

Why go to the trouble of running for president to promote ideas that can't work?

By **Editorial Board**

August 1, 2019 at 7:43 p.m. EDT

“I DON’T understand why anybody goes to all the trouble of running for president of the United States just to talk about what we really can’t do and shouldn’t fight for,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) said Tuesday night, in the most notable zinger of July’s Democratic presidential primary debate. “I get a little bit tired of Democrats afraid of big ideas,” Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), the other major candidate on the field’s left wing, piled on.

This got us thinking about some big ideas in U.S history. Like, say, amending the Constitution to outlaw liquor. Or sending half a million troops into Vietnam. Or passing a \$1.5 trillion tax cut for the wealthy in a time of massive deficits.

Ambition is essential, in other words, but not sufficient. The country faces big challenges, such as economic inequality and climate change, that call for creative solutions. They also call for wisdom, honesty and even a bit of modesty about government’s limitations. Having embraced President Barack Obama’s “no drama” approach to governing, often defined by the philosophy “don’t do stupid s---,” it would be odd if Democrats suddenly embraced ideological grandiosity as a prerequisite for service in the Oval Office.

That means, first, that proposals should meet a baseline degree of factual plausibility — a bar that, for example, the Medicare-for-all plan that Mr. Sanders and Ms. Warren favor does not clear. Ms. Warren’s Tuesday night zinger was aimed at former congressman John Delaney (Md.), who had pointed out correctly that the numbers behind the proposal simply do not compute: The senators cannot deliver a system that provides far more benefits than other single-payer systems they claim as their model while preserving the level of care and access that insured Americans currently enjoy. They should make the case for a government monopoly on health care if they want, but they should be honest about the trade-offs.

Candidates who promise big ideas should also be pressed on how they will realize them. Mr. Sanders says he will lead a revolution. Ms. Warren will take on the “giant corporations that have taken our government and that are holding it by the throat.” Then, the theory goes, they can bring about radical change.

But the United States is a vast, pluralistic country, and Congress will continue to reflect its ideological range. Big donors and billionaires may exercise too much influence, but Democratic primary voters should be wary of candidates who use that fact to explain away all opposition to their ideas. Even if you undid *Citizens United* and enacted campaign finance reform, sustainable policy in America would emerge only by means of principled compromise.

The next president should have a vision of progress for the nation that is expansive and inspiring. It also should be grounded in mathematical and political reality.