Opinion

News



Sen. Elizabeth Warren campaigns May 19, 2019, in Nashua, New Hampshire. (Flickr/Marc Nozell, CC by 2.0)



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Tomorrow, the voters of New Hampshire head to the polls and the rest of the country is hoping they will bring some clarity to the race. When you go to New Hampshire, as I did twice last October, you realize that voters there really do pay attention — they turn out to see the candidates in small town settings, and they balance policy preferences with considerations of personality.

Iowa's messy caucuses yielded nothing but depression: The voters do not seem particularly attached to any of the candidates, and consequently the turnout was unremarkable: Former Mayor Pete Buttigieg benefitted from former Vice President Joe Biden's dismal showing, Sen. Bernie Sanders brought some new voters to the polls but he still got half of the number of votes he got in 2016, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren's campaign might have crashed and burned had not Biden's showing been so much worse. Sen. Amy Klobuchar could not break 15% and no one else scored better than 2%.

ABC News and WMUR sponsored a debate at St. Anselm College on Friday night. I wonder how many people were watching on a Friday night when the restaurants are full, even in the small towns of the Granite State. In the event, I am not sure that the debate will have shifted many votes.

Buttigieg had some good moments, the strongest of which came when he was asked if he would have ordered the killing of Iranian Maj. Gen. Soleimani, as President Trump did. He mixed patriotism with biography — he is the only veteran on the stage – and managed to avoid answering the question with an accurate observation that you can't answer such questions in the abstract. A few minutes later, when discussing America's presence in the Mideast, the former mayor seemed to shoot for the big picture, but he buried himself in the weeds.

Buttigieg's second to the worst moment came indirectly when Warren pointed out that there are steps candidates can take right now to remove the influence of money from politics, they do not have to wait until they become president and hope to overturn *Citizens United* with a constitutional amendment. The ex-mayor's defense was exceedingly weak and among MSNBC's post-debate discussion with New

Hampshire voters, his willingness to "suck up to billionaires" as Warren put it, clearly bothered some of the voters. He also took it on the chin from Klobuchar, who challenged him for criticizing Washington experience, as she noted the good work that she and other Democrats had accomplished.

When you do not have much of a record to run on, it doesn't help if that record is weak on race relations, and Buttigieg struggled when asked about the disparity between arrests of blacks and white for marijuana possession on his watch in South Bend, dodging the question at first, and trying to answer a different question when pressed. This can't have helped in South Carolina where African Americans are a majority of the Democratic primary electorate but, more importantly, it demonstrated the problem with having not much of a record to run on.

Sanders is indefatigable and as consistent as any politician you are ever going to encounter. He has not qualified his support for Medicare for All, which again dominated the first half-hour of the debate. He pointed out that he, unlike Biden, voted against the Iraq War. When questioned about whether or not Americans would warm to a socialist, he gave the same defense he has been giving since he first ran for office. The only time he faltered was on the one issue where he did, in fact, switch his position: gun control. As a congressman from a rural state, Sanders supported gun rights early in his career. It remains the biggest hurdle for him to cross between him and the nomination. As the campaign turns to the south and to states with urban populations, it is a vulnerability and he had a chance to inoculate himself Friday night. He did not do it.

Biden had one of the best moments of the night when he said the president should have given a medal to Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, who had been removed from the White House earlier in the day, not to Rush Limbaugh, and then asked the audience to stand up and applaud Vindman. Biden and businessman Tom Steyer were the most consistent at turning any and every question into an attack on Trump. But the former vice president's energy level was erratic, really erratic. One moment, he sounded like the seasoned statesman he presents himself as, and the next moment, he was shouting for no apparent reason. It breaks my heart to say it, but this is not Biden's time and his friends and family who convinced him to run did his reputation no good.

Warren disappeared from the discussion for whole blocks of time. Her strongest moment came in the discussion of the racism in our criminal justice system. After

Buttigieg's struggle defending his record, Warren came next and pointed out that we need to expand the discussion of race beyond the subject of criminal justice. Amen. She also did a better job of focusing on her core campaign theme – government only works for the rich and powerful and that is corruption, "pure and simple" – than she did last autumn.

What Warren failed to do was explain why she is the best positioned candidate to unite the Democratic Party. Those Iowans who voted for Sanders four years ago but didn't this time? They backed Warren. And the establishment, spooked by Sanders's continued strength at the polls, will rally around anyone who can stop him. I am not sure anyone else on the stage would be broadly acceptable to Sanders' voters. She desperately needs to come in at least third in New Hampshire and needed to distinguish herself from the others to clear the path of party unifier. She chose to stay above the fray, a strategy that rarely works.

Klobuchar won the debate. Not even close. However, she has outperformed the field in previous debates and those performances never seem to turn into a big boost in the polls. Will this time be different? It could. Klobuchar's fundraising has never taken off, so her campaign has been unable to follow up a strong debate performance with an ad campaign to reinforce her message. As noted, New Hampshire is different because the most engaged voters go out and meet the candidates and, in turn, influence their circle of friends and co-workers. But, she will need a lot of those engaged voters to break her way, and do a lot of chatting, to make a difference.

Steyer had strong moments but it doesn't, and shouldn't, matter. He will not be the nominee. Ditto Andrew Yang, although he could make a difference by backing one of the other candidates when he drops out. Both of them bombed in Iowa and they might do marginally better in New Hampshire. Steyer has spent millions of dollars in the states yet to come, producing an uptick in the polls, but that will fade if he continues to fail at the ballot box.

My favorite moment came towards the end when the moderator asked about one of the candidates not on the stage: former New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg. The candidates on the stage trashed him. That suits me. If the best the party of Jefferson and Jackson and FDR can do is run our billionaire against theirs, our democracy is not really worth fighting for, is it?

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The most important task facing the Democrats is to find the candidate that can best unite the party. A repeat of 2016 will be deadly. Lest we forget, the number of Sanders' supporters who voted for Trump in the key swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, was greater than the margin by which Trump beat Hillary Clinton. I think Sanders could unite the party: His problem is elsewhere, namely, the word socialism will be a drag with unaffiliated voters who will hear Trump's definition of it over and over again, and might be scared off. On the other hand, he has the authenticity to stand toe-to-toe with the president.

Biden might be able to unite the party but I think his star is fading and fading fast. He is running on his experience and that did not work out so well for Clinton against Trump. True, Biden does not have her historic negatives, but neither would his candidacy represent any kind of historic benchmark.

Buttigieg did better than other candidates in becoming the second choice of Iowa voters whose first choice did not qualify, a sure indicator of the potential to unify, but he lacks the authenticity to stand against Trump. You know those awful framed posters in some offices that feature an image of a soaring eagle or a babbling brook and a contentless word like "success" or "growth." Buttigieg is the electoral equivalent of those posters. He says his plans are bold, but most of them have been around for decades.

That leaves the women. Ideologically, Warren is better placed to unite the party, a self-described capitalist who nonetheless shares many of Sanders' policy objectives. She has harmed her campaign by too often sounding like she just emerged from the faculty lounge at Harvard, speaking in trendy liberalese and overly woke. On the other hand, Klobuchar has the moderation of a Buttigieg or a Biden, but with a real authenticity to her, and a scrappiness that speaks well of her ability to beat Trump.

Who will unite the party? Maybe no one. But, if I could vote in New Hampshire tomorrow, I would be voting for one of the women.

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

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