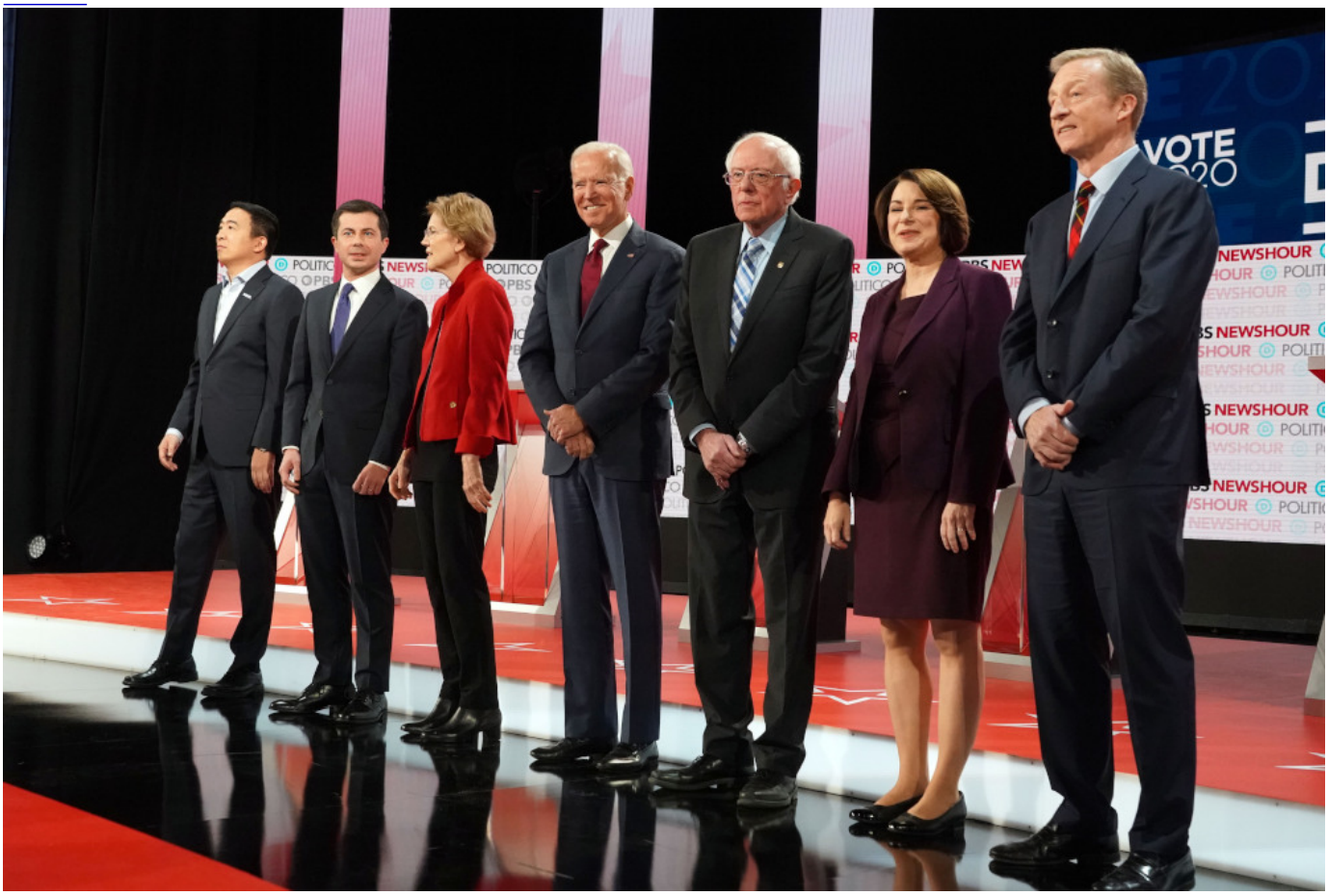
Opinion

News



Democratic presidential candidates, from left, Andrew Yang, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, former Vice President Joe Biden, Sen. Bernie Sanders, Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Tom Steyer gather on stage prior to their debate at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles on Dec. 19. (Orange County Register via ZUMA Wire/Scott Varley)



by Michael Sean Winters

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With Christmas only two days away, and confident that no NCR readers have been naughty and all have been nice, I suspect most NCR readers want the same thing this coming year: A new president. Santa can't wrap one and put him or her under the tree. The voters, not the elves, need to make some decisions. What is the state of the race?

The most important fact to recognize is how fluid everything is. Three new polls indicated that a majority of Democratic primary voters could still switch their vote to someone other than their current favorite.

Former Vice President Joe Biden has led the national polls all year, but he lagged in the first two states, Iowa and New Hampshire, and only late in the year decided to really contest the two states. Biden had his best debate performance last week. At no time was his speech halting, nor did he appear confused. He interjected some humor and defended himself well against incoming attacks. If the party wants a moderate, committed to trying to unite the country, it is hard to see how anyone will challenge him for the role.

Sen. Bernie Sanders started the year in the top tier and has remained there since. His debate performance started weakly: As he sometimes does, Sanders lets his energy take on a negative, scowling quality. But, he became more confident as the night went on. He still has not developed an effective rejoinder to Biden's complaints about the cost of Medicare for All, but you can also see why Sanders has strong appeal among some working-class voters who backed President Donald Trump. It is not only that his heart is in the economic fight, it is that his heart is completely not in the culture wars surrounding social issues.

And, in the course of 2019, Sen. Elizabeth Warren and then former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg made their way into the top tier. Late entries Tom Steyer and Mike Bloomberg are spending huge sums on advertising, but I have failed

to meet anyone who thinks that what the Democratic Party needs is a billionaire candidate. In the debate, no one made Steyer pay for continuing to brag about being the first to call for Trump's impeachment even though his campaign clearly irked many independent voters. During the impeachment debate in the House of Representatives, one of the most frequent talking points repeated by Republicans was that the Democrats could not accept the results of the 2016 election, that if it was not for the Ukraine situation, they would have found something else, and that this impeachment was just politics by extreme measures. They said that because it persuades people and it persuades people because they saw Steyer's ads.

Heading into last week's debate, Buttigieg was finally earning some bad press after months of climbing in the polls and a press corps strangely unwilling to ask him any tough questions. In the November debate, the other candidates also did not challenge the mayor, even though it was clear he had moved into the top tier and, in some polls, was in the lead in Iowa. Then he was forced to disclose his clients when he worked at the McKinsey consulting company and his shock at some of the company's practices was unconvincing. And, when he released the names of some of his big donors, some of his small donors began asking for their money back. The hashtag #RefundPete was born. Photos of one of the mayor's fundraisers, hosted by Silicon Valley families with a combined estimated worth of $80 billion, in a Napa Valley wine cave, under a chandelier with 1,500 Swarovski crystals, rounded out a dismal few weeks for the mayor. At the debate, the words "wine cave" became a meme and the mayor will have to fight very hard to keep those words from becoming to him what "binders full of women" was to Mitt Romney.

Warren had her bad weeks in October and November. First, she looked evasive when she refused to say she would raise middle-class taxes to pay for her Medicare for All plan, even though Sanders, standing right next to her, readily admitted he would. Not only did she appear to be dodging, but it put her off her game and, unlike in previous outings, she did not bring every answer back to her central theme of making government work for everyone and not just for the rich and well connected. When she rolled out her plan, and then had to qualify it with an implementation policy that appeared to be backing off a bit, it confirmed the impression that she was not really sure how to proceed. After a year defining herself as the candidate with a plan for virtually everything, her waffling made it look like it was the politics, not the policy, that mattered to her.

In last week's debate, Warren was back on her game. On almost every question, she brought the conversation back to the need to make government work for average people and not just the rich. She needed to land a blow on Buttigieg, and she did. He was ready, sort of: His response was strong, but, alas, nothing he said about Warren had become a meme by midnight and was trending strongly on Twitter. She had a great comeback when asked about the fact that, if elected, she would be the oldest president sworn into office. She replied: "But the youngest woman president." Her discussion of the wealth tax was strong and that, more than anything, is what catapulted her into the top tier in the first half of the year.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar again had a strong debate performance but she has had strong performances before and it never seems to translate into an uptick in the polls. She went after Buttigieg for criticizing the experience of those on stage, pointing out the good work done by her colleagues. It was a strong moment among many strong moments, and focused on the person whose rise has blocked her own path in Iowa, Mayor Pete. We will see if things change, and there is an Iowa debate before the voting begins, but Klobuchar is currently in a distant fifth place in the Hawkeye State and she needs to break into the top three there or her campaign is over.

Ditto for Andrew Yang. He was smart and gracious and sometimes funny, but he is still viewed as a fringe candidate and it is hard to see how he could move into the top tier. Steyer had one of his better nights but he, too, has no realistic shot at the nomination. I know the other candidates have no incentive to antagonize someone who is not a threat, but I do wish someone would challenge him for having given the GOP their strongest talking point during he impeachment mess, namely, that the Democrats wanted to overturn the 2016 election by impeaching he president long before any of us had ever heard of Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky.

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In January, the candidates will begin running more and more ads — on television, radio and the internet. They will be testing their ground game in the four early voting states, which will likely be the most decisive part of winning, especially in Iowa with its arcane, but brilliant, caucus system. The top four need to position themselves not only to get their people to the caucus venues, but to try and become the second choice of voters currently backing other candidates. In Iowa, a candidate must secure 15 percent of the voters at each caucus site to move forward. Voters

whose candidate does not cross that threshold are then invited to caucus for someone else. I wish all elections were done on such a ranked, sliding scale.

The fundamental policy cleavage I identified in my article from New Hampshire remains: Sanders and Warren argue that Trump was elected in large part because Democrats embraced neo-liberal economics that left too many working-class voters behind. It is not enough to beat Trump; the Democrats need to restructure the economy and limits the moneyed interest's ability to dominate government. Buttigieg and Biden are incrementalists, believing that most voters are scared of fundamental change, and tweaking here, amending there, is the only way to achieve progress, albeit slower progress.

Most of all, Democratic voters, who will be making up their minds in January, are looking for a leader, someone with the confidence and the smarts to take on Trump. At year's end, the most obvious consequence of the debates and campaigns so far is that plenty of Americans have been introduced to a group of candidates, any one of whom would be better than the president we have, and all of whom articulate a governing philosophy, their blindness on abortion excepted, that speaks to the better angels of our nature.

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

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