

The Slander Sanders Shout-Fest: The South Carolina Democratic Primary Debate

By [Dr. Jack Rasmus](#)

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Tonight, February 25, 2020 the Democrats held their 10th debate on the eve of the South Carolina primary this coming weekend. It's also the last debate before next week's Super Tuesday string of primaries held in 14 states.

A lot was riding for several candidates on stage tonight in South Carolina. Some of them will not be around for the debates to follow Super Tuesday, when 37% of the 1,991 delegates to the Democratic Party nominating convention will have been chosen. That 1,991 does not count, of course, the more than 500 special delegates the party's leadership are holding in their back pocket until the convention. That number will decide the outcome and the party's nominee for president—not all the trappings of democracy in the primaries—i.e. the debates, the primary voting, the multi-millions spent on ads, etc. That's how democracy is and will be determined in the Democratic Party: the leaders will decide at the convention when they play their 'special delegates' card—none of whom will have been voted on by the party rank and file members in the primaries. Most of the 500 are Congressional Democrats and we know how they'll vote when Pelosi and Shumer tell them.

Tonight's debate showed the desperation of several of the candidates, especially Buttigieg, Klobuchar and Steyer. All will be gone, I predict, and drop out of the race before the convention in June in Milwaukee.

So too may Biden implode, should he under-perform against Sanders in the South Carolina primary this weekend. And that looks increasingly likely to happen, as Sanders' support continues to grow amongst under-40 year old African-American voter group. Everything rides for Biden on the black vote in South Carolina, which comprises 60% of the eligible democrat voters. A close second by Sanders will spell the end of Biden's campaign.

The eventual, and inevitable, departure of Buttigieg, Klobuchar and Steyer from the race by April will leave Sanders, Bloomberg, Warren (and maybe Biden) still in the race, up until the convention.

Buttigieg-Klobuchar Contra Sanders

So it wasn't a surprise to watch Buttigieg-Klobuchar (plus Bloomberg) go after Sanders with repeated slanders about his being a 'Democratic Socialist'. The real emphasis was on Socialist, of course. Buttigieg and Klobuchar led the attack, especially the boy mayor from small town Indiana.

Buttigieg's attack centered on the party leadership's main talking point—now being spread wide and far in the party's media wing (MSNBC, etc.): i.e. that a Sanders ticket would mean

the loss of swing districts in the swing states in the House of Representatives and seats in the Senate. Without a Congress, even if Sanders won, he couldn't achieve anything, Buttigieg argued.

This is an argument to bypass the fact that Sanders is polling ahead of Trump in 47 polls to date, and is clearly the strongest debater to take on Trump. Buttigieg may have had another motive in mind by making the defend Democrats in Congress point. He may have been pandering to the 500 special delegates, most of whom are seated House Reps and Senators. Or, maybe even laying some groundwork for a future run for a House seat. He and his billionaire backers certainly know that a 38 year old white boy mayor from Indiana could never become president! He'll be well rewarded by the party in 2022 for leading the attack on Sanders.

In the post-debate CNN political commentary by so-called expert 'talking heads', even Van Jones, a black Democrat party activist and one of the more savvy and intelligent in the crowd, admitted Sanders would likely be the only candidate tough enough to debate toe to toe with Trump. Jones knows what's going on in the grass roots in South Carolina. While he wouldn't say it outright, he implied at times that the Sanders candidacy is the only one backed by a social movement and that shouldn't be underestimated.

And can one even imagine a Bloomberg vs. Trump, or Biden vs. Trump, and, even more so a Buttigieg v. Trump debate before the election? Trump would eat the two 'oldsters' for lunch, given their timid debating skills. And Buttigieg? He'd have a field day, as they say, belittling and lecturing the kid from Indiana. It would look like a stern dad chastising his errant boy. Or how about Klobuchar debate going head to head with Trump? Really?

After raising the 'down ballot' talking point, Buttigieg then moved on to a standard red-baiting attack on Sanders. He accused Sanders of praising Fidel Castro and Cuba. Then ridiculed Sanders as being stuck in the past of 'revolutionary politics of the 1960s', of not being a real Democrat, and an extremist choice voters would reject. When the moderator then gave Sanders the opportunity to answer, Buttigieg continued to talk over him during Bernie's entire response in an obvious cheap attempt to drown him out.

Klobuchar's red-baiting of Sanders was more direct. She just flat out said that a socialist on the ticket would mean no choice for the 'real' Democrats in the middle. She repeated the socialist charge on several occasions. And attacked his Medicare for All plan which she grossly misrepresented by saying it would cost \$60 trillion and thus three times the size of the entire US GDP.

Not to be outdone, Bloomberg early chimed in repeating the past week's media message that Russia was again interfering in the election and undermining Democracy in America by supporting Sanders, since they (Russians) believed he, Sanders, would be the preferred candidate for Trump. That's the line floated by an unknown 'intelligence expert' in the US bureaucracy, for which there was absolutely no evidence provided to back up the claim. Even the bureaucracy backed off from the line last week. But Bloomberg led with it.

It was disappointing that not one of the candidates, even Sanders, bothered to raise the point that the real threat to democracy in the US in recent years and today isn't coming from abroad. It's not the Russians or Putin. It's not Xi and China. And certainly not Cuba. It's home grown. It's the massive and spreading voter suppression and gerrymandering going on at the state level, especially in Trump's 'red states' political base. It's what's going on in

Florida, Georgia, Arkansas, Ohio, Texas and elsewhere. And no one said a thing about it, drowned out by the media pushing more of the Russia and Putin somehow fooling us to vote for Trump!

Biden: Raises His Voice if Not His Chances



It wasn't the only example of four candidates refusing to follow the time limits to comment, raising their voices, and talking over each other. There were similar shouting matches. For example Biden v. Steyer, when two old white men argued over who did more for imprisoned blacks.

Joe Biden's performance was an improvement over his past dismal efforts, in volume of voice if not content. Joe talked it up, not saying much he hadn't but perhaps saying it more loudly. How could he not do better? The bar of prior performance was quite low. At one point he complained to the moderator he wasn't being called upon enough and perhaps he should be more aggressive in demanding time. But, he added, he was a gentleman, the only one on the stage. Yeah Joe, just what we need: a gentleman in the White House! That'll make everything right.

Bloomberg: Warren's Punching Bag (Again)



And what about Bloomberg's performance, in his second debate? The bar was so low after his disastrous effort in his first debate last week that it wouldn't take much to have 'done better'. Some commentators thought he did marginally better, but still poorly. It was like a guy who got knocked out in the first round (last debate) and, this time, gets knocked around the ring several times but manages to stagger back from the ropes.

The slugger who pummeled Bloomberg was again Elizabeth Warren. She leveled a

devastating ‘one-two’ punch by telling everyone how Bloomberg funded right wing Senator, Lindsay Graham’s (of South Carolina) last election; then how he helped elect the infamous governor of Michigan, who did nothing about lead poisoned drinking water in his state. Bloomberg gave him a \$3 million donation. Warren added how Bloomberg had repeatedly financed other Republicans and right wingers. The message was clear: if anyone on the debate stage was not a Democrat, it wasn’t Sanders; it was Bloomberg.

If Bloomberg himself was a bad joke in his first debate, in this his second he was the repeated maker of bad jokes. What the hell did he mean about ‘naked cowboys’ in New York? I still don’t understand that one.

Bloomberg tried his best to explain his case in a repeated shout fest with Warren over his non-disclosure agreements with abused women in the past, reporting his tax returns (the only candidate not having done so yet), and his views on housing red-lining in New York. But what we got to hear, several times, was that he ran New York, which was bigger than most countries in the world; therefore he could run the USA. It was like an automaton: pushed the button and out came his New York mayor history and how New York was bigger than most of the world (an arrogance shared by many New Yorkers, by the way, including the Donald). His answer to Warren’s new charges was simply to brush them off as a “side show” and irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was he, Bloomberg, was the only candidate that could be Trump. And by implication, the rest of them were there as ‘show’—perhaps indirectly suggesting he knows something we don’t about eventual outcomes!

Warren Attacks Sanders’ Medicare Plan

When not attacking Bloomberg or Sanders, Warren once again tried to tug at our ‘heart strings’ with her constant stump story of her modest up-bringing, her family’s difficult fortunes, her three brothers in the military, and how she was discriminated against as a women in getting employment.



But her new ammunition was leveled at Sanders this time around, not just Bloomberg. She declared she had a better Medicare plan than Sanders since he has not explained how he would pay for it, which of course is not true.

(Admittedly, in the debate Bernie did not have sufficient time to explain. What he therefore needs is a more simple, 3 or 4 point financing explanation that can be delivered in one minute). As others had done repeatedly during the debate, Warren kept talking way over her time limit and attempting to drown out Sanders’ attempt to explain. The moderators let her go on, to Sanders’ disadvantage.

Thus Warren, Klobuchar and Buttigieg thus now appear to have closed ranks attacking

Sanders' Medicare for All proposal.

If Buttigieg & Klobuchar appeared desperate and led the charge against Sanders' socialism (with Bloomberg tagging along), Warren tacked left and right against Bloomberg then Sanders just as desperately trying to differentiate herself. But none of them will likely do well in South Carolina. Steyer was mostly the odd man out, except for his exchange with Biden, and his indirect plea that neither Bloomberg or Sanders can win. Like the other 'centrists' he wistfully suggested the extremes were not really 'Democrats' but he was. In that he echoed the centrist position, a position which none of those in the center understand is sliding away like loose sand beneath their feet. For the ranks of Democrat voters no longer want a 'center'

Why Sanders is Leading the Race

Sanders understands this 'disappearing center' dynamic better than did the others on the stage. He held his ground. Like a slugger in a boxing ring, he took some hits but continued to punch away, left and right, at his long standing positions: tax the billionaires, ensure health care for all that only Medicare can deliver, free public college tuition, relieve student debt, raise minimum wages, pay living salaries to teachers, and so on.

He acknowledged his past comments on Cuba as only defending its obvious gains in literacy and healthcare, which was no more than Obama did, he argued. He did not back off from them or deny them. Even as he took swipes at China and Russia, arguing in effect he was more 'democratic' than 'socialist'.

But there was no desperation in his delivery, unlike some. He did not shout out, trying to look tougher (like Biden). He did not talk over others (like Buttigieg, Klobuchar). He did not attack Warren in response. He did express his positions with feeling (unlike Bloomberg). He presented the picture of 'what you see is what you get. I'm not backing off my positions'. And he repeated several times what the others still don't understand: there's a movement building. If we can organize and turn out more of the vote of the more than half of eligible voters in America who don't vote because they see nothing in it for them—then he can win!

Sanders is the candidate that voters know what he stands for. He's the candidate of programs and proposals. That's his great, differentiating appeal. He's not the candidate of critiquing and picking apart others' proposals. Anyone having watched the debates sees that. In contrast, other candidates in the debate(s) spent more time talking about either what they had done in the past or directly attacking Sanders' proposals. But what they stand FOR in the future is not always clear.

Except for Warren's wealth tax and program for Medicare, it's hard to recall from the debate what the other candidates actually propose for the future—apart from platitudes and 'look what I did in the past'! Look what I did in New York (Bloomberg). What I did as VP under Obama (Biden). What I did as mayor (in Indianapolis). What I did as Senator from Wisconsin (Klobuchar). What I did while a businessman (Steyer). But that doesn't cut it any more with voters—especially youth, millennials, GenZ and even GenXers, with minority youth, and underpaid and nearly hopeless young workers.

American voters in this election cycle appear to want to know 'what are you going to do for me', now and in the future. Spell it out in detail. Millennials want to know how they can get out of low paying, dead end jobs and pay for their mountain of student debt; black and

latino youth how to get the police and La Migra off their backs; all young people how they can afford an education; suburban moms whether their kids will come home safely from school ever again; the homeless where can they live besides on the streets; the retirees whether their social security and pensions will be taken away; the middle class why their incomes are not rising when the 1% are getting so rich; why they can't afford prescription drugs and housing any more; and everyone is worried about the costs of hospitals, doctors, and dental care.

Sanders appears as the candidate most focused on these issues. Not on 'what I did when'. Not on tearing down the (few) proposals of other candidates. Not on slandering them. Not on resurrecting what are, in fact, Trump-traditional Republican talking points—i.e. red-baiting, Cold war (Russians are coming) hysteria, and

While the Buttigiegs and Klobuchars turn to centrist Democrat party themes of the past; while Biden sleep walks in the present; and while Bloomberg resurrects Republican solutions for the future, Sanders appears authentic. Some may not want that authenticity—especially billionaires, corporations, and their media. But apparently youth, students, growing ranks of black and latino voters, and more and more rank and file union workers do. And that's Sanders' appeal and why they are flocking to him and creating a movement.

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*Dr. Rasmus is author of the recently published book, 'The Scourge of Neoliberalism: US Economic Policy from Reagan to Trump', Clarity Press, January 2020. He blogs at [jackrasmus.com](#) and hosts the weekly radio show, *Alternative Visions*, on the Progressive Radio Network. His twitter handle is @drjackrasmus and website: <http://kykloproductions.com>*

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