Opinion
News



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These two-night, back-to-back debates are grueling. And the two nights could not have been more different.

For those of us who hope the Trump era will come to an end in 2020, the first night was exhilarating. Whatever differences among the Democratic candidates were highlighted Tuesday night, the debate showed people discussing which ways are the best ways to help people, while Donald Trump is busy figuring out whom he can insult next.

The second night? Democrats in the sandbox, the tone was nasty and the result was more muddled.

The first night, on July 30, showed the degree to which the Democratic Party has become, depending on your point of view, more radical or more serious about confronting certain issues. For example, in recent years, discussions of gun violence have focused on background checks and closing the gun show loophole, which are fine things to do but inadequate to the problem. Tuesday night, several candidates voiced their support for a ban on the sale of assault weapons and no one objected.

Mayor Pete Buttigieg was especially strong on this point, citing his experience in Afghanistan where such weapons are appropriate. I wish someone had mentioned the history of the assault weapons ban, and how it was allowed to lapse before the cumulative nature of its effects could be felt.

Similarly, in the discussion of trade policy, only one candidate voiced support for President Barack Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership agreement: former Rep. John Delaney, who spent the entire night doing his best impersonation of an early 1990s New Democrat trying to fashion "Reagan Lite" ideas. As with the assault weapons ban, the candidates need to explain why the Trans Pacific Partnership was such a bad agreement, why its environmental and labor standards were so hollow.

Perhaps it was the unfortunate format, which allotted only 60 seconds to answer the questions, but these debates need to allow the Democrats to lay out arguments and give some background, not just rush to the conclusions.

The first night also witnessed the debut of Montana Gov. Steve Bullock. He did a good job presenting himself as someone untainted by the dysfunctionality of Washington, D.C., but I am not sure he catapulted himself sufficiently into the top tier of candidates. He mentioned in passing that his state passed campaign finance reform after *Citizens United*, but he needed to really lift that accomplishment up and dwell on it a bit.

Bullock complained about "wish-list economics" but Sen. Elizabeth Warren spanked all the candidates who were trying to present themselves as moderates by saying what they were against when she said, "I don't understand why anybody goes to all the trouble of running for the president of the United States just to talk about what we really can't do and shouldn't fight for. I don't get it." It was the best line of the night.

Warren and Sen. Bernie Sanders both had strong nights as they parried the attacks on their positions without even once taking a shot at each other. They both need to work on introducing a pragmatic note into their discussion of health care reform, and both would benefit from explaining how the model for their proposals is not socialist Russia but FDR and the New Deal. But both exude a mix of passion and policy knowledge that is more or less what Democratic primary voters are looking for this year.

Sanders was less surefooted in the June debate, so he needed this kind of strong performance and he got it. Warren is two-for-two.

Buttigieg's performance was strong when he was present, but he seemed to be standing on the sidelines for far too much of the debate. He did fine but no better than fine. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Rep. Tim Ryan and Gov. John Hickenlooper needed strong, breakout performances and did not produce them. Look for them to fade in the weeks ahead.

Marianne Williamson would do better if she could make it through the night without using the word "psychic" but she can't. Her strongest moment came on the worst topic of the night, reparations, an idea that seems like it was cooked up in a Republican Party war room.

On the second night, on July 31, the stakes for former Vice President Joe Biden could scarcely have been higher after his lackluster performance in the first debate in June. Much of the evening, he was the piñata on stage, being attacked by virtually everyone else. In the first half of the night, he seemed off, less specific and less quick than the younger candidates on the stage, sheepishly stopping in midsentence when time ran out instead of acting like someone who was once vice president of the United States and is now chomping at the bit to take on Trump. But Biden got his footing in the second half and improved as the night went on.

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Ganging up on one of the most beloved figures in the Democratic Party is not a good look for the Democrats, but no one could resist the temptation to pounce. Early in the debate, Sen. Cory Booker spoke to the need to keep the focus on defeating Trump, and reminded the audience that any of the Democratic candidates would be better than the incumbent. He played the part of the "happy warrior."

It did not last: Twenty minutes later, he got out his stick and took a whack at the Biden piñata. More than once, I found myself feeling a bit sorry for Biden, especially when people tried to trap him on the subject of President Barack Obama's record.

Sen. Kamala Harris both gave and received some blows. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard took the most direct hit at Harris' record as a prosecutor and Harris' response was weak at best. Some of Harris' hits were self-inflicted: She lacked the precision with which

Warren and Sanders defended Medicare for all. Her best moment came in the discussion of equal pay when she said, "I'm done with the conversation." In her early interviews, she repeatedly said we need "a conversation" when asked about a variety of difficult issues.

Gabbard, as well as Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, Gov. Jay Inslee and — though I hate to admit it — entrepreneur Andrew Yang, did very well but I am not sure that they have any room to grow. Yang is going to end up as the founder of some kind of cult, Inslee will be director of the Environmental Protection Agency, and Gillibrand, well, I think her rank insincerity is too problematic to consider her for any post in a future administration.

Sen. Michael Bennet seems like the nicest man on any stage. I want him to be my neighbor, but not my nominee. Mayor Bill de Blasio seems like the person you do not want as a neighbor or a nominee. Former San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro had a good night, but I do not know if it was a strong enough performance to vault him into an upper tier. It is hard not to imagine him being on anyone's short list for veep. Still, if there was someone who really helped themselves on the second night, it was Booker.

The format was lousy. One minute is not enough time to get into a serious discussion of anything, and so the discussion rewarded zingers over explanations. I was delighted to see the time limits enforced but they were the wrong limits. The questions pitted the candidates against one another rather than against Trump. The second-tier candidates, with the possible exception of Booker, did not help themselves enough to vault into the top tier.

The Democratic National Committee should revise the rules and raise the bar for participation in the next debates: This is serious business, and wasting time on listening to Yang or Bennet or Williamson serves no purpose.

At the end of the June debates, a focus group of Iowa voters concluded that Warren had won the first night and Harris the second, but that overall, Warren was the winner. This time, Warren was again the clear winner, although CNN did not have a focus group to confirm it.

Campaigns are about more than debates, but these are important steppingstones. As candidates begin to drop out, their supporters will look to events like debates to decide whom to support.

Democrats want someone who can beat Trump. They want a winner. And the best way to look like a winner is to win. The voting doesn't start until January, and so the only victories available now are in these debates. Going two-for-two is an impressive achievement for the senator from Massachusetts.

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

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