Opinion

News



Candidates are seen during the first official Democratic 2020 presidential primary debate in Miami June 26. Pictured are New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio; Rep. Tim Ryan of Ohio; Julian Castro, former mayor of San Antonio; Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey; Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts; former Rep. Beto O'Rourke of Texas; Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota; Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii; Washington Gov. Jay Inslee; and former Rep. John Delaney of Maryland. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Segar)



by Michael Sean Winters

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I am not sure why debates have become one of the principal events by which we evaluate a candidate and choose which one to support. There is nothing about the office of the presidency for which debating skills would seem important. But, ever since 1960, with few exceptions, debates have been central to political campaigns. But what, really, do we learn? What did we learn the last two nights?

Pundits tell us that a candidate needs to appear authentic, which is true, but at this level of the political game, candidates tend to be prepped so much that even their "candid" moments can appear rehearsed. Because they are.

A primary debate can be distressing to watch because there is an incentive to run to the extremes: Primaries are low turnout events, and so candidates need to appeal to voters who are motivated, and such voters tend to be more ideologically extreme than centrist voters. At the same time, voters of all ideological stripes tell pollsters that they do not like to see Democrats attacking fellow Democrats.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren was the only candidate Wednesday night who is already polling in double digits and her performance solidified that standing. She owned the stage for the first half hour, not only articulating her brand of policy-heavy populism, but all the other candidates were asked to respond to her policy proposals. She disappeared a bit during the middle of the debate, never interrupting, and never needing to. If anyone had attacked her frontally, she would have needed to respond but no one did.

She also had a strong closing statement. I do not like these canned closing statements, but they are the last perception a voter leaves with, so they count, the way coffee at a restaurant always needs to be fresh: The last taste lingers. When a focus group of Iowa Democrats was asked which candidates won the debate, more people cited her than any other by a wide margin. On CNN, Van Jones said that listening to Warren he felt something he had not felt in a long time: "I felt like maybe

help is on the way."

She needs to fine-tune her approach to health care reform, and become more pragmatic, but nonetheless, no one is better on the economic fairness issues that matter most to most people.

While there were no real viral moments from Wednesday night's debate, the breakout candidate was former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julian Castro. "Energy, sincerity, concrete plans," a friend emailed me as the debate closed. The first words out of Castro's mouth were "My mom ..." Nothing wrong with that.

Castro took the risk of going on offense: His target was former Congressman Beto O'Rourke and the subject was immigration. The exchange made Castro look informed and made O'Rourke look like a lightweight. O'Rourke also did not help himself when he began the debate by answering in Spanish, but what he said had nothing to do with the question he had been asked, so it looked way too pre-programmed. If anyone lost the night, it was O'Rourke. We will see what kind of bounce Castro gets and if he can sustain it.

There was a consensus that the other candidate who helped himself a lot was Sen. Cory Booker. At first, I thought he was pandering too much, but then I remembered this was politics. Booker did a good job of reinforcing the image he had as mayor of Newark, New Jersey, as a guy who walked the walk, a man who chose to live in a poor neighborhood so he could continue to experience the challenges and difficulties facing the urban poor.

He mixed personal anecdotes with policy concerns easily, even if he is far less policy-specific than Warren is. He needs to learn how to appear passionate without having the veins in his temples pop, and he needs a more coherent campaign theme, as do all the candidates except Warren, who relentlessly returns to her central populist theme.

Mayor Bill de Blasio wins the prize for best interrupter — people who like that sort of thing praised him, but many of us found it obnoxious — and the moderators failed to shut him down when he did so.

They did shut down former Congressman John Delaney every time he interrupted, which only made him look weak. The rest of the time his answers were furtive and when he explained his support for a carbon tax, he showed why the policy does not work: If the climate debate is driven by science, how is it that the best response is an '80s economic model that no one thinks will work?

Sen. Amy Klobuchar distinguished herself as more centrist than most of the field, but she does not communicate passion. At one point, when asked why black and Latino voters should support her, she made a legislative reference that fell completely flat. She would have benefited from a debate with only two or three others: On a crowded stage, she kept getting lost.

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard needed a breakout moment and did not get it. Gov. Jay Inslee was asked about his signature issue of climate change and, yet, he seemed unprepared. Among the accomplishments he noted was passing a "vision statement." Huh? Is there anything in the world more useless than a vision or mission statement?

Rep. Tim Ryan displayed as much passion as anyone on the stage, and his discussion of mental health needs in the context of gun violence was spot-on. But he couldn't relax and so his passion seemed aggressive, and his closing theme — "You will not be forgotten" — is way too close to one of President Donald Trump's talking points.

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Thursday night was a more chaotic affair as candidates repeatedly interrupted each other, talking over each other, wasting time. This provoked one of Sen. Kamala Harris' best moments when she chided her fellow candidates, saying, "America doesn't want to witness a food fight, they want to know how we'll put food on the table." It was one of many good moments for the senator from California who was the clear winner. On issue after issue, she brought in a personal story to make a moral point. She criticized President Obama's immigration policy — he was known as the "deporter-in-chief" in the immigrant community — and explained that as attorney general in California, she instructed law enforcement officials not to cooperate with federal immigration. She was light on policy, very light, and it will be interesting to see her on the same stage as Sen. Warren. I am still not sure what

Harris wants to do as president.

Harris also was the only candidate to really go after Vice President Joe Biden, saying she was hurt by his comments about working with segregationists and his position on busing, doing so in very personal terms. Harris' attack prompted Biden's best moment. He said she was mischaracterizing what he said and noted that when he graduated law school, he became a public defender, not a prosecutor. It was not a great response, except for the black community: Commentators tend to underestimate the suspicions that stalk Harris in the black community because she was a prosecutor.

Most of the night, Biden was Biden. He was fluent in policy, but he kept appealing to his record at a time when, repeatedly, the American people have registered their desire for change. Not sure if people think he is the right counterpoint to Trump, and I suspect that question will continue to stalk his campaign. His weakest moment came when he defended his vote in favor of the Iraq War and got a bit confused in his answer when describing the authorization of force. Nonetheless, he entered the frontrunner and he had no major misstep. That counts as a win.

The third candidate who had a strong showing was Mayor Pete Buttigieg. He was better than anyone at intermingling policy and personal stories in his answers. He is imperturbable and you have the feeling that you could bring up the most obscure topic and he would have something thoughtful to say about it. His answer when asked about the diversity of the South Bend police force was his strongest moment: "I couldn't get it done." Can you imagine Trump taking responsibility for anything? And, as he has done in the past, he called Republicans hypocritical for claiming the mantle of religion while endorsing policies such as Trump's immigration horrors, that contradict the ethical norms of all religions. The one thing the mayor does not project is the sense that he is a fighter and, at the end of the day, that is the quality needed to take on Trump and the voters will know it. In a perfect world, Mayor Pete is the perfect counterpoint to Trump. In the real world, I think Democrats want someone less cerebral, and more scrappy.

Sen. Bernie Sanders was Bernie. He has the opposite problem from Harris: He grasps that fundamental policy changes are needed in our economy and in our democracy, but he doesn't grasp the need to personalize issues. His passion is the passion of the activist. All cultures need activists, but they are pains in the neck. In 2016, he benefited from being the only alternative to Hillary Clinton, but I suspect that

historically his role is akin to that of John the Baptist: He was the voice crying in the wilderness about the fundamental unfairness embedded in much of our social relations. He paved the way. But, I think his moment is passing.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, like Mayor de Blasio the night before, proved that the caricature of New Yorkers as rude is accurate: She interrupted repeatedly but, like another New York politician, Gillibrand seems like she couldn't be sincere if her life depended on it. Equally obnoxious was Congressman Eric Swalwell, who seems to think anyone over 40 should just retire and go away. The two Colorado politicians — former Gov. John Hickenlooper and Sen. Michael Bennet — were awful. A friend texted about Hicklenlooper: "He would be a great speaker at the Rotary Club." Ouch. Businessman Andrew Yang and New Age guru Marianne Williamson were an embarrassment and should not be on a debate stage again. And, someone needs to get Yang a tie.

One of the biggest differences between the two nights was that on the first night, Trump was barely mentioned and on the second night, almost every response mentioned Trump. The greatest myth among both voters and commentators is the belief that the most important thing is to find a candidate who can beat Trump. I have said it before and will say it again: Mitt Romney ran as the anti-Obama and John Kerry ran as the anti-Bush, and both lost. To win, you need to chart a positive vision for the country, and there was more of that on the first night than on the second. It is the biggest difference between Harris and Warren, the two women who, by most accounts, won their respective evenings.

Before the next round of debates, the DNC needs to make two changes. They need to eliminate the vanity candidates and they need to empower the moderators with a switch to turn off the mics of candidates who interrupt or go over their time.

Final takeaway: Warren and Harris won their nights, and Castro and Booker had breakout performances. Biden, Buttgieg and Sanders gave their supporters plenty of reasons to keep supporting them, but did not move the needle beyond that. The rest of the candidates need to look for the exits.

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

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