

PA PAC Questionnaire for United States Congress – 2020

Please return the completed questionnaire along with your resume or biographical statement describing education, work history, community service, and prior political experience as soon as possible, but by January 5 at the latest.

You may e-mail your responses to Tom Miller at tom-miller1@nc.rr.com or you may send a printed copy of your responses to PA PAC c/o Tom Miller 1110 Virginia Avenue, Durham, NC 27705-3262

Please note that following the January 5 deadline, the People's Alliance PAC may publish your responses to this questionnaire and your resume.

When answering this questionnaire, please repeat the questions in your response document with each question numbered and organized as it appears here. Type your responses in italics, bold, or a different font to distinguish your responses from the questions. Do not use colors or shading.

Please try to confine your responses to no more than 300 words unless another word limit is indicated. Do not feel obliged to exhaust the limit for each question.

If you use words or ideas from another person, please attribute your source.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire and your willingness to serve the people of North Carolina and the nation.

Candidate's name: Erica D. Smith

Office: United States Senate ___ United States House of Representatives

Address: PO Box 1236, Gaston, NC. 27832

E-mail Address: info@ericaforum.com / hugh@ericaforum.com

Phone: 704-378-8726 / 704-833-8107

Website: www.ericaforum.com

Why Are You Running?

1. What are the three most important issues facing the nation? What are your top priorities in addressing those issues?

Today's three most important issues, and my priorities to address them, include:

1. **Equality.** *Equal justice under the law. Equal rights for people of every color, every faith or no faith, every social stratum, every ability or disability, every gender, identity, orientation, and every origin. Equal opportunity for all to build the best lives they can, including every zip code. Ethnicity and income level.*

2. **Humanity.** As Gandhi observed, “A nation is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members.” Jesus likewise said, “What you have done for one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done for me.” My country’s soul is too great to be as inhumane as it often is today. Healthcare is a human right. Equal pay for equal work is simple fairness. Access to a good, affordable education is the cornerstone of democracy. Families belong together, not thrown in cages. All God’s children have a basic right to a clean environment. Childhood nutrition and nurturing environments enable students to participate in their educations fully. All these are the table legs of a humane society.
3. **Prosperity.** The only guarantor of a healthy society is opportunity for all, according only to our innate abilities. To experience satisfaction, we all need the opportunity for meaningful work at a livable wage, stable enough for us to realistically hope to build a better future for ourselves and our children. Too many Americans today grow up and remain trapped in ‘job deserts,’ both urban and rural. We know how to promote economic development that creates and maintains good paying jobs. We only need the will to roll up our sleeves and do it.

These broad priorities encompass immediate goals, too numerous to detail here, laid out in my “Six Point Platform for Progress” (<https://ericaforus.org/platform-for-progress>)

Concerning the President of the United States

2. Should the President of the United States be removed from office on the articles upon which he has been impeached?

I was proud to stand in the cold rain on December 17th – the eve of the House impeachment vote, to call for President Trump’s impeachment before news cameras and a cheering crowd at Raleigh’s ‘No One Is Above The Law’ rally. I spoke out because I believed that North Carolina voters deserve a Senator who will never waver when the defense of our Constitution is on the line.

Now, the President’s case comes before the Senate. There I would do what all Senators are sworn to do: withhold judgement until all the facts are considered and deliberated, and any new witnesses and evidence have been heard. If Pres. Trump can mount an honest, compelling, and substantiated defense of his actions I would be eager to hear and deliberate it with my colleagues. But if he can’t, or won’t, and all that is left in evidence are the same facts assembled by the House, then the Senatorial jurors could arrive at only one honest verdict – the same one that the House did: that the President should be impeached and removed from office for high crimes and misdemeanors against our country.

Federal Revenues, Federal Spending, and the Economy

3. Is the current system of federal taxation fair? What changes should be made, if any? Please cite specific examples.

The only fair system of taxation is a progressive taxation, in which the wealthy are taxed at a higher rate than are the poor. While our system today is progressive in the sense that it is not a ‘flat tax,’ I do not believe that the ‘slope’ of our current system is fair. That is to say, the wealthy do not today pay anything like the amount of income tax that would be in keeping with the benefits they enjoy from the system of government that our taxes finance, while the middle class and working poor pay more than they receive in benefit. We must raise the highest tax rates to an equitable level, repeal tax code provisions that allow the wealthy lucrative tax shelters and deductions not available to the middle class or the poor, and treat capital gains more like we treat personal income for tax purposes. Additionally, for so long as our courts insist that “corporations are people,” then corporations should pay the same tax rates that people do.

4. What is your position concerning tariffs and trade?

Tariffs and other international trade barriers are a two-edged sword. On the one hand, wise, limited, and judicious application of tariffs remain an important tool to protect vital national interests from unfair foreign competition, just as certain restrictive barriers (particularly regarding critical technologies) can be important tools to protect national security. Particularly where we compete with nations that are unconcerned about living wages, worker safety, and environmental protection, wisely erected and judiciously limited tariffs enable us to craft trade agreements that do not put American workers and the American economy at a unilateral disadvantage. On the other hand, a robust and not overly encumbered system of international trade provides our farmers, manufacturers, and service providers with access to enormous markets, and thus creates good jobs here at home. As with so many economic issues, the question of tariffs is not black-or-white. Rather, it calls for the sort of smart good government that was a defining characteristic of our recent history until three years ago.

5. Are you in favor of reducing government spending in any specific areas? If so, please list your top three specific areas and explain your reasons. Are you in favor of increasing government spending in any specific areas? If so, please list your top three specific areas and explain your reasons.

*I am in favor of **changing** some of the ways we invest government revenues to enable a more humane and wise investment strategy:*

- 1. Military defense currently accounts for almost 20% of our budget, while other needs equally critical to our security (such as climate remediation and carbon reduction) go begging. I believe we can achieve substantial savings in defense expenditures by modernizing the way we solicit, manage, and pay for defense contracts, which will free up revenues for such additional critical needs while still retaining (or perhaps I should say re-gaining) our stature as the world's most powerful and reliable defender of peace and security.*
- 2. Similarly, today Medicare pays far too much for prescription drugs (as do private insurers and individuals, as well) because we do not use Medicare/Medicaid's potent power of the purse to negotiate equitable drug prices with suppliers. Ironically, this is one of the few areas in which 'free market' evangelists do not support negotiation of prices between buyers and sellers. Negotiating down predatory drug prices without harm to our pharmaceutical industry's power of innovation will free up much-needed revenues to help pay for universal healthcare coverage.*
- 3. Our 'corporate welfare' system diverts far too many of our precious financial resources to those who least need it. A classic example is agricultural subsidies to huge and highly profitable agribusiness interests like Archer Daniels Midland. Estimates of the scale of corporate welfare vary, but all fall in the range of hundreds of billions of dollars per year. We need legislators who, because they are not in the pockets of these welfare-dependent industries, will be unafraid to address this chronic problem. The revenues this will free up can be much better spent on targeted and effective economic development programs to create more and better good-paying jobs.*

6. Are you concerned about the affordability of a college education in the U.S.? If so, what role can the federal government play in addressing your concerns?

As an educator, I am deeply concerned about college affordability and today's crippling levels of student debt. In some cases, the Department of Education already has the tools it needs to address some aspects of the problem. One example would be more stringent oversight and regulation of for-profit 'universities.' Another would be using the power of the purse of the Department of Health and Human Services (home to the largest funder of university research, the National Institutes of Health or NIH) to more wisely negotiate the steep 'indirect costs' universities ask for in research grants. These are costs unrelated to the actual cost of research, covering instead a myriad of unrelated university expenses. Tuitions vary widely among universities, and the equity of a particular university's tuition level (relative to its other available resources, such as endowment and state appropriations) should be a consideration in negotiating its indirect cost rate with NIH. This would provide the most expensive major universities with powerful incentives to adjust their tuition rates and needs-based scholarship awards in ways favorable to reducing student debt. Having implemented four and five-year tuition lock-in rates in NC's University system schools, I have witnessed firsthand the predictability and certainty that better enables students and their families to plan for tuition throughout matriculation. Finally, we must re-evaluate certain federal student loan programs that limit student loan eligibility based on the socioeconomic status of their parents.

*Other college affordability issues may require new legislation (and/or appropriations) to address. Community college should be extremely affordable, and this may require state/federal cooperation in appropriations and legislation to fully achieve. We may also need new laws to enable the federal government to offer meaningful reduction of **existing** college load debt to current overburdened graduates.*

Secure Elections, Fair Elections, and the Right to Vote

7. What action should the Congress take, if any, to protect the integrity of elections from foreign or domestic mischief?

Congress's recent efforts to improve election security have so far been half-hearted and ineffective, appropriating needed funds but allowing them to be spent in ways that do not actually improve security – such as allowing states to use those funds to purchase insecure voting machines instead of adopting highly secure hand-marked paper ballot election systems. All such future appropriations of election security funds must be directed to investments that demonstrably increase election security.

But foreign election 'meddling' involves much more than cyberattacks alone. We have all seen how Russia has used, and continues to use, US social media companies to interfere in our elections by propagating disinformation. Some companies, like Twitter, have voluntarily taken constructive first steps to address this, such as imposing a hiatus on paid political advertising for the 2020 election. Others, like Facebook, stubbornly remain addicted to highly profitable state-sponsored propaganda passing as advertising. Since its birth, social media has enjoyed perhaps the lowest level of government regulation of any major new technology-enabled industry ever. Now that we fully recognize that social media brings new threats as well as new opportunities, it is time to regulate this now mature industry as good governance does older industries, for the common good.

8. What changes, if any, should be made to federal election laws in the light of the *Citizens United* decision of the United States Supreme Court?

*I am not a constitutional scholar, so I don't pretend to know whether the Supreme Court's disastrous *Citizens United* decision can be reversed via legislation, or whether it will instead require a constitutional amendment. But either way, *Citizens United* must be reversed, because its permission for wealthy corporations and billionaires to spend unlimited sums on political influence clearly poses an existential threat for our democracy. As a state senator I have already demonstrated my commitment to this through my sponsorship of 2019 Senate Bill 339 (*We The People Act / Referendum*), which would reverse the effect of the *Citizens United* decision.*

9. Should Congress readopt all aspects of the body of legislation referred to as the Voting Rights Act? Should it be adjusted or retired?

Our recent history of state-sponsored voter suppression, both here in North Carolina and across the nation, has clearly demonstrated that the Supreme Court's logic in overturning portions of the Voting Rights Act (that is, its assumption that we have matured into a 'post-racial' society) was deeply flawed and completely unrealistic. Congress must fully restore the Act, and even strengthen it, to insure that every American has the right and the ability to vote, and that those who are the current targets of the most intensive voter suppression – people of color – are particularly protected.

Along with restoring the Voting Rights Act, I will continue to fight in the U.S. Senate for expanded voting rights just as I have in the NC General Assembly: to encourage and enable every eligible citizen to vote by making election day a national holiday (2019 Senate Bill 294 – "Make General Election Day a State Holiday"), by implementing automatic and online voter registration (2019 Senate Bill 494 – "Automatic and Online Voter Registration"), and by establishing non-partisan redistricting (Senate Bill 641 – "Fix Our Democracy").

Immigration

10. How would you reform U.S. immigration policy? Since agreement on immigration reform has proved hard to obtain, what measures should be taken in the meantime that would improve the lives of undocumented immigrants? Are government agencies responsible for immigration and our borders performing as they should? Please limit your answer to 400 words.

Needed reforms of U.S. immigration policy include:

- 1. Defense of DACA. In my service as a state senator I have already demonstrated my support for DACA recipients through my sponsorship of 2019 Senate Bill 615 ("DACA Recipients In-State Tuition"). But so much more remains to be done for these innocent and eager would-be citizens that can only be accomplished at the federal level.*
- 2. A clear and equitable pathway to citizenship for current undocumented immigrants who have proven themselves to be responsible and contributing members of our society.*
- 3. Border security (not Trump's ornamental wall!) implemented hand-in-hand with humane immigration and refugee policies and quotas that incentivize legal entry to our country by those who seek a better life and offer their boundless energy to this nation - a nation built (and still being built) by immigrants, refugees, and their offspring – that is to say, nearly all of us.*

As we work toward these admittedly challenging goals, near-term measures needed to better humanize our treatment of current undocumented immigrants consist, first, of systematically reversing each and every one of the President's heartless and destructive new DHS policies and procedures. Comprehensive congressional investigation is called for to thoroughly document the disaster of our government's recent and current family separation activities, with the goal of guiding legislation and appropriations to reverse as much of the damage as possible, and to insure our nation can never take this same inhuman course again. Additionally, on both moral and public health grounds, we must extend Obamacare (and universal health insurance when it becomes available) to include immigrants both documented and undocumented.

The Department of Homeland Security has, over the past three years, proven itself to be vulnerable to being hijacked by despots and xenophobes. New legislation is required to ensure that can never happen again.

Healthcare

11. Are you satisfied with the healthcare system in the United States? If you are not, how should the system be changed?

America's healthcare system is broken, and there is much hard work to do to make it equitable. The first step in that direction is universal health insurance. At the same time, we need to make substantial new investments in recruiting, educating, and supporting healthcare workers whose services are in particularly inadequate supply or are inadequately compensated, from primary care physicians and nurses to paramedics, home healthcare workers, and long-term caregivers. We need to bring long-term care and mental health care fully under the umbrella of insured healthcare for all Americans. We need to free physicians from their current roles as gatekeepers and bookkeepers to make careers in medicine attractive again. We need to support and rebuild rural healthcare delivery and rural hospitals to reverse the 'healthcare desert' that rural America has become. And we need to reduce the cost of healthcare by eliminating middlemen who add little or no value, and by negotiating prescription drug prices with manufacturers.

Housing

12. What, if anything, should the federal government do to promote affordable housing and home ownership?

Affordable housing is fast becoming a critical American weakness. Our cities today are rapidly becoming unaffordable for those who work in and serve them, and too many of our rural areas are blighted. We need to invest in grants to states and municipalities to reverse this, as well as tax incentives to developers and landowners to powerfully encourage them to build affordable housing in the necessary volumes, not just in feel-good numbers. In my service in the state senate I have clearly demonstrated my commitment to affordable housing by sponsoring legislation like 2019 State Senate Bill 8 – "Authorize Teacher-Government Employee Housing."

Additionally, we need a new civilian 'GI Bill' to make home ownership more achievable for those who are gainfully employed but still out of reach of it. Our communities are strengthened by citizens who literally own a stake in them. Investing in home ownership is an investment in our society.

Wealth

13. Is the distribution of wealth among the people of the United States a proper concern of the federal government? If your answer is "yes," what should the Congress do to close the wealth gap that separates the richest and poorest Americans?

The wider that the gulf between the richest Americans and the rest of us becomes, the more unstable and inequitable our society becomes. Today's disparity between the richest and the rest of us is at a level of extremity that is historically unprecedented. Wealthy individuals who are also socially and ethically conscious, like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, have warned us time and again of this danger and have themselves called on the federal government to raise taxes on the extremely wealthy. The federal tax code has long proven an effective and equitable tool to address these dangers. Instead of granting ever greater tax breaks to the wealthiest and piling the cost onto this generation in the form of spending cuts, or onto future generations in the form of crippling deficits, we need to restore a taxation structure that ensures everyone pays their fair share of the cost of our civilization.

Guns

14. What, if anything, should be done to reduce the proliferation of firearms and reduce gun violence in the United States?

Gun violence, fueled by a toxic combination of too many highly lethal firearms, too little concern for domestic terrorism, and inadequate provision of mental health care and nurturing educational environments, poses an existential threat to all Americans. Sensible gun control laws are a first important step to solving the problem, and include: reducing the lethality of legal weapons by restrictions such as banning high-capacity magazines and automatic fire modifications; 'red flag' laws to temporarily restrict access to guns for those judged to be a danger to themselves or others (such as the bill I have sponsored as a state senator, 2019 Senate Bill 565 (Extreme Risk Protection Orders)); and extending background checks to all firearm transfers or sales.

At the same time, we also need to look beyond gun control itself to begin to heal the inequities that contribute to a culture of violence. We need to ensure that our law enforcement agencies take the threat of domestic terrorism seriously and also that they are provided with the training to de-escalate tense situations. We need to extend mental health care availability. And we need to revive our schools to make them nurturing environments of real learning.

Civil Rights and Race Equity

15. What should the state do to promote racial equity and diversity, such as increasing opportunities for under-represented and under-served people of color? Can you provide an example of your advocacy for race-equity and diversity?

The promotion of racial equity is a component of the foundation of every policy prescription I have offered here. Color-blind economic development to provide good-paying, stable employment is one aspect of sound policy to promote racial equity. So is universal healthcare insurance, improved healthcare delivery, adequately and equitably funded education, affordable housing, an equitable tax code, environmental remediation, restoration of the Voting Rights and Civil Rights acts, immigration reform, and the reduction of gun violence. Building a broadly humane society is the necessary road to a racially just society.

Policy Examples of Equity Advocacy - I served as Primary Sponsor on the following selected ratified bills – SB500 which required enrollment of all students in grades 3-8th scoring level 4s and 5s on EOC/EOG tests into advanced math courses. This followed a 10-year study in Wake County wherein 15000 minority students who scored advanced levels on statewide assessments but were not enrolled or teacher nominated for advanced math placement. I, primary and secondary sponsored the following bills promoting equity: SB660 Equity in funding for state Historically Black Colleges and Minority Serving Institutions; Equal Pay for Equal Work; No Money Bail and Bonds; NC Citizens Redistricting Commission with express goals of diversity and inclusion among members; SB184 promoting diversity and inclusion in NC boards and commissions appointments.

As immediate past chair of the NC Legislative Black Caucus, I led advocacy initiatives to promote increase contract opportunities for women and minority owned businesses, and increased funding for the Carolina Small Business Center.

16. Would you support legislation designed to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people from discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodation, and access to government benefits and services?

I fully support legislation to protect LGBT people from all forms of discrimination and harassment, and to assure them full access to public services and government benefits. In my legislative career in North Carolina I have sponsored or co-sponsored bills to add crimes targeting LGBT individuals to the category of hate crimes (2019 Senate Bill 209 – "Hate Crimes Prevention Act"), to fully repeal North Carolina's notorious 'bathroom bill' (2019 Senate Bill 464 – "Full Repeal of HB2"), and to protect LGBT individuals from housing, employment, public accommodation, credit, insurance, and education discrimination (2019 Senate Bill 455 – "Equality For All"). I have filed versions of the "Equality For All" legislation in every

session in which I have served. My first day on the job as a NC Senator, I took on Senator Phil Berger with his SB2 Magistrate bill as it sought to codify discrimination by allowing Magistrates to abuse religious freedom exemptions to opt out of performing same sex civilian unions. I am not only committed to supporting legislation to protect LGBTQ+ citizens from discrimination, I am committed to leading on the issues.

The Environment

17. How does climate change inform your policy view with regard to environmental protection, economic development, energy production, and transportation?

As an engineer I believe in science, and the science is settled: man-made climate change is a clear and present danger to our civilization. If there's any good news in that, it is this: a meaningful response to this threat, of the required magnitude, will create enormous opportunities in green jobs promoting economic development through the required switch to carbon-free sustainable energy and efficient transportation systems. America can and should lead the world in this revitalization of both our planet and our economy. At one time we did, but we have lost that lead thanks to today's monetization of science denial. We can lead again, and we must.

We must restore important initiatives that have been neglected or gutted during the Trump administration, including efficient mass and long-distance transit development, energy efficiency standards, the switch to non-polluting renewable solar and wind energy generation, and full participation in global initiatives such as the Paris Climate Accords. Then we must do even more by generously funding climate remediation research to make America the innovation leader in this field, and embrace the tremendous potential for economic development by creating millions of good-paying 'green' jobs to accomplish all these goals.

Foreign Policy

18. What issue affecting our relationship with other nations and peoples of the world concerns you most and what should the United States do about it?

Regarding US international relations, I am most concerned by the loss of our honor, and the loss of the world's confidence in America since President Trump took office. America has (at least more often than not) rightly been viewed as a reliable partner and protector of democracy, peace and stability since the close of World War I. Our nation's unparalleled wealth and love of freedom naturally suits us to the role of a Democratic Republic that promotes good will and freedom across the globe. Once we have restored our decency at home through the electoral process, we will face an enormous task in rebuilding the world's trust in our support.

I am concerned about the US being led into another war because of President Trump's impetuosity in his unilateral and uncollaborative action of ordering Iranian attacks in the assassination of General Quasem Soleimani. His actions risk the destabilization of our allies, our interests, our economy, and our lives. Our allies, without prior notice, are now forced to scramble to de-escalate a potential geopolitical crisis that could lead to war. Our national and international interests in the region and around the world are now thrown into a state of confusion, with Russia the potential beneficiary.

Between Ukraine-gate, Russian ties, trade tariffs, and threat of another war, our country has an extraordinary challenge in restoring our international relationships and diplomacy. Our recent retirement from the world stage, further complicated by the current administration's love affair with tyrants and despots, has left a vacuum in the world's power structure into which other, far less noble nations are rushing to fill. This gravely threatens international peace. Resuming our rightful position will require tremendous diplomatic, economic, and political initiatives, and will not happen overnight. But it is absolutely essential.

Your Politics

19. For whom did you vote in the 2016 United States Senate and presidential elections?

US Senate – Deborah Ross US President – Hillary Clinton

My politics – I have always promoted a politics of inclusion and have been a Party loyalist and team player. In 2016, I did not have a Primary nor General Election opponent. Despite this, I covered 45 poll workers in 3 of the 8 counties I serve in SD3 – trained them, provided snacks and lunch and wrote out 45 individual checks for \$100 from my NC Senate campaign account to get Democrats elected up and down the ticket. I coordinated poll workers and GOTV in the remaining 5 counties. Governor Roy Cooper won 6 of my 8 counties, losing Martin County by only 30 votes. As a former county party chair, vice-chair, precinct chair and vice-chair and member of the SEC, I have worked very hard to help get strong public servants elected up and down the ticket, from local to state to federal elected office.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please do not forget to provide us with your resume or biographical statement.