



Big Ideas for the 2008 Race

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The 2008 presidential race started extremely early. That may or may not be a good thing; Americans may get sick of politics well before they actually cast their votes. But the long process could be constructive if it allows us to engage in a sustained debate over issues and agendas for the nation.

The Brookings Institution has created a special project designed to inject ideas into this debate. It is explicitly bipartisan, with an advisory council including former Reagan chief of staff Ken Duberstein, along with Tom Donilon, A. B. Culvahouse, Fred Malek, Congressman John Porter, Senator and Ambassador Jack Danforth, Mack McLarty, Mickey Kantor, Judith McHale, and Casey Wasserman.

Our chapter writers include our own scholars, former Bush National Security Council official Michael Green, former senator Warren B. Rudman, and former representative Charles W. Stenholm. The reader can go to the Brookings website (www.brookings.edu) and that of the Opportunity 08 project (www.opportunity08.org) to read updates of some of these chapters as well as to access other papers within the three subject areas: Our World, Our Society, and Our Prosperity.

Some ideas coming out of the project are quite provocative. A simple and elegant place to start is with economist Bill Gale's proposal for how to begin to address our anemic personal savings rates. Today, if you want a 401(k), you have to sign up for one—and that simple fact discourages

many people from creating this savings-inducing financial vehicle. Why not automatically enroll them when they take a new job? If they wish to opt out, fine—but doesn't it make sense to take advantage of human inertia to a good end?

In another paper, David Sandalow argues the near-total dependence of our cars and trucks on oil is a more fundamental problem than oil imports per se. If drivers had a choice between oil and other fuels, Sandalow argues, many of the national security, environmental, and economic problems often associated with oil could be mitigated. He calls for measures to transform both the auto fleet with "plug-in hybrids" and the fuel supply with new forms of ethanol.

He would use federal vehicle purchases and tax incentives to accelerate development of such technologies, and increase the ethanol production subsidy for so-called cellulosic ethanol (made from various grasses and trees). Even for those not using ethanol, plug-in hybrids would help reduce energy consumption and oil imports—as well as global warming—because electricity plants are far more efficient than internal combustion engines.

Bill Frenzel, Charles Stenholm, Bill Hoagland, and Belle Sawhill lay out a serious bipartisan plan for eliminating the fiscal deficit. Their approach would cut spending and increase revenues in roughly equal proportion. For example, they would limit total itemized income tax deductions to 15 percent of income and would cap the exclusion on employer-paid health insurance.

Speaking of taxes, in another paper, Bill Gale proposes revenue-neutral changes to the law that would tax new corporate investment income once and only once, and introduce return-free filing for many taxpayers (an idea since espoused by John Edwards as well). Controversially, he would change the mortgage interest deduction to a one-time homebuyers' tax credit, focusing this tax break on those who most need the help.

Former Bush administration official Ron Haskins and Belle Sawhill propose an ambitious, if moderately expensive, plan to tackle poverty. They would expand the Earned Income Tax Credit, increase further the minimum wage, subsidize child care for low-wage workers, invest more in high-quality early childhood education, and use some noneconomic tools, such as teaching relationship skills to individuals getting married.

Bruce Katz and Margery Austin Turner present a plan for revamping federal housing policy. Designed partly to avoid building houses in inner

cities, it would engage metropolitan planning organizations in creating regional housing concepts linked to regional transportation and job creation strategies.

Peter Berkowitz of the Hoover Institution suggests new policies for higher education in the United States. My favorite is the dramatic expansion of fellowship programs to support the study of critical foreign languages.

Hady Amr and Peter Singer also call for major improvements in America's foreign language capacities in their paper on engaging the Muslim world—in which they further suggest the next president include stops in major Islamic countries on his or her first overseas trip.

In a separate education paper, INTEL executives Sean Maloney and Christopher Thomas develop a policy agenda to enhance America's future prospects for a robust Internet economy, including much greater federal support for technical education and IT research and development. And in yet another paper with implications for education policy, Hugh Price, Amy Liu, and Rebecca Sohmer propose more college aid for students attending school part time, a large group that has grown over the years, yet has never been the main focus of aid and scholarship programs. They also favor creating special short courses to help disadvantaged students prepare college applications and raising Pell Grant levels.

The 2008 election represents the first time since 1928 that neither party has an incumbent president or vice president running for the nomination. It also represents one of the most momentous elections in our nation's history, especially in regard to foreign policy. (In this regard, this book and the broader project, with papers and other material at Opportunity08.org, focus substantial attention not only on relations with the Islamic world but also the Iraq War, nuclear nonproliferation, and the rise of China.) Our collective national goal should be to encourage and assist the candidates in providing fresh ideas that meet the huge challenges of the day. And our role as a nonpartisan think tank with an explicitly bipartisan approach to [Opportunity08](http://Opportunity08.org), as unusual as that may be in these times, will I hope allow us to do so.

