

Candidates

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Opening statements

In their opening statements, the candidates shared why they entered politics and gave their case for why they believe they'd make good governors.

Holscher stressed her agricultural roots and her strong electoral performances in a district that was previously held by a Republican.

"Throughout my life, I have focused on prioritizing things that impact rural Kansans' lives, things like public schools, lowering the cost of living, health care, making sure seniors can retire with dignity. I'm running for governor to achieve results for our state, just as I've done in the Legislature," Holscher said.

Corson shared his personal story about growing up in Kansas schools, and how he learned to appreciate the entire state when he traveled around it while playing baseball at Garden City Community College.

"It showed me the strength of our communities across the state. It showed me the grit of our workers and it showed me the compassion of our teachers. In short, it showed me all of the same values that I'm trying to teach my two boys," Corson said.

Both candidates focused on cost-of-living issues and providing funding for local schools in their opening statements.

What have you passed?

The moderator asked the candidates about bills they're particularly proud of introducing and a time they've worked across the aisle.

Holscher said she's one of the most successful Democrats in the Statehouse,

Kansas Sen. Ethan Corson, D-Fairway, and Cindy Holscher, D-Overland Park found plenty of common ground, and both committed to supporting whichever Democrat ultimately won the primary. They are entering the race with different priorities and strategies in their campaigns, however. Corson and Holscher are considered the front-runners in the primary race. Political newcomer Marty Tuley is also seeking the Democratic nomination for governor.

and that she's especially proud of a 2023 bill that removed the statute of limitations on child sexual abuse cases.

"I worked on this bill for four years, working with survivors and educating legislators until finally we passed the bill unanimously in both the House and Senate," Holscher said.

On working across the aisle, Holscher said in her first term, she co-founded the Bipartisan Women's Caucus. She said the group collaborated on ideas to reverse cuts to school funding and stabilize the state budget.

Corson said he's proud to introduce a bill every year to raise the minimum wage in the state, which currently matches the federal minimum wage of \$7.25. His latest version proposed raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, and increasing it annually based on the cost of living.

"No one who's working full-time in Kansas should be living in poverty," Corson said.

Corson said he's earned the respect of his Republican colleagues, and that he's often called on to negotiate with the other side. He highlighted the latest legislative session where he worked across the aisle on a bill that eliminated state sales taxes for disabled veterans.

Strengthening Kansas schools

The candidates were asked how they would strengthen Kansas schools and deal with issues like school funding, teacher retention and "culture war attacks."

Corson said Kansas public schools provided the foundation for his life, and the next governor will have to pass a new school finance formula. He said as he's traveled the state, he's spoken with superintendents to learn what different districts need.

"I had lunch with the superintendents

of Holcomb and Garden City to understand what it looks like to be in a school district with so many English-language learners. In Wichita (Unified School District) 259, 89% of students are on free and reduced price lunches," Corson said. "There are different challenges across the state, and we need a school funding formula that recognizes that."

Holscher said public schools are the backbone of Kansas's communities but that they're under attack from underfunding, teacher shortages and political culture wars. She said as governor she'd oppose any attempt to institute school funding vouchers for private schools.

"Voucher schemes and so-called school choice do not help Kansas kids. They take taxpayer dollars away from already-strained public schools and hand them to families who are already sending their kids to private schools," Holscher said.

Cost of living

Holscher said she'd be "laser focused" on cost-of living issues if she becomes the next governor. She highlighted her work on dropping the sales tax on groceries, and fought back against proposals to end child care tax credits and child support reforms.

As governor, she said she'd seek to increase the stock of affordable housing options by cutting red tape driving up prices, expand Medicaid to get more Kansans health coverage and invest in child care to lower costs. She'd also seek targeted tax cuts for working families, seniors and veterans.

"Too many Kansans are doing everything right and still falling behind in a system that is being rigged against us. I'm running for governor to change that. I'll work to lower cost, strengthen families and build a Kansas where every child can dream big and actually achieve it," Holscher said.

Corson said he's worked on cost of living issues in the Senate Committee on Taxation, including eliminating sales taxes on groceries, eliminating tax cuts on social security disbursements and a limited property tax freeze for fixed-income seniors. He said he'd work on a child tax credit, expand property tax relief for seniors and make renters eligible for certain tax refunds.

"As governor, my top priority will be to make Kansas the most-affordable state to have a middle class life," Corson said.

Stance on unions

The candidates were asked whether they were pro-labor, if they'd repeal Kansas's right-to-work law and how they would strengthen workers' rights.

Corson said he's the only candidate who has secured the endorsement of a labor union in the race. He said he's broken with Democrats on autonomous vehicles in part due to how it would impact union labor.

He also pointed to economic development deals he supported that attracted union labor in the Panasonic plant in De Soto, and will do the same for data centers.

He said his priority this upcoming legislative session is to repeal laws limiting what local governments can pay contractors.

"One thing that I hope we're able to do this year, but if not I will sign into law as governor, is to repeal the ban on allowing localities to implement prevailing wage and other pro-worker standards. Cities and counties should be able to life standards, not be locked into a race to the bottom," Corson said.

Holscher said she's for anything that's good for labor, and said she learned that personally growing up in a union household. She said she's worked with Kansas teachers unions to implement fair pay and ensure safe classrooms.

She said she would repeal Kansas's right-to-work law, and support protections for collective bargaining, prevailing wages and workers organizing.

"My commitment is simple, I will be a governor who stands with working people every single day, not just when the cameras are rolling, not just during campaign season," Holscher said.

Connecting with western Kansas

Democrats have fared poorly in the rural western region of the state, having only won in the more urban Kansas counties in 2024. The moderator asked

how the candidates would connect with rural Kansans in the General Election in 2026 given the past performance of Democrats.

Holscher said Kansas farmers are hurting due to tariffs implemented by President Donald Trump, the loss of markets due to trade wars and the increasing cost of inputs like equipment and fertilizer. She said she'd work to preserve and expand Medicaid, deliver an agriculture strategy that prioritizes small and mid-sized family farms and make investments in rural Kansas's schools infrastructure and health care.

Corson said his campaign has already started laying the groundwork in western Kansas, holding town halls and forums in places where Democrats rarely go.

"I think one of the big mistakes that our party has made is that we wait until three weeks before the election and then we go out to western Kansas ask people for their votes," Corson said. "We had 42 meetings, town halls and events in nine different cities."

Jobs and investment

Kelly has called herself the "economic development governor," and has touted her success in bringing business investment into the state. The candidates were asked how they would attract jobs and investment in urban and rural areas.

Corson worked at the U.S. Department of Commerce attracting foreign investments to the United States and negotiating trade deals with other countries.

"As governor, I'm going to personally lead as many trade missions as it takes to open up markets around the world, to our farmers, to our producers, to our agricultural sector," Corson said.

He said the biggest barrier to companies investing further in Kansas is a lack of housing, which he'd want to address with local communities.

Holscher leaned on her private sector experience, where she sought investment, launched products and managed budgets. She believes several industries could lead and grow in Kansas, particularly renewable energy.

"We need to make sure Kansas is a place where businesses want to come and stay. That means a strong higher education system that trains workers for the jobs are economy needs, especially in health care," Holscher said. "It means making Kansas predictable, fair and supportive for businesses of all sizes."

Budget

The moderator asked the candidates if Kansas has a spending problem, which is often said by Republicans seeking to reduce spending, and how they would respond to that statement.

Holscher called the statement a mischaracterization and said infrastructure, schools and public safety suffered under spending cuts implemented by Gov. Sam Brownback.

"Kansas can't afford the Brownback experiment 2.0, here is the reason why we must elect Democrats, because we believe in making smart, responsible investments that strengthen communities and give Kansans a fair shot," Holscher said.

Corson said there's probably some truth in the statement that Kansas has a spending problem but pointed the finger at Republicans for creating the issue.

"Every single year, Gov. Kelly ropposes balanced, fiscally responsible budgets that fully fund our schools while living within our means. But at the same time, by the time the budget makes it through the Republican controlled budget committees, it ends up getting loaded up with all these special projects," Corson said. "I'm simply not going to allow that to continue."

Why can you reach candidates statewide?


Both candidates are state senators who haven't won a statewide race. They were asked why they believed they could win, and how they'd achieve it.

Corson said he has a genuine connection to the western part of the state from his college days, and he believes he will perform better there than other Democrats. He said he's for campaign finance reform, but that he can raise enough money to be competitive.


"We believe that total spending in this race will be around \$100 million. Our campaign has already raised over \$625,000. It's a record for a Democratic gubernatorial candidate in the off year," Corson said.

Holscher pointed to the 135 endorsements she's accumulated across the state and her history of winning in Republican-leaning districts.

"I outperformed the Democratic ticket in both 2020 and 2024," Holscher said. "We're probably going to be facing someone like Ty Masterson or Jeff Colyer in the general. That's the type of person I've defeated. I know how to take care of that. That's a talent we're going to need to win the governor's office next year."



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