Opinion



U.S. Sen. Cory Booker takes a selfie with a supporter at the 2019 Iowa Democrats Hall of Fame Celebration in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, June 9. (Flickr/Lorie Shaull)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

June 26, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Democratic Party's presidential nominating contest takes a big turn tonight. For the first six months of the year, the candidates have been out on the hustings, mostly in early-voting states like Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina. They have been raising money and assembling staff. They have gotten some media hits here and there.

Tonight and tomorrow night, 20 of the candidates will take to the debate stage, 10 on each night, the distribution chosen by lot. To qualify for one of the podiums, candidates needed to be polling at one percent in at least three polls or receive a contribution from 65,000 discrete donors, with at least 20 donors in 20 states to show demographic reach.

The criteria will need tweaking, and soon: Gov. Steve Bullock of Montana, a two-term governor in a red state, did not qualify, but self-help writer Marianne Williamson did. Entrepreneur Andrew Yang will also be on the stage. Williamson's book made the bestseller list, a testament to the fact that millions of Americans apparently need help and think they can find it in the self-help section. Yikes. Yang is, well, I do not know who he is, but every time I see him I think maybe I should have tossed my hat into the ring. Both of these vanity candidates will be on the stage Thursday night alongside former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders, the 2016 runner-up, so I suspect they will be marginalized.

Tonight, the two people who should not be there are U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii and former U.S. Rep. John Delaney of Maryland. Delaney is a rich guy who grabbed a congressional district that had been gerrymandered so a Democrat could win it. Nonetheless, he almost lost reelection in 2014, and his congressional career was an undistinguished affair. Gabbard seems to have an odd affection for Syrian dictator and mass murderer of children Bashar al-Assad. I suppose as a sitting member of Congress, there is no rule that could bar her from entering the contest. I hope her vanity race costs her a serious primary challenge for her congressional seat so we never have to hear from her again.



U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren at the 2019 Iowa Democrats Hall of Fame Celebration in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, June 9 (Flickr/Lorie Shaull)



U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris at the 2019 Iowa Democrats Hall of Fame Celebration in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, June 9 (Flickr/Lorie Shaull)

What worries me about these vanity candidates is that they have nothing to lose. They will have to generate a viral moment or their candidacies will dry up. And, what better way to create such a moment than to go after one of the front-runners? It won't work. Democrats do not want their prospective nominees taking swings at each other at this stage in the race. But these four candidates have nothing to lose, so what does it matter? Hopefully, the leading candidates will have been briefed not to swing at balls in the dirt.

It is not only the vanity candidates who will be tempted to take a shot at one of the front-runners. On the first night, both Sen. Cory Booker and Sen. Amy Klobuchar will need to find a way to generate some enthusiasm coming out of the debate. Neither

of their campaigns has been able to muster any momentum. On the second night, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and Sen. Kamala Harris face a similar dynamic. Gillibrand is running as the woman's candidate, which might be a plausible approach if there were not so many other women running. Harris is compelling in many ways, but she has so far failed to explain why she should be president, beyond the fact that it would be the next natural career move.



U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar at the 2019 Iowa Democrats Hall of Fame Celebration in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, June 9 (Flickr/Lorie Shaull)

Other candidates face unique challenges. U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell has been an impressive young member of Congress, but the obvious lane for him — 20's, fresh face — has been taken by Mayor Pete Buttigieg. Similarly, former U.S. Rep. Beto

O'Rourke has hoped to own that lane. He needs to reclaim it this week or his campaign will continue to stall. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee has been running on the single issue of climate change, but he will need to display some level of competence on other issues when asked about them, and do so without losing his primary focus. If he tries to reduce every issue to climate change, he risks looking foolish.

What of the four front-runners? Sen. Elizabeth Warren is the only top-tier candidate in tonight's debate. She will, consequently, have a target on her back. My guess is she can handle it. She is the only candidate who has created a lane this year and, in becoming the candidate with the serious policy proposals, she has elevated the entire contest. The only person who can cause her to stumble tonight is named Elizabeth Warren. If she maintains the conversational tone she has perfected at town halls and displays her prodigious knowledge of issues and her ability to relate them to her values, she will have a good night.

Tomorrow night, Biden, Sanders and Buttigieg will all be on the stage. Buttigieg has generated a lot of enthusiasm, but his poll numbers have flattened out. His town hall in South Bend, Indiana, to address racial issues was fraught in ways that did not reflect well on his candidacy. A strong performance tomorrow night could generate some renewed momentum, and the imperturbable mayor is not likely to be overwhelmed by his more senior fellow debaters.

Biden is a good guy whom everybody likes, but he also is someone who speaks without thinking some issues through; he has a knack for putting his foot in his mouth. It has been 11 years since he was on a debate stage with multiple candidates and seven since he went one-on-one with Paul Ryan. He really needs to demonstrate that he is still at the top of his game. If the viral takeaway from tomorrow night is a Biden gaffe, his campaign will risk going into free fall. Biden's support is wide but not too deep.



South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg outside the 2019 Iowa Democrats Hall of Fame Celebration in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, June 9 (Flickr/Lorie Shaull)

Sanders faces a similar problem. No one possesses the charisma of anti-charisma like Sanders, and that was a great foil to Hillary Clinton, a candidate who did not, ahem, project sincerity. But, on a stage with many others, Sanders' flailing hands and disconnected arguments may not play as well. He needs a strong performance to stem the slow dissipation of support, much of it moving to Warren. Otherwise, the perception will take hold that 2016 was his shot, not 2020, and his candidacy will continue to deflate.

Of course, the Democratic Party as a whole will be tested the next two evenings. President Donald Trump's approval rating hovers around 42 percent, despite a booming economy. The 2020 election is the Democrats' to lose, and they just might manage to do so. If they introduce themselves to the voters this week as a party obsessed with late-term abortion, transgender bathrooms and reparations for slavery, they will display all that moderate-centrist voters dislike about them. If they

focus on the fact that the president campaigned in 2016 as the champion of the working class but then appointed a bunch of Goldman Sachs veterans to his administration and passed a tax cut that benefited the uber-rich, that is to say, he betrayed his promises — and that the Democrats offer a different vision for the future, one in which the government helps the little guy not the big corporate interests — the Democrats will win.

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

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.

Advertisement