Opinion

News



Sen. Amy Klobuchar talks with people at Shift Cyclery and Coffee Bar in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Feb. 16. (Wikimedia Commons/Lorie Shaull)



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Sen. Amy Klobuchar's entrance into the 2020 political sweepstakes Feb. 10 was accompanied by two blizzards. The first was actual: By the end of her announcement speech in Minneapolis, she was covered in snow. The second blizzard was metaphorical: She was showered with praise. Unfortunately for her, much of the praise came from Republicans. "Republicans gush over Klobuchar" might not be a helpful headline for winning the Democratic primary in our highly polarized environment.

In The Washington Post, Henry Olsen called Klobuchar "Trump"s worst nightmare." Her early media appearances certainly demonstrated a compelling contrast with the incumbent. He is rash, and she is almost preternaturally calm and composed. Trump’s speech is so disjointed, he makes life very easy for the writers at Saturday Night Live: They really do not have to change any words, just teach them to Alec Baldwin. Klobuchar speaks in fluent, precise paragraphs on almost any topic. The reptilian president denies facts he finds inconvenient and makes up facts he thinks will be helpful, but the senator from Minnesota grounds her statements in logical, fact-based arguments.

Still, I do not know how well Klobuchar will fare. In 2016, voters had a choice of a candidate who had exemplary experience, a nose for the moderate middle and whose rationale for running was that she was not the other guy. Voters chose the bomb thrower. Maybe four years of Donald Trump has inclined enough Democrats to merely want a change of cast in the White House, but I think they want more fundamental change. I doubt anyone who voted for Sen. Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primaries will line up for Klobuchar, and Sanders would have won if he had been facing a moderate candidate not named Clinton.

In this sense, Klobuchar contrasts most sharply with Sen. Elizabeth Warren who, in her announcement speech said, "We can't afford to just tinker around the edges — a tax credit here, a regulation there. Our fight is for big, structural change." Klobuchar peddles the promise of bipartisan cooperation, which I do not think will sell, leading to a return to good politics, not bad, if only we can get Trump out of Washington. Klobuchar appeared on the Rachel Maddow show. It is a measure of Maddow's

dominance at MSNBC that her show has become a must-stop for any major contender. Klobuchar had been accused of being a tyrant to her staff, and her answer when asked was brilliant in two ways. First, she did not apologize; she said she had high expectations of herself and of those who work for her. Second, she did not play the gender card. She didn't have to. It is almost inconceivable that a male candidate would be the target of such an accusation. You can bet Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand would have complained accordingly. Klobuchar's decision to let the bias speak for itself was smart. Playing the identity card always looks weak because it is often used as a dodge.

I suspect the senator kicked Maddow in the shin on her way out of the studio. At the conclusion of her interview with Sen. Kamala Harris, Maddow said she could see the Californian in the White House. As she finished her interview with Klobuchar, Maddow said she hoped she would stay in politics even if she loses. Ouch.

Klobuchar also appeared in a CNN town hall Monday night with Don Lemmon. She did an excellent job, and I began to see the appeal. When asked about overcoming adversity, she spoke about her father's battle with alcoholism and how he finally got treatment, is now sober, and they have a very close relationship. But she went further and connected his story of redemption to her experience as a prosecutor and her work on criminal justice reform. Her strongest moments came when she told the questioners something they did not want to hear. When asked whether or not she supports free college, she said she supported allowing graduates to refinance their debt, and she spoke about the need to help those who do not go to four-year colleges. When pressed again, she said, "No, I do not support free college." Such candor is welcome. Similarly, when discussing Medicare for all, she said she did not think it was possible at this point and suggested incremental reforms instead. "You don't always get what you want" in the legislative process. Realism is welcome, too. But she has to be careful. Politics is about aspirations as well as realities. Ideas deemed outlandishly liberal four years ago are pretty mainstream today.

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There were a couple of time when she lapsed into Washingtonspeak, talking about how she was "an original co-sponsor" of a certain bill and getting bogged down by celebrating legislation that did not always become a law. Similarly, on foreign policy, she delivered boilerplate language about "standing with our allies" and offered no

aspirational, values-rich language about America’s role in the world. I was reminded that Barack Obama was the first senator to ascend to the White House since John Kennedy precisely because such inside-the-Beltway talk does not resonate. Klobuchar needs to banish that kind of language from her talks.

Klobuchar, so far, has the Midwestern moderate lane all to herself. Depending on how the campaign progresses, that might be enough to gain a plurality in some early contests and, if she grows as a candidate in the meantime, she could pull it off. But I think the energy in the party, and the media’s desire for fireworks, work against her in the primaries, and there is no reason to think she would match up well against Trump. She is running not just as a moderate, but as the grown up. So did Jeb Bush and John Kasich and Hillary Clinton.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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