

Las Vegas debate reveals deepening Democratic Party crisis

Patrick Martin
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Wednesday night's presidential debate in Las Vegas, Nevada, strongly suggests that the Democratic Party is headed for a political debacle at its presidential nominating convention in Milwaukee this summer, as a half-dozen right-wing candidates gang up in an effort to deprive Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders of the nomination.

The media coverage of the two-hour debate focused on the rehearsed insults and sound bites deployed by the six candidates on the stage against each other—with the biggest blows hitting billionaire Michael Bloomberg, participating in his first debate—and on speculation about which candidates might benefit from their debate performance in the polls and in fund-raising.

But the most important incident at the debate came at the very end, when the candidates were asked about the now increasingly likely scenario, with convention delegates divided up among four, five or even six candidates, that no candidate wins an outright majority. Should the candidate with the most delegates, albeit less than a majority, become the nominee?

Sanders said yes. All the others—Bloomberg, former Vice President Joe Biden, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Amy Klobuchar, and former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg—said no, declaring that the “process” of the nominating convention must be allowed to play out.

This answer demonstrates two important political facts: the self-styled “democratic socialist” Sanders is viewed as the frontrunner and is expected to win the most delegates; and his opponents are prepared to join forces and engage in backroom maneuvers to block his nomination.

In acknowledging that Sanders has emerged as the leading candidate for the nomination, his rivals are admitting an incontestable fact. Sanders now leads in the national polls and in most state polls, including Nevada, where caucuses take place Saturday, and in the most important states voting March 3, “Super Tuesday,” including California, Texas, North Carolina and Virginia.

In a poll conducted for the *Washington Post* and ABC television network, Sanders was supported by 32 percent, compared to 16 percent for Biden, his closest rival. Bloomberg followed with 14 percent, Warren 12 percent, Buttigieg 8 percent and Klobuchar 7 percent. Sanders led among men and

women, those with a college education and those without, and among Latinos, and he was a close second to Biden among African-Americans.

Most revealing was the age breakdown: among Democratic voters under 50 years old, Sanders had the support of a clear majority. Among the youth, his support approaches a landslide. These figures are a distorted reflection of a pronounced shift to the left among American workers and youth, looking for an alternative to corporate domination, gaping economic inequality, and the mounting threat of war.

Writing in the *Post*, Dan Balz observed, “One measure of how rapidly things are changing is this: In barely a week, the question has shifted from whether Sanders has a ceiling, based on the fact that he managed just a quarter of the vote in both Iowa and New Hampshire, to whether he can be stopped. The answer to that question could be known as early as Super Tuesday, less than two weeks away.”

In invoking the “process” required to select a nominee, the Democratic candidates are referring to the rule established by the Democratic National Committee that allows nearly 800 unelected “superdelegates” to be seated at the convention, comprised of Democratic congressmen, senators, governors and other current and former officials, as well as all the members of the DNC itself.

These superdelegates are barred from voting for a presidential nominee on the first ballot. But if no candidate wins a majority, superdelegates will vote in the second ballot, and would likely play the decisive role in selecting a nominee other than Sanders.

This is only the expression in the language of convention delegate arithmetic of a more basic political truth: it is absurd to claim, as Sanders does, that the Democratic Party can be transformed into a vehicle for “political revolution” or become the basis for building a movement for vast and progressive change in the United States.

The Democratic Party is a capitalist party, unshakably committed to the defense of the profit system and the global interests of American imperialism. That is true whether its presidential candidate is the billionaire Bloomberg, the longtime Washington operative Biden, the left-talking Senator Warren ... or Sanders himself, whose talk of “socialism” is

nothing more than a “left” label for policies of liberal reform modeled on those of Franklin Roosevelt, the leader of American imperialism in its heyday.

The debate itself demonstrated the basic class orientation of the Democratic Party. As usual in these affairs, but perhaps more strongly than any previous debate, nearly all significant issues of foreign and domestic policy were excluded. There were only a handful of references to the deepening social crisis in America, the harrowing conditions of life facing tens of millions of workers and youth, and the turn to police-state methods by the Trump administration.

There was virtually no discussion of American foreign policy or events taking place outside the United States. There was no mention of the mass struggles sweeping Latin America, or of the coronavirus epidemic, the mounting economic and political tensions between China and the United States, the festering conflicts in the Middle East, or the rise of the fascist far right in Europe.

Nor was there any discussion of the failed impeachment of President Trump—over charges that he held up military aid to Ukraine for its “hot war” with Russia—or of the aggressive and anti-democratic actions Trump has taken since then, including his assertion of an absolute right to intervene in any criminal investigation being conducted by the US Department of Justice.

Amid the endless mutual mudslinging and attempts to “one-up” each other, most of Sanders’ rivals on the debate stage did take the opportunity to denounce the socialist label that has been central to his rise to frontrunner status.

Bloomberg was the most brazen, sneering at attacks on capitalism, declaring that he worked hard for his \$60 billion fortune, and engaging in open red-baiting, saying, “It’s ridiculous. We’re not going to throw out capitalism. We tried. Other countries tried that. It was called communism, and it just didn’t work.” The audience booed.

The two NBC News moderators who are themselves multi-millionaires, Lester Holt and Chuck Todd, incited the candidates to declare their opposition to Sanders’ “socialism,” suggesting that it would doom the Democratic Party in the November election. (Todd was a remarkable choice for a “moderator,” given that he has publicly condemned Sanders supporters as “online brownshirts.”)

In one of his rehearsed lines, Buttigieg presented himself as the happy medium between Sanders and Bloomberg, saying, “most Americans don’t see where they fit if they’ve got to choose between a socialist who thinks that capitalism is the root of all evil and a billionaire who thinks that money ought to be the root of all power.”

Warren reiterated her flat declaration that she was a capitalist, as opposed to Sanders, while professing to agree with him on many issues. Klobuchar declared, “I believe in capitalism,” while claiming that government could act as a check on corporate wealth. Only Biden missed his cue from Holt, who asked him to comment on a poll supposedly showing voter

hostility to socialism. Biden replied with a bit of demagoguery about taxing the wealthy but did not join in the condemnation of the “s-word.”

Sanders himself only confirmed that his “socialism” has nothing to do with an actual struggle by working people to overthrow and replace the profit system. He calls only for higher taxes on the rich, for a somewhat fairer distribution of wealth and income, while maintaining that such changes can be accomplished through the election of a Democratic president and a Democratic Congress.

When his right-wing opponents decry his reform policies as politically unrealistic, declaring that they could never be enacted under the existing two-party system, they are telling the truth, albeit from a right-wing standpoint. Sanders is seeking to delude his millions of supporters with the prospect of a revival of liberal reformism under conditions of a deepening global crisis of capitalism and a turn by the ruling classes all over the world to austerity, militarism, and the promotion of fascist and racist forces.

At one point in the debate, when challenged on the conflict over health care policy between his campaign and the officials of Culinary Workers Local 226, which collects dues from 60,000 casino and hotel workers in Las Vegas, Sanders made an abject disavowal of any criticism of the union officialdom: “I saw some of those tweets regarding the Culinary Workers Union. I have a 30-year 100 percent pro-union voting record. Do you think I would support or anybody who supports me would be attacking union leaders? It’s not thinkable.”

This statement demonstrates Sanders’ real political orientation. He seeks to build, not a genuine popular movement against capitalism, but a diversionary bulwark to block such a movement, consisting of elements of the pseudo left, the trade union apparatus, and as much of the Democratic Party establishment as he can convince to support his efforts.

The author also recommends:

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