Opinion



by Michael Sean Winters

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Let's start with some uncomplicatedly good news: According to new state-by-state polls done by Morning Consult, President Donald Trump's approval rating is deeply underwater in key swing states like New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Michigan, and less so but still underwater in Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Arizona. Interesting that he is dead even in Florida, which has been the swingiest of the swing states for 30 years. It is early, and the choice is not yet binary, but Trump's low numbers are pretty shocking given the state of the economy. The polls hold out a possibility that 2020 will mirror 1980: The race may be close until the end, but the reasons voters are ambivalent are the same and they might break all one way, creating a landslide one way or the other. That is another reason why it is imperative that the Dems nominate someone with a positive agenda, not simply an anti-Trump candidate: This could be a wave.

In The New York Times, Farhad Manjoo writes the first draft of the Democratic primary history: By introducing and discussing serious policy proposals, Sen. Elizabeth Warren has not only carved out a lane for herself — the only candidate to do so thus far (Mayor Pete just pushed Beto out of the "fresh face" lane) — but she has elevated the entire political contest from a Trump-bashing contest of epithets to

a contest of ideas.

At USA Today, a report on Democratic hopefuls visiting many states that do not usually get much attention. It is vital that the Democrats do not try most of the country as "flyover country." Such a dismissive characterization. But, the real challenge is to reach beyond the hotbeds of liberalism that exist in any state. And, when all is said and done, a candidate still needs to get on the podium in Iowa and win one of the next three states — New Hampshire, Nevada or South Carolina — to really have a chance on Super Tuesday.

Also in the Times, a report on how the auto companies are actually fighting the Trump administration's deregulation of their own industry. That doesn't happen every day but it shows this administration's indifference to actual policy outcomes when they think they can score an ideological point.

In The Washington Post, a look at how intolerant Democrats are becoming towards pro-lifers within their ranks. Former Congressman Bart Stupak hits the nail on the head: "It's not the same party anymore. You're driving people away." Former Veep Joe Biden's flip on the Hyde Amendment is only the latest casualty of any sense of moderation or balance. Democrats need to realize how important this issue is to some of us and at least stop telling us we are not welcome.

Relatedly, I have long been leery of advocates citing polling numbers on abortion: Depending on how the questions are framed, and the order in which they are asked, it is very easy to get the outcome your clients want. But, a new NPR/PBSNewshour/Marist poll seems to have captured some of the acute ambivalence that one normally gets only by looking at an aggregate of polls. And the conclusion is, as I have stated many times, the debate is dominated by the extremes but the majority of Americans actually support abortion rights early in a pregnancy, but also favor restrictions in the later stages. The majority will continue to be frustrated because, as we saw with Joe Biden, the party elites pressure all politicians to become as extreme as they are. Hint to Democratic nominees: Find a way to telegraph a bit of moderation and you will do a lot better in middle America.

As the Southern Baptist Convention gets under way in Birmingham, Alabama, guess what issue is on the top of their agenda? Clergy sex abuse. As in the case with the Catholic Church, the leadership of the Southern Baptists are being forced to confront the issue because of reporting by the Houston Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News. Unlike us Catholics, I would be surprised to see the lawyers getting

too heavily involved: The ecclesial structures of the Baptists are not such a fat, juicy financial target.

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Aaron Blake, at The Washington Post, must have had too much time on his hands, because he penned an article for "The Fix" charting a path to the Democratic presidential nomination for each of the 24 people running. I hereby decree that it is morally irresponsible to tell a pollster you support Andrew Yang or Marianne Williamson or any of the others who are running because, well, because this is a free country. The quicker these vanity candidates do not qualify for a debate, the quicker the party can get serious about nominating the right woman, I mean the right person, to run against Trump.

At the Sacred Heart University blog on the church's ecclesiological crisis, "Go, Rebuild My House," Jesuit Fr. Gerry O'Hanlon offers a fine reflection on the limits of polemic in the current moment, and not only on the issue of sex abuse. He gives a shout out to NCR's Phyllis Zagano as well.

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

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