President Joe Biden participated in every debate, and Mayor Pete Buttigieg (D-South Bend), Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) participated in all but the final debate.

We demonstrate how participants organized their conversations on the economy around the notion of corruption and used that organization to posit an alternative political economy centered on patriotic obligation to one another. The analysis is divided into three sections. We first highlight how candidates reject the present economic arrangement for its failure to benefit the majority of Americans, an arrangement they intimate is a consequence of untoward forces. We then isolate the explanations candidates offer for that failure and explain how each fit within
the broader conceit of corruption. Finally, we turn to the solutions posited by candidates, specifically noting the recurrence of a patriotic ethos for both the individual, and the state.

*What’s so wrong with our economy?*

“The economy” refers to a constellation of shifting arrangements between workers, owners of capital, the state, and the flow of resources between the three. Beyond those material elements, “the economy” is a rhetorical construct; it is a set of assumptions and a negotiation of rules that allow individuals and institutions to rationalize their behavior, or the behavior of others, while simultaneously empowering or constraining those behaviors. Wendy Brown (2015) suggests neoliberal discourse is self-sealing in this rationalization; it encourages specific behaviors motivated by the accumulation of capital and explains those behaviors when negative externalities occur, while foreclosing modes of being not organized by its rationality. By discussing how the economy operates, politicians craft political economies capable of shifting the material and symbolic conditions of “the economy” thereby (re)articulating the relationship between the state, private economic actors, and resources. In this section, we isolate the groundwork for such a shift in the way candidates problematize the modern economy. By explaining how the priorities of contemporary economic discourse (dis)advantage subsets of the population, candidates suggest a moral failure in the current arrangement.

In the first contest of the primary, Sen. Elizabeth Warren posed what was arguably the question at the center of the economic debate in the 2020 campaign: “Who is this economy really working for?” (Night 1, 2019). Variations on this question were echoed by a number of candidates. Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) in the same debate agreed, as he “see(s) every single day that this economy is not working for average Americans” (Night 1, 2019). Former Rep. Beto O’Rourke (D-TX) noted “this economy has got to work for everyone and right now we know
that it isn’t” (Night 1, 2019). This question inverts standard economic logic by reclaiming the agency of economic participants from neoliberal rationality. In political discourse, “the economy” is routinely presumed to be outside of human control; it is a force of nature and human beings are subject to its logic and its whims (Brown, 2015). By asking who the economy is working for, candidates challenged the prevailing political economy, as the question is an implicit rejection of the neoliberal subject position. Brown (2015) notes the rhetorical dominance of *homo oeconomicus*, a being whose existence is configured entirely through participation in an economic system, has ascended alongside neoliberal governance in the past forty years. *Homo oeconomicus* cannot challenge or change the prevailing neoliberal order, as their decisions are governed by the dynamics of the economic system in which they are situated, exclusively toward their own betterment within that system. The question “who does the economy work for” inverts this position, suggesting that the economic order must change to suit the needs of its participants. The question argues, rather than fitting one’s own existence within the economy, the economy ought to “work” for its participants independent of their personal actions.

Such an inversion is appropriate, even necessary, in light of how “economic success” is measured. Prior to the debates, President Trump was quick to tout the economic recovery he inherited and sustained from President Obama. Trump routinely discussed highs in the stock market, progressively lower unemployment numbers, and stable GDP as core indexes of his own economic savvy and the strength of the US economy. Candidates, then, used these metrics to demonstrate the myopia of the modern political economy and the fundamental failure in how its benefits are distributed. In the first debate, former Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) highlighted the core problem with those metrics: “You ask [Trump], ‘Well, how are you measuring this greatness of this economy of yours?’ And he talks about the stock market. Well, that’s fine if you
own stocks. So many families in America do not” (Night 1, 2019). This disconnect is not simply that many Americans have chosen not to own stocks. Rather, Harris and others pointed to a synecdochic failure of the stock market to represent the whole of the economy. Markers like the Dow Jones industrial average are meaningful metrics for specific activities, what Levasseur and Gring-Pemble (2015) call the “speculative economy.” The authors argue the speculative economy is the rhetorical construct concerning the less tangible elements of modern capitalism. Rather than focusing on the production of material goods to be sold for profit, profit is derived from investment and removed from the physical results of labor. The division between speculative and tangible economy is not simply semantic or taxonomic. Instead, the speculative economy constitutes a separate moral realm of engagement with the economy.

Levasseur and Gring-Pemble (2015) note that venture capital – the practice by which firms acquire companies or enterprises for discount rates, only to then saddle the acquired company with debt and strip its assets and labor to the proverbial bone to eventually sell at a profit– is emblematic of a winner-take-all success that ignores the long-term costs of such destructive practices. Compared to the tangible economy, where individuals produce goods and services in exchange for capital, the speculative economy presents the greatest possibility for reward against a corresponding moral and material risk. Though some benefit – massively – from the speculative economy, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) was quick to note: “We know that not everyone is sharing in this prosperity” (Night 1, 2019). By suggesting metrics of economic success such as the stock market and GDP growth leave out lived experiences with the economy, candidates in the Democratic primary debates laid the groundwork for an alternative political economy centered more on human labor and needs.
That alternative is necessary in light of the very human cost both engendered and ignored by the speculative economy. The GDP and the stock market are abstractions divorced from the economic realities of a vast majority of Americans. Though media representations of wealth and news coverage of economic events rarely emphasize such routine things as the price of goods or the physical toll of labor, politicians must present a vision of a political economy that accounts for more than the speculative economy. Mitt Romney’s economic discourse in 2012, for example, became a liability in light of his seemingly disconnected, plutocratic visions of the economy (Coker, 2017b; Levasseur & Gring-Pemble, 2015). This disconnect was fruitful in 2020 for the Democratic candidates, as it allowed them to highlight the disparity lived by many Americans. Mayor Pete Buttigieg (D-South Bend) argued “GPD is going up, and life expectancy is going down. Think about what that means. It’s only getting tougher” (July, 2019). Life expectancy as a metric was rarely mentioned as a meaningful facet of economic life, despite the fact that the health of the workforce is a significant indicator of GDP growth. This injection of human mortality into the calculus encourages a shifting mindset vis a vis economic productivity; neoliberal rationality reduces all life to economic value, and as such the rhetorical move to center humanity highlights the problems of the present system. Former CEO Andrew Yang concurred:

GDP and corporate profits are at record highs in America today. Also at record highs, depression, financial insecurity, student loan debt, even suicides and drug overdoses. It has gotten so bad that our life expectancy as a country has declined for the last three years, because suicides and drug overdoses have overtaken vehicle deaths for the first time in American history. (December, 2019)

Metrics of economic success are not just failing to account for misery and poverty. They may actually be the cause of that misery. The notion that the economy fails to work for a majority of
individuals was clarified by the emphasis on metrics; it becomes not an accident, but a design of the modern economy. Yang furthered the conversation begun in the first debate, noting in the sixth debate: “folks aren’t measuring the economy by how the Dow Jones is looking, they’re measuring the economy by how they’re doing. This economy is not working for most of us, for the middle class” (December, 2019). In the fifth Debate, Buttigieg continued: “even when the Dow Jones is looking good, far too many Americans have to fight like hell just to hold onto what they’ve got” (November, 2019). That the speculative economy could suggest a robust, well performing system, even as a majority of workers struggle, is taken as an indicator that something is amiss. The economy is failing to meet the needs of the many, largely because it prioritizes the needs of the few.

Elevating the needs of the many is treated as a welcome inversion in light of the misplaced priorities of the modern economy. In the third debate, Andrew Yang suggested: everything revolves around the almighty dollar. Our schools, our hospitals, our media, even our government. It’s why we don’t trust our institutions anymore. We have to get our country working for us again, instead of the other way around. We have to see ourselves as the owners and shareholders of this democracy, rather than inputs into a giant machine (September, 2019).

This dehumanizing subject position where workers are “inputs” is obviously deleterious. It impacts. Yang argued, trust in institutions, with cascading impacts on other material elements. Those material elements are highlighted by a bevy of candidates emphasizing the wide swath of Americans who “want to know how we’re going to put food on their table” (Night 2, 2019). Similarly, Sen. Bernie Sanders argued in the third debate: “We are the wealthiest country in the history of the world. Yet we have the highest child poverty rate of almost any country on Earth.”
(Debate 3). The insistence by candidates that people are struggling with basic subsistence is paired with a central contradiction: the “economy,” by many markers, is doing quite well. That performance is understood not as a mistake, but as a myopia, an intentional choice made to prioritize the needs of the few over the needs of the many.

Identifying the rot: Corruption and the economy

Having clarified the failures of the neoliberal order to provide for a majority of people, candidates proscribed the root cause of the problem. Perhaps the clearest example of this causal link came in the sixth debate from Sen. Warren. She argued:

We have a government that works great for giant drug companies, just not for someone trying to fill a prescription. Works great for people who want to make money at private prisons and private detention centers at our border, just not for the people whose lives are torn apart. Works great for giant oil companies that want to drill everywhere, but not for the rest of us, who see climate change bearing down upon us. And when you see a government that works great for the wealthy and the well-connected and for no one else, that is corruption, pure and simple. (Debate 6)

Warren’s campaign emphasized corruption outside the debates as well. She was the only high-profile candidate to put forth a proposal to reduce corruption in the form of conflicts of interest and questionable behavior from government officials (Nilsen, 2019). This emphasis was the starting point for identifying corruption as the organizing element of the modern political economy and the core barrier to worthwhile change.

Robert Sparling’s (2019) work on the historical roots of political corruption notes that “the exact behaviors that are considered corrupt vary depending on historical, geographic, or cultural contexts” (p. vii). Despite that variance, however, there are commonalities. Across
populations, the existence of bribery, nepotism, or the “loss of social rootedness” (p. viii) will often lead to charges of corruption. These features are identified as a failure of systems and individuals, both morally and materially deleterious to the social order. In the Democratic primary debates, candidates both intimiated and spoke outright of how corruption is endemic to the modern political economy. It is not a single individual or even a single systemic element, but rather the influence of money, and by extension the motivation of greed, that prevents both the government and corporations from creating an economy that works for everyone.

Corruption, in the context of the primary debates, is intimately related to the way money buys influence and power. Health guru and “also-ran” Marianne Williamson indicted the candidates on stage when she stated, “until the Democratic Party is ready to speak to deeper corruption knowing that we ourselves sometimes, because of our own corporate donations, have participated” (July, 2019). Corporate donations are easy political targets, and Warren and Sanders were quick to highlight the connections of their opponents to high dollar industries like healthcare and finance (Cole, 2020). Fundraising was a cudgel throughout the debates, allowing candidates to suggest that money corrupted their opponent’s priorities. In the sixth debate, for example, Warren took aim at Buttigieg’s recent fundraiser “held in a wine cave full of crystals and served $900 a bottle wine” (December, 2019). Warren concluded that Buttigieg’s willingness to accept money from the elite would translate into corrupt actions. She declared, “I do not sell access to my time. I don’t do call-time with millionaires and billionaires” (December 2019) to which Buttigieg retorts: “Senator, your presidential campaign right now as we speak, is funded in part by money you transferred, having raised it at those exact same big-ticket fundraisers you now denounce. Did it corrupt you, Senator?” (December, 2019). This exchange
demonstrates the way large sums of money and those who have it are perceived to secure political power and favor by corrup
ting politicians.

This explanation of corruption is persuasive and strategic for Democrats beyond sniping, given their position as challengers launching attacks on a sitting administration mired in scandal and unseemly self-enrichment. Sen. Sanders noted in the fourth debate, which occurred soon after the House began its first inquiry on impeachment:

Trump is the most corrupt president in the history of this country. It’s not just that he obstructed justice with the Mueller report. I think that the House will find him guilty of worthy of impeachment because of the emoluments clause. This is a president who is enriching himself while using the Oval Office to do that (October, 2019)

The notion that Trump was singularly the most corrupt president in the modern era, perhaps in history, was not at this time even much contested among serious scholars. News outlets had, by 2019, assembled lists of the president’s conflicts of interests (Citizens for Responsible Ethics in Washington, 2020), alongside expert testimony and investigation on the technical and legal ways the members of Trump’s administration ran afoul of the emoluments’ clause, the Hatch Act, and numerous ethics rules at the cabinet level (Kravitz, 2019). However, Trump’s corruption is understood as moving beyond self-enrichment. Rather, Trump’s actions are problematic because they signal the shifting priorities of the Presidency, and by extension, the nation. Harris argued in the same exchange with Sanders:

[Trump] has consistently, since he won, been selling out the American people. He’s been selling out working people. He’s been selling out our values, he’s been selling out national security and on this issue with Ukraine, he’s been selling out our democracy.

Our framers imagined this moment, a moment where we would have a corrupt president.
 […] Donald Trump needs to be held accountable. He is indeed the most corrupt and unpatriotic president we have ever had (October, 2019).

This coupling of corruption and (un)patriotic behavior clarifies a rhetorical move; the corrupting influence of money is evident in policy priorities, and by extension economic enrichment. This system of prioritization goes beyond the individual. As the country may (not) be capable of holding a corrupt individual accountable, the larger issue becomes a system inundated with corrupt priorities.

Though President Trump was an example of self-enrichment, nepotism, and shady dealings, he is not the corrupting rot at the center of the modern economy. In the debates, the problem of corruption goes well beyond individuals. Early in the cycle Warren suggested “Trump is part of a corrupt, rigged system that has helped the wealthy and the well-connected and kicked dirt in the faces of everyone else” (July, 2019). Trump is not the exigence of that system, but an end result and an index of its spread. Though his corruption had reached blatant and historic levels, the extent to which excising the man would save the system is subject to debate. Yang chastised Buttigieg for reducing economic problems to the sitting president, noting “Donald Trump is not the cause of all of our problems, and we’re making a mistake when we act like he is. He is a symptom of a disease that has been building up in our communities for years” (New Hampshire, 2020). That disease concerns greed and the way corporations are able to encourage politicians to take more seriously their interests.

At its core, the problem with money and the resulting corruption is the way it shifts and alters the priorities of the government. After characterizing the status quo as “cruel. 87 million uninsured, 30,000 people dying every single year, 500,000 people going bankrupt,” Sen. Sanders noted: “if all we could do is take their money, we should be ashamed of ourselves” (October,
That shame suggests an underlying moral element to economic commitments; money’s corrupting influence shifts one’s priorities away from the many. Sen. Warren argued, “for decades, we have had a government that has been on the side of the rich and the powerful. It has been on the side of the wealthy. That means it has not been on the side of everyone else” (July, 2019). Warren further cast these shifts in moral terms when in the first debate she argued: “for decades we have had a trade policy that has been written by giant, multinational corporations to help giant, multinational corporations. They have no loyalty to America. They have no patriotism” (July, 2019). Warren continued this line in the fourth debate:

The principle reason has been a bunch of corporations, giant multinational corporations who have been calling the shots on trade, giant multinational corporations that have no loyalty to America. They have no loyalty to American workers. They have no loyalty to American consumers. They have no loyalty to American communities. They are loyal only to their own bottom line. (October, 2019)

At its core, the moral problem with capital accumulation is further evidence of corruption at the center of the modern economy. If those with enormous wealth can corrupt the priorities of politicians and governments, the extant political economy constitutes a moral hazard that risks destroying American communities and even the American spirit.

For many of the Democratic candidates, the major issue is corporations’ ability to flood the system with money to ensure their interests are being upheld over the broader public. Yang in the third debate asked “why are we losing to the fossil fuel companies? Why are we losing to the gun lobby and the NRA? The answer is this, we all know, everyone on this stage knows, that our government has been overrun by money and corporate interests” (September, 2019). Money empowers an undue amount of control, as absent the pronounced influence of well-funded
lobbying groups, common sense legislation beneficial to all would have already been passed. In the third debate, Sen. Warren contended: “The question we need to ask is when we’ve got this much support across the country, 90% of Americans want to see us do…the answer is corruption, pure and simple” (September, 2019). To suggest that corruption, understood as the influence of money, is the core issue precluding meaningful change (re)articulates money as a corrupting force that encourages the government to act outside the interest of the polity.

To that end, blame is laid on those same individuals who the economy has been “working for.” In the third debate, Sen. Sanders contended, “we have got to recognize that this country is moving into an oligarchic form of society, where a handful of billionaires control the economic and political life of this country” (September, 2019). Money, in this context, is the true measure of power, as its capacity to shape the rules of the modern economy are unquestionable. As a consequence of this power, government is ineffective at curtailing the excesses of capitalism generally, and neoliberalism specifically. Sanders noted, “the issue is where power resides in America and it’s not white or black or male or female. We are living in a nation increasingly becoming an oligarchy, where you have a handful of billionaires who spend hundreds of millions of dollars buying elections and politicians” (December, 2019).

“Patriotic” Capitalism and what we owe each other

Having identified the cause and harms of the problem, Democratic candidates located a solution to corruption in economic patriotism, an obligation to one’s country and its citizens over and in addition to considerations of profit. Appeals to patriotism and attacks on the patriotism of political opponents are a hallmark of American Presidential campaigns, and in many ways the 2020 Democratic Primary debates exemplified the rhetorical maneuvering of candidates seeking the label “patriot-in-chief.” Candidates turned to patriotic imagery epitomized in Cory Booker’s
eulogizing of the late Congressman John Lewis during the Atlanta debate: “We all owe a debt that we cannot repay. We all drink deeply from wells of freedom and liberty that we did not dig.” Pete Buttigieg highlighted the symbolic power of the American flag he wore on the shoulder of his military fatigues while serving in Afghanistan (South Carolina, 2020). Others turned to the Burkean “assumed we,” a regular tool in the rhetoric of patriotism, embodied in Jay Inslee’s claim, “We can do what America always does: lead the world and invent the future and put people to work” (Night 1, 2019). Viewers did not need to look hard to see these traditional appeals to patriotism, but some candidates pushed the concept in new directions, especially around issues of equality and economic justice.

While patriotism is a popular theme in political rhetoric, its meaning is also deeply contested (Martin & McHendry, 2016). In the 2020 debates, candidates relied on economic patriotism as the antidote to the greed and corruption of the status quo. Like more general appeals to patriotism, economic patriotism in political campaigns is not new. 2020 debate participants certainly tapped into neoliberal discourses of economic patriotism. Candidates predictably relied on production/consumption driven rhetoric of economic nationalism that has helped propel candidates from both major parties into the White House, including then President Donald Trump. Calls to “buy American goods” or “protect American jobs” are a cornerstone of patriotic economic rhetoric and maintained a prominent position in the 2020 debates. Such discourses are exemplified by Sen. Warren’s calls to create 1.2 million new manufacturing jobs in the United States (Night 1, 2019) and Sen. Harris’ statement “We need to export American products, not American jobs” (September, 2019). But the rhetoric of economic patriotism took a unique form in the 2020 debates, beyond the neoliberal model of production and consumption. In addressing the rot at the core of the American economy, candidates used patriotism as a tool to
thread the rhetorical needle of preserving individualism while calling for greater recognition of the economic interdependence of all Americans and the obligations that stem from national identity.

In the Atlanta, Los Angeles, Des Moines debates, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) described the 2020 election as a “patriotism check.” The election would, in her formulation, separate the patriots from the profiteers. This dichotomy was even more explicit in Warren’s repeated reminders to viewers that large corporations had no sense of patriotic duty or obligation to the United States. Warren contrasted the globalism of multi-national firms with the patriotic loyalty of American workers:

[F]or decades, we have had a trade policy that has been written by giant multi-national corporations to help giant multi-national corporations. They have no loyalty to America. They have no patriotism. If they can save a nickel by moving a job to Mexico, they’ll do it in a heartbeat. If they can continue a polluting plant by moving it to Vietnam, they’ll do it in a heartbeat. (July, 2019)

Warren and several of her fellow candidates argued that capitalism was not inherently unpatriotic but had become so because of an idolatrous fixation on profits over people. A cabal of the “wealthy and well-connected,” as Warren called them, were willing to run down America if it meant they could acquire more wealth for themselves. Democratic candidates suggested the American way of life was under attack, and it was time for true patriots to rise up and defend it.

As Mayor Bill DeBlasio (D-New York) said during the second debate series in Detroit, Michigan:

For the last three years, we've watched Donald Trump pit working people against each other, black versus white, citizen versus immigrant. And why? So that the wealthy and
the powerful he represents can hold the American dream hostage from everyone else. (2nd Round, 2019).

Saving the American dream meant reformulating the relationship between the state, corporations, and the public while demanding corporations carry the weight of patriotic responsibility that they had for too long thrust upon the working class. The understanding of patriotism advanced in the debates ran alongside, rather than counter to, the traditional production/consumption narrative of economic patriotism, thus articulating a new political economy.

Candidates framed patriotism **not as antithetical to individualism, but compatible with collectivism to repay some portion** of the benefit gleaned from operating in a free-market economy. Sen. Klobuchar articulated this corporate patriotic duty to the debate audience in Los Angeles:

> I figure if you are given opportunity, you don't go into the world with a sense of entitlement. You go into it with a sense of obligation, an obligation to lift people up instead of hoarding what you have for yourself. (October, 2019)

Candidates borrowed from the sense of patriotism embodied in *Kennedy’s Inaugural Address* and in Roosevelt’s *Four Freedoms Speech*, to remind viewers of the collective responsibility inherent in patriotism and that such responsibility extended to the economic actions of corporations. Warren took special care to emphasize that her position was not anti-capitalist, but an insistence on patriotic duty. During the fourth debate in Westerville, Ohio, Warren pushed back against the framing that her policies would punish success, saying:

> Look, I don't have a beef with billionaires. My problem is you made a fortune in America, you had a great idea, you got out there and worked for it, good for you. But you built that fortune in America. I guarantee you built it in part using workers all of us
helped pay to educate. You built it in part getting your goods to markets on roads and bridges all of us helped pay for. You built it at least in part protected by police and firefighters all of us help pay the salaries for. And all I'm saying is, you make it to the top, the top 0.1 percent, then pitch in two cents so every other kid in America has a chance to make it (October, 2019).

By reminding viewers of the significant role played by public tax dollars and the work of public employees in subsidizing the success of the wealthiest Americans, Warren reformulated corporate taxes as a patriotic duty. This sense of collective responsibility was also tied to a collective benefit. The entitlements produced when corporate patriotic obligations were fulfilled achieved a fundamentally American objective that realigned priorities and allayed the moral rot at the center of the modern economy.

The final important move of candidates in the 2020 debates in relation to economic patriotism was to present an expanded slate of American values. Tom Steyer closed his remarks at the Los Angeles debate by saying, “as Americans, we're going to come together to stand up for the original values -- freedom, equality, justice, teamwork” (December, 2019). Steyer’s inclusion of teamwork, a term that rose to popular use in the 20th century, as an original American value illustrates the attempts to redefine collaboration and economic interdependence as fundamental to American identity. Yang’s use of the term freedom dividend to describe the $1,000 monthly universal basic income payments reframed wealth distribution around the idea that Americans were entitled to reap the benefits of freedom that, in Yang’s perspective, had been too concentrated at the top. Beto O’Rourke went further in claiming that collective care for one another is what defines an American: “Whatever our differences, we know that, before we are anything else, we are Americans first, and we will ensure that each one of us is well enough and
educated enough and paid enough to realize our full potential” (July, 2019). Senators Booker and Klobuchar repeatedly reminded debate audiences that the 2020 election was not just a political contest, but a referendum that would determine what it truly meant to be American. As Booker claimed in the Westerville debate:

This election is not a referendum on one guy in one office. It's a referendum on who we are and who we must be to each other. The next leader is going to have to be one amongst us Democrats that can unite us all, not throw elbows at other Democrats that are unfair, because the preparation is being the leader that can revive civic of grace in our country, teach us a more courageous empathy, and remind America that patriotism is love of country, and you cannot love your country unless you love your fellow countrymen and women. (October, 2019)

Booker posited American identity, and consequently patriotism, as rooted in an individual’s relationship to the other rather than in an individual’s relationship either to the state or to their property, production, and consumption. This reframing of American patriotism around issues of economic justice challenged the existing schema for economic patriotism derived from neoliberal discourses of production and consumption. Democratic candidates’ rhetoric positioned corrupt special interests against the hard work of patriotic Americans and called for a more intentional sharing of the outputs of a capitalist economy.

Implications

The rhetorical shift evident in the 2020 Democratic primary debates has implications for scholarly understanding of both economic and political rhetoric, and for the future of the American economy. First, the diversity of viewpoints clarifies the advantage of a wider field in a Democratic primary. When candidates commit to an exchange of ideas that could break from
party orthodoxy, new visions of the world and political possibilities can reach a wider audience. However, though that vision presents a material and symbolic remedy to some of the most egregious harms of neoliberal capitalism, it may fail to present a viable policy path. This failure occurs on two counts: first, the continued emphasis on “work” relies on a mythic return that ignores modern economic reality, and second on the anemic policy options left to the eventual Democratic candidate.

The Democratic primary debates encountered a problem with breadth. Even with reasonable restrictions on candidate selection criteria, the first debate featured twenty-two candidates split over two nights. Though political elites are rightfully concerned with candidates like Ben Carson in 2016 and Marianne Williamson in 2020 who appear more interested in publicity than with governing, restrictive criteria further the perception and reality that primary contests are little more than glorified coronations. Quite the contrary, as our analysis demonstrates, a diversity of candidates can lead to diversity of ideas that runs against established orthodoxy. Though parties have a vested interested in keeping unqualified or extreme candidates from pulling frontrunners towards untenable positions, the diversity of the 2020 primary field demonstrates the possibility that the debate space could contribute to a nuanced political alternative germane and unique to the goals of the party.

There is, however, the possibility that those policy alternatives could dramatically fail. Given the almost uninterrupted decrease in worker protection, environmental protection, and meaningful government oversight in the last forty years, appeals around fundamental economic change open an opportunity for little-d democratic action in opposition to neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2015). However, the candidates risk a damaging rhetorical shift that fails to improve the material conditions for many under late-stage capitalism. Consider the primacy of “work” as an
organizing term within the debate in the elevation of the tangible economy over the speculative. Biden routinely invoked the “dignity” of work as an explanation for why the modern economy fails workers. Similarly, a number of also-ran candidates emphasized “blue collar work,” as Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH) put it “working class issues, the people that take a shower after work, who haven’t had a raise in 30 years” (July, 2019). The fetishization of the working class is nothing new; as recently as the 2016 election, “working class” was invoked as a white-coded voting group supposedly pivotal to electoral success (Mercieca, 2020). However, the repeated emphasis on work in the Democratic Primary debate portends the possible economic reality post-alternative. Even if the arrangement between the government, the market, and the polity is re-arranged along this new framework of economic patriotism, work (read: economic productivity) will continue to govern individual subjectivities.

This governance, according to Brown (2015), can “take[] shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” (p. 30). The emphasis on the tangible economy-manufacturing, farming, service work-elevates a type of behavior as laudable, and a goal worth returning to. Though the end result of the economic (re)configuration articulated in the debates may curtail corporate profit and corruption, at the bottom a person’s economic production is still a core measure of their value. That configuration continues the abandonment of those who cannot, or will not, shape their behavior around the whims of the market. Even if the orthodoxy described here became ascendant, “any individual who veers into other pursuits risks impoverishment and a loss of esteem and creditworthiness at the least, survival at the extreme” (Brown, 2015, p. 22).

Therein lies the second problem in this political economy: itneglects the difficulty in enacting “economic patriotism” in a globalized economy. Though candidates build compelling
arguments regarding the dominance of money in US politics, their solutions are anemic and individualized. The notion that companies or individuals should prioritize the collective over, and often at the expense of, their own self-interest runs counter to years of deregulation and ideological saturation from neoliberal rationality (Coker, 2017). As highlighted in recent scholarship from Calvin Coker and Ryan Corso-Gonzales (2021), the dominance of the individual in neoliberal discourse precludes challenging the system to which they are entirely subject. Neoliberalism promises endless capital accumulation in exchange for everything. One’s safety, security, and dignity are not protected by the state, or even the community, as risk is entirely outsourced to the individual. Candidates rightly identify the accumulation of capital as deleterious to the public good but fail to account for how the public good has been reconfigured for neoliberal ends (Asen, 2017; Coker & Corso-Gonzales, 2021). In short, the articulation of a new political economy must be understood as a beginning, rather than an end, in challenging neoliberal dominance.
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