With Mueller’s work done, 2020 Democrats are now free to ... keep not talking about Mueller

By Philip Bump

It is certainly true that the conclusion of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III’s work left a lot of Democrats feeling somewhat deflated. After two years of speculation about President Trump’s campaign and possible interactions with Russia’s interference effort in 2016, the announcement on Sunday that Mueller found no apparent link was not what many of Trump’s opponents were hoping to hear.

But that’s different from saying that proving collusion and — in the more feverish dreams — ousting Trump from office was the central concern of Democratic voters or of Democrats seeking to replace Trump in the Oval Office.

There’s a good reason for Trump and his allies to position the Mueller findings as having kneecapped Democratic objections to his presidency broadly and to insist that his position in 2020 is bolstered as a result. It’s certainly true that Trump’s position is stronger than it would have been if Mueller had found a smoking gun on the subject, but the idea that his campaign will now be supercharged is predicated on an incorrect assumption about the priorities of Democratic voters.

The Post’s Dave Weigel responded to a tweet that suggested Democrats seeking election in 2020 might be freaked out about the Mueller probe by pointing to data from a Democratic campaign.

The New York Times’s Astead Wesley echoed that sentiment.

“On the road, there’s certainly the hyper engaged, cable news obsessed Dem, who wants to talk about George Papadopoulos and Jerome Corsi,” he wrote on Twitter, “but those people are still outnumbered by the [number] of people who frankly lost track of the Russia plot like a year ago.”
Some voters cared very much about Trump! Most were more worried about other things.

That was 2018, though, when Trump wasn’t on the ballot. Trump has certainly and necessarily become a bigger focus of Democratic rhetoric — but that’s not the same as saying that the Mueller report has become a focal point.

CNN has held nine town halls with 2020 candidates and potential candidates, from a conversation with former Texas representative Beto O’Rourke before the 2018 election (when he was a candidate for Senate) to a discussion with Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) last week. Over the course of 143 questions asked mostly by members of the town hall audience, only four have dealt with issues that even tangentially overlap with Mueller, including three on possible impeachment of Trump and one on Russian interference in the election.

These are curated events by CNN, sure, but the pattern of question-asking was consistent: Questions about health care, about climate change, about student loans. Relatively few about Trump and none about Mueller specifically. On Twitter, the picture is slightly different. Twitter, unlike a town hall in Iowa, is a national platform, used to build a national base — and maybe boost some national fundraising. But even so, the 2020 Democrats have mostly tweeted about things other than Mueller and collusion since the beginning of the year. Only one tweet of every hundred has addressed the Mueller probe. Many of those tweets dealt with releasing the results of what he found publicly.

It makes sense that the subject wouldn’t come up much on the campaign trail, really. What are you going to ask Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) when you see him at a pizza shop in Manchester, N.H.: something about his policy proposals for education or that his speculation on a highly secret federal probe? For both the Democrats and the president, the Mueller probe and its conclusion is a way to gin up energy, but it’s not really anything to run on.

The majority of Democrats care about getting Trump out of office. They’d have been happy if Mueller helped them do that. If not, they’re happy to nominate a Democrat who will do it the old-fashioned way.

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