

The Stock Market Is Booming, but Democrats Say, Look Who's Been Left Out

In Iowa, Democratic candidates sought to undercut Trump's core message of a strong economy by making the case that it isn't working for the right people.



By Jeremy W. Peters and Sydney Ember

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DES MOINES — On paper, Esther Mabior should be fine. She has a degree from Iowa State University, where she majored in economics, and lives in a city where her chosen profession, the insurance business, employs thousands of people.

But Ms. Mabior, 26, can't find a job as an insurance adjuster. And she says her own experience is a lot like the stock market highs and the ever-expanding gross domestic product she keeps hearing about: It all looks good on the surface, but deeper down things aren't so rosy.

"There may be people doing well," Ms. Mabior said after attending an event for Pete Buttigieg's campaign in Des Moines over the weekend, calling herself "living proof" that as far as the economy is concerned,

“it’s not that great.”

The stock market is days away from closing out what is likely to be its best year in two decades. The unemployment rate, now at 3.5 percent, has been at 4 percent or lower for almost two years. Employers continue to add jobs in large numbers, with the country now in its 11th year of economic expansion.

During multiple events, in Iowa and New Hampshire, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. rejected the idea that the strong economy was lifting everyone. He took aim in particular at one of Mr. Trump’s greatest wells of support: white working-class Americans, who were once a bedrock of the Democratic Party but who are now helping Mr. Trump remain competitive in battleground states like Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

“An awful lot of people — middle-class folks — are in real trouble, and they’re not at all certain about their future,” Mr. Biden said in Fairfield, Iowa, on Saturday. “So the idea that everybody’s doing well is just simply not true. The very, very wealthy are doing very, very well, but the rest are scraping along.”

At an event on Sunday in Peterborough, N.H., he acknowledged that the economy was “growing” and unemployment was “incredibly low.” But, he said, “There’s no rational distribution of the growth in terms of increases in income and other things.”

One consistent theme at campaign events is that wages are not rising enough to offset the increasing costs of living, including for health care and education. Another is that with a strong economy, workers should be sharing more of the gains.

“Are your wages going up?” a volunteer for Senator Elizabeth Warren’s campaign asked the audience as she introduced the candidate in Clarinda, a small town in southwestern Iowa.

When she took the stage herself, Ms. Warren of Massachusetts argued that the economic recovery had failed to touch the most marginalized communities or rural areas.

“Why is America’s middle class being hollowed out?” she asked. “And the answer is in who our government in Washington works for.”

The economic arguments are resonating, in Iowa and elsewhere, with voters like Max Goldman, a 53-year-old technology consultant from Kansas City, Iowa. Mr. Goldman, who traveled to Ms. Warren's event in Clarinda, said he wished Democrats talked more about the federal deficit. But he said he did not credit Mr. Trump with the improving economy, and thinks other voters — even moderates — might feel the same way.

“Every president will take credit for the economy,” Mr. Goldman said. “But the stock market is not the economy, and the wages argument she’s making is a good one.”

Kyle Hunt, a 40-year-old loan officer from Clive, a Des Moines suburb, said at Mr. Buttigieg's event on Sunday in Knoxville that the economy where he lived seemed to be “working fine” because there were job opportunities. But he said he had also noticed recently that more people, especially minorities and women, were borrowing more money, including to pay for rent.

“I definitely see people that it's not working for,” he said.

Mike Rowold, 72, a crop insurance adjuster who attended a town hall-style event that Mr. Biden held at a high school in Tipton, Iowa, on Saturday, said most people there were “not concerned about the stock market in any way, shape or form.”

“That economy is a false bubble,” he said.

Mr. Rowold, who said he would support Mr. Biden in the caucuses, faulted the Trump administration's trade policies for hurting farmers in Iowa.

“Very few of these guys are actually investing any of their money into the stock market,” he said of the farmers. “They're hanging onto the farms that they have right now.”

Ms. Mabior, the out-of-work insurance adjuster, said she has not yet decided which if any of the Democratic candidates she would support. Asked whether Mr. Trump's celebration of the booming stock market and G.D.P. growth meant anything to her, she said most economic indicators had become irrelevant: Iowa, she pointed out, has among the lowest unemployment rates in the nation: 2.6 percent.

And yet somehow, she finds herself included in that figure: “Can you believe it?” she said.

Jeremy W. Peters reported from Des Moines, and Sydney Ember from Knoxville, Iowa. Astead W. Herndon contributed reporting from Clarinda, Iowa, and Thomas Kaplan from Peterborough, N.H.