

spotlight on
POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY
THE SOURCE FOR NEWS, IDEAS AND ACTION

The Convention Voices Not Heard

Bill Nichols, Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity

The voices from two weeks of political conventions are hard to distinguish at this point: the speeches, the protests, the wall-to-wall talking heads, the celebrities.

The voices those of us at *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity* remember are a little different. They were harder to hear but worth a close listen.

Spotlight, in conjunction with Policy Matters Ohio and Cleveland State University in Cleveland and Temple University in Philadelphia, sponsored two forums aimed at fostering bipartisan dialogue and engagement about how to address poverty and create opportunity in the two host cities.

In Cleveland, close to 200 people attended the event at Cleveland State University, which included a panel of local experts and an additional session with two Republican leaders in the poverty policy arena—pollster Jim McLaughlin and Jimmy Kemp, president of the Jack Kemp Foundation.

In Philadelphia, about 75 people braved the sweltering temperatures to participate in the forum at Temple University, which included a panel of local activists, office-holders, and academics followed by a question-answer session with Ann O’Leary, a senior policy advisor for the Clinton campaign.

There were no gift bags or performances by Katy Perry or Lynyrd Skynyrd. These events were open to all who were interested in a respectful conversation focused on solutions for real people struggling to move out of poverty in Cleveland and Philadelphia

What voices do we remember? A few examples:

- In Cleveland, a young man appealed to McLaughlin and Kemp to help their party remember the incredible burden those in poverty feel and to help people in need move forward to a place of confidence and self-worth.
- In Philadelphia, a local woman asked our panel of local experts how she, an ordinary Philadelphian struggling to make ends meet, could become part of such an event and tell people her story?
- In Cleveland, a woman angrily accused Kemp of insinuating that the poor don’t want to work. Kemp calmly answered—and nearly a half-hour after the event ended, he was quietly chatting with the questioner and others on the empty Waetjen Auditorium stage in what seemed like an honest and respectful conversation. That’s what bipartisan dialogue looks like.

We are realists at *Spotlight*. Conventions are about parties and raising money and spectacle. They’re about projecting a party’s best face to millions of viewers at home. As a result, they are usually short on policy specifics.

But what we learned in Cleveland and Philadelphia is something that both parties should remember in the mad dash to November and as the fall campaign begins in earnest. There is an audience out there that wants to talk about the real challenges faced by millions of people living in poverty. In both cities, we had more questions than time would allow and a social media response that was truly dizzying.

Politics “precludes real conversations about poverty alleviation,” said Omar Woodard, the executive director of GreenLight Philadelphia and a panelist in our Philadelphia event. While that is unquestionably true in most cases, these two events showed that respectful conversation about poverty is possible.

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Our convention experience was different than most. The people we remember best are still in Philadelphia and Cleveland, still struggling with real problems that will be there in January when a new president is sworn in.

They also share a goal, which Jim McLaughlin put this way in Cleveland: Poverty policy shouldn't be "bipartisan; it should be non-partisan."

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