

Short shrift in a long campaign

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The two-year presidential campaign was an exhausting marathon for candidates and for voters, yet it hardly touched on some major issues facing the nation. Among the glaring omissions in the 2012 race:

Poverty: Though concern for the middle class was a near-constant refrain of both candidates, next to nothing was said about those struggling to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. The number of people in poverty hit a 19-year high in 2010, at 15 percent of the population—up from 11 percent in 2000. (The rise in poverty began before the economic recession of 2008.) One in five children lives in poverty—a figure that puts the U.S. second highest among 35 of the world’s richest countries just below Romania. A Brookings Institution report predicts that a fraying safety net, combined with a weak economy, could push poverty to levels not seen since the 1960s.

Though the candidates talked endlessly (if vaguely) about creating jobs, neither candidate focused on how wages for those who have jobs have not risen with the cost of living over the past 30 years, pushing many people into poverty. Nor was it noted that federal expenditures on job training have been cut over the past decade.

Climate change: In 2008, both Barack Obama and John McCain pledged that they would address global warming. This year, the candidates vied over who most deserved the title “Mr. Coal.” For the first time since the 1980s, the question of climate change was not even posed in the presidential or vice presidential debates. One would not know from this campaign that South Florida is preparing for a rise in

sea levels that threatens a half million people and billions of dollars in property.

The candidates never directly addressed how they would curb carbon emissions for the sake of the planet. The “cap and trade” approach to limiting carbon, once embraced by Obama and by many Republicans, was ignored.

Gun violence: Though 44 multiple shootings have taken place this year, including massacres at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin and at a movie theater in Colorado, the candidates largely avoided discussing gun laws. Responding to a debate question, Obama offered a vague endorsement of a ban on assault rifles (the federal assault rifle ban expired in 2004), but he didn’t commit himself, and, like Romney, he quickly changed the subject.

Gun violence, our neighbors in poverty, a planet in peril—these are large, disturbing topics that are risky to talk about. It is a failure of democratic politics when candidates don’t even try.