

## Do Robots Or Trade Threaten American Workers More?

*Danielle Kurtzlurben, NPR, Politics, October 24, 2019*

Are robots stealing workers' jobs? At last week's Democratic presidential debate, CNN moderator Erin Burnett dove into the thorny issue.

"According to a recent study, about a quarter of American jobs could be lost to automation in just the next 10 years," she said, asking candidates how they would respond to this problem.

The question ultimately pitted two divergent worldviews against each other. One came from entrepreneur Andrew Yang, who has centered his campaign on what he perceives as a massive employment threat from automation. His prescription is a universal basic income program.

The other point of view came from Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who took issue with Burnett's premise.

"So the data show that we have had a lot of problems with losing jobs, but the principal reason has been bad trade policy," she said. "The principal reason has been a bunch of corporations, giant multinational corporations, who've been calling the shots on trade, giant multinational corporations that have no loyalty to America."

The question of whether trade or automation affects employment more not only divides economists, but appears set to drive major questions in the Democratic primary.

### Fact-checking Burnett's question

There are two fact checks here. One is of Burnett's question and one is of Warren's contention that trade has driven job losses.

In her question about what candidates would do to combat automation-related job losses, Burnett [seemed to be referring](#) to a January 2019 report from Brookings Institution. The [authors of the paper](#) noted this in their own post-debate blog post.

One author says Burnett was misstating their conclusions.

"The question distorted what we and other and many analysts say about how this will play out," said Mark Muro, senior fellow and policy director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. The report found that about one-quarter of jobs have a "high susceptibility" to automation — meaning that 70% or more of the tasks in those jobs could potentially be automated using existing technology. But [that doesn't necessarily mean](#) those jobs will disappear.

"If you play that out, that's very different from saying 25% of jobs are going to be liquidated," Muro said.

Even if Burnett was overstating the report's findings, it's nevertheless true that automation takes a lot of blame for U.S. job losses, particularly in manufacturing.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/10/24/772798717/fact-check-do-robots-or-trade-threaten-american-workers-more>

