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At Flint Debate, Clinton and Sanders Avoid Talk of Environmental Racism

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Activists bemoan a lost opportunity to connect the dots between race and environmental pollution in the Flint water crisis.

BY LISA SONG, INSIDECLIMATE NEWS

MAR 8, 2016



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Demonstrators protest over the Flint, Michigan water crisis outside of the venue where the Democratic presidential debate was being held in Flint on March 6, 2016. Credit: REUTERS/Rebecca Cook Files

Even as Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders spent much of Sunday night's debate in Flint, Mich., discussing the city's water crisis and climate change, they steered clear of what many believe is an issue that lurks behind both.

The candidates had been urged for weeks by advocates to address environmental justice, to connect the issue of Flint's lead-tainted water with widespread racial disparities. Many advocates hoped Clinton and Sanders would emphasize that communities of color across the country are disproportionately affected by environmental and climate disasters.

"I was looking for more specifics in terms of policy, plans, proposals and strategies that would lift up environmental justice and climate justice, and to bring home the point that...race is playing [a role] in terms of making communities more vulnerable," said **Robert Bullard**, dean of Texas Southern University's School of Public Affairs. Bullard is often called the "father of environmental justice" due to **his long-standing expertise** on the issue.

Flint became the focus of national attention last fall when it was revealed that the city's drinking water had high levels of lead. The human-made crisis stemmed from a series of bureaucratic decisions that began in 2011, when Gov. Rick Snyder appointed an emergency manager to oversee Flint, which was in dire economic straits. About 40 percent of the city's 99,000 residents live below the poverty line, and nearly 60 percent

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In an attempt to save money, the emergency manager, who had **tremendous power over Flint's operations**, switched the city's water source to the Flint River in April 2014. Within weeks, residents began complaining about the brown, smelly water. Some reported nausea and rashes, but public officials ignored their concerns, even when water testing showed high levels of bacteria, trihalomethanes (a possible carcinogen), and lead.

The lead came from lead water pipes, which were being corroded by the river water. Lead is a neurotoxin that affects the brain, and is particularly harmful to children. When a Flint pediatrician **warned the public last September** about rising cases of lead poisoning in children, Michigan officials rushed to discredit her concerns. But growing public scrutiny, along with additional water testing, forced the governor to concede the problem in October. Flint abandoned the river water and switched back to buying drinking water from Detroit, but there's no way to reverse the damage. Solving the problem will require replacing Flint's lead water pipes, at **an estimated cost of \$55 million**.

Many say the state would not have been so slow to act if Flint were an affluent community. "Environmental Racism + Indifference = Lead in the Water & Blood," **the president of the NAACP tweeted** in January.

Bullard, who has advised Clinton's campaign on environmental justice, said the candidates could have used Flint on Sunday to highlight other communities of color experiencing similar tragedies, including neighborhoods in Chicago that are "devastated with pollution" and Native

Americans whose tribal land in Louisiana is **sinking from sea-level rise**.

These communities want to know how the next president will provide relief, and that question was not answered, Bullard said.

Prior to the debate, nearly 95,000 people **signed a petition** urging the candidates to have "a real debate on the problems of racial justice, environmental racism, and the solutions of climate justice."

The petition was sponsored by 18 environmental and social justice groups, including 350.org, Climate Hawks Vote, the Indigenous Environmental Network and Presente.org. Environmental Action, an advocacy group based in Boston, started the petition and helped form the coalition behind it.

Presente is a California-based group that advocates for Latino communities. The Sanders campaign hired Presente's then-executive director Arturo Carmona last fall.

Matt Nelson, the group's managing director, said the powerful organizing that has taken place in Flint has forced presidential candidates to devote more attention to environmental justice. But the debate showed there is "still definitely a disconnect" between the candidates' words and the true scope of the problem, he said.

Nelson, who has tracked the GOP presidential debates, said the Republican candidates haven't had a substantive discussion about Flint.

Lead's Toxic Legacy

Daniel Faber, a sociology professor at

Northeastern University who advises Sanders' campaign on environmental justice, said both candidates hurt their chances to stand out by failing to address the issue head-on.

Sanders "missed a golden opportunity" to distinguish himself from Clinton by neglecting to cite his environmental justice record, which includes co-sponsorship of a Congressional environmental justice bill as far back as 1993, Faber noted in an email.

Clinton failed to emphasize her husband's role in passing a presidential executive order on environmental justice in 1994, and how she would build upon that legacy, Faber said.

In previous media appearances, both candidates **have questioned** whether the Flint crisis **would have occurred** in a white, suburban neighborhood. On Sunday, however, they circled around the issue. They criticized the Republican state government's role in creating the lead crisis, emphasized their commitment to climate action and pledged to reduce unemployment.

Clinton promised to clean up lead's toxic legacy in soil, house paints and other cities' contaminated water systems. Sanders promoted his plan to fix crumbling infrastructure by raising taxes on the wealthy.

Neither connected the dots between race and environmental burdens, though Clinton's campaign **tweeted about** Flint and environmental racism during the debate, offering context that was missing as she spoke.

Justice for Flint requires that we address racial, economic,

and environmental injustice.
#DemDebate
pic.twitter.com/BuRSyKhdbU

— Hillary Clinton
(@HillaryClinton) **March 7,**
2016

The candidates' campaign websites address the topic in greater detail.

"As president, Hillary will make environmental justice a priority by working to reduce air pollution, investing in the removal of toxins like lead, developing greener and more resilient infrastructure, tackling energy poverty, and boosting efforts to clean up highly polluted toxic sites," says the **Hillary for America** website.

Sanders' campaign uses the less common phrase "environmental violence" to describe the extreme harm caused by environmental stress:

"Like income inequality, environmental inequality is rapidly growing in the United States," **according to BernieSanders.com**. "The environmental violence being inflicted on these communities of color is taking a terrible toll, and must be made a national priority. ...We need to mitigate climate change and focus on building resilience in low-income and minority communities."

Despite their criticism, environmental advocates say the Democratic debate brought attention to an often-neglected issue.

"Flint has brought the epidemic of environmental justice and systemic racism to the forefront of

not only this debate, but also the presidential election," said Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition, in an email. EHC advocates for environmental health in the San Diego/Tijuana region.

Clinton and Sanders missed the larger context of Flint, said Michael Garfield, director of the Ecology Center, an environmental group based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

And yet, the candidates "spent nearly a half hour talking about safe drinking water, environmental health and justice issues, and climate action," Garfield said in an email. "Has that ever happened before in a Presidential debate? It's about time!!"

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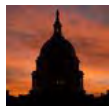
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