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Tomorrow and Wednesday nights, CNN will televise the second round of debates featuring 20 Democrats seeking their party's nomination for president. What can we expect?

Hopefully, the unwieldy format will again prove so obnoxious and grating to the viewing audience that Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez will severely tighten the eligibility requirements for the next debate. Yes, in the singular.

The bar must be raised sufficiently that all the eligible candidates can fit on the same stage, and preferably with six or seven candidates, tops, on that stage. The most obvious vanity candidates — Marianne Williamson, Andrew Yang, Rep. Tim Ryan, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, former Rep. John Delaney and Mayor Bill de Blasio — shouldn't be on the stage this time. They will only take up valuable time voters need to compare viable candidates.

Since the last round of debates, two candidates have entered the race. Montana Gov. Steve Bullock is disadvantaged by the fact he is on the debate stage Tuesday night. What if he were to have a significant performance, as former of Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julián Castro had last round? It would last but for 24 hours. Everyone who goes on the first night is disadvantaged because their performance will necessarily be limited to a single news cycle before the second debate begins. This is the foremost reason to whittle the candidates down to a single night.

Billionaire and environmental activist Tom Steyer has also entered the race. Just what America needs: another billionaire with a huge ego who has no idea how the government works. I hope he never makes it on the stage, and if his performance during his first round of network interviews is any indicator, he won't. Nothing comes out of his mouth that has not been said before, and said better. The egos on these entrepreneurs-turned-politicians are big enough to make a journalist blush.

The core split within the Democratic Party today is between the establishment and the economic populists. By establishment, we mean someone who would look to put a Wall Street guy in as secretary of the treasury and it is represented by the Clintons and, to a lesser degree, former President Barack Obama.

The economic populist wing wants a fundamental restructuring of the economic rules of the road to curtail the influence of large corporations and strengthen the hand of workers. We have to travel back in time before the New Democrats to find earlier representatives of this approach, but it has been the dominant theme of progressivism in American history: Thomas Jefferson in 1800, Andrew Jackson in 1830, Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, all were economic populists who used the power of government to rein in the power of big business.

CNN chose which candidates go on which nights by lot, and on the first night, the two leading economic populists — Sen. Bernie Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren — will be at the center of the stage. The only top-tier establishment candidate that night is South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, alumnus of McKinsey. The rest of the slots that night are filled in with also-rans, with the exception of Bullock, whom we have yet to see perform on the big stage.

Sanders and Warren are in different trajectories: Sanders' numbers have softened and declined over the course of this year while Warren's have strengthened and

grown. They are, so far, appealing to different demographics, with Sanders getting white working-class voters and Warren doing better with voters with more education.

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It is in Sanders' interest to strike at Warren and try to steal her momentum, but I am not sure it is in his character. Sanders really cares about the policies he has been advocating and knows that if the wind continues to go out of his sails, Warren stands to pick up his voters more than he would stand to pick up hers.

Warren has no interest in doing anything different: In every Iowa poll in the last two months, she has pulled even or ahead of Sanders. They may be saved by someone like Delaney, who was outspoken in the first debate about his opposition to economic populism. He may attack one of the two at center stage, allowing them to come to each other's defense. If there is a kerfuffle between the two populists, Warren should distance herself from compulsory Medicare for all.

The second night puts the leading establishment candidates at center stage: former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris. Biden seemed ill-prepared and almost unresponsive when Harris attacked him last time for his comments about working with segregationists. He has been increasingly feisty since and so we might see some fireworks between them.

Sen. Cory Booker has also ditched his Mr. Nice Guy routine and knows he needs to make it into the top tier after this debate or his campaign is essentially over. Castro could have another strong performance again and, this time, it would be on night two.

The task for Biden and Harris is the same: They have to articulate a rationale for the candidacy. Is anyone sure why they are running for president except Biden thinks it is his turn and Harris thinks it is the next logical step in her career?

If they were being well-served by their campaign teams, they would also know that tearing each other down comes at a price: In Iowa, it matters that you try to become people's second choice because of the way the caucuses work. And Democrats beyond the Hawkeye State don't like seeing the fratricidal nonsense.

My biggest concern about both nights is that the dominant voice will belong to the man not on the stage, President Donald Trump. If the Democrats spend the bulk of the time discussing racial and gender issues, it is a win for the president. If they can break out of his narrative and talk about the millions of Americans still living paycheck to paycheck, it will be a good night for the party.

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

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