

# Democratic Party debate dominated by coronavirus pandemic

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To say that Sunday night's Democratic presidential debate between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden was anticlimactic is obvious. The exchanges between the candidates had been rendered largely irrelevant by the two factors: the massive global impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and the consolidation of the Democratic Party behind Biden, making him the presumptive nominee.

The first factor was far more important: the so-called differences between Sanders and Biden, and between the Democrats and Trump, pale to insignificance in the face of a life-and-death crisis that threatens tens of millions of people, in which the capitalist ruling class is refusing to take any serious action, while it relies on both its political parties to cover up and obscure that overriding political reality.

Biden, who spoke first, was asked about the coronavirus crisis and he responded with a rehearsed profession of sympathy for the victims, along with calls for more testing and for deploying the military to build additional facilities to treat those who are hardest hit by COVID-19—in other words, tent cities for the critically ill.

Panelist Jake Tapper of CNN asked Sanders the following question: “Senator Sanders, this morning, Dr. Anthony Fauci acknowledged that it's possible that hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Americans, could die of coronavirus in a worst-case scenario. If you were president right now, what's the most important thing you would do tonight to try to save American lives?”

The answer was remarkable for Sanders' inability to address the prospective human toll of the coronavirus crisis directly—he said nothing at all about the prospect that millions could die and tens of millions suffer serious and long-term damage to their health.

Sanders called on President Trump to stop “blabbering with unfactual information,” said he was “glad” that Trump had declared a national emergency, and then moved directly to the economic consequences of the public health crisis, on the need for people to receive medical treatment regardless of their ability to pay.

Neither Biden nor Sanders returned to the question of a death toll in the millions, nor did their media questioners ask them to do so, or ask how such a catastrophe could be avoided. The unstated assumption is that it cannot be.

Neither candidate discussed whether workers should remain on the job under conditions where the best practice from the standpoint of public health is “social distancing,” not cramming people into workplaces where they run a greater danger of contracting the infection.

Neither expressed an opinion on the various measures being taken haphazardly by state governments, such as closing schools, restaurants and bars, banning gatherings of large numbers of people, or other emergency actions, or why no national policy had been adopted.

Neither questioned whether primary elections should continue regardless of the public health crisis, although after the debate, in comments to CNN, Sanders suggested that it was questionable for Florida, with its large concentration of retirees and the elderly, the most at risk from coronavirus, to hold its primary today.

As for Biden, the fact that he remained vertical throughout the debate, did not confuse the moderators with the rival candidate, and was able to recall and repeat details of his own coronavirus policy, announced publicly only three days before, was treated as a major triumph by his own campaign, by the Democratic Party

establishment, and by the media. Biden had passed the test, they cheered.

Sanders referred to Biden, as he has repeatedly in recent weeks, as “my friend,” and even declared at one point, “I know your heart is in the right place.” Even when raising issues of Biden’s record, he stopped short whenever it looked like Biden might be put into difficulty.

Media commentators described Sanders as “someone going through the motions,” and as a candidate who “didn’t seem to be trying to win.”

The truth is that the contest resembled a fixed boxing match, where the contestant who has agreed to take a dive only pretends to throw punches. This was Sanders’ role, as he announced days in advance what questions he would ask Biden, and deliberately avoided some of the most dangerous topics—Biden’s longtime embrace of American militarism, his cordial ties to Southern segregationists in the Senate, and his decade as the leading Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, marked by such episodes as the Anita Hill hearing and the passage of law-and-order legislation that sharply raised the incarceration rate for minority youth.

Even the limited number of criticisms Sanders actually made of Biden’s long right-wing record in the Senate and the Obama administration were too much, apparently, for the former vice president. At one point, Biden actually said, “He’s making it hard for me right now,” complaining that Sanders was being too aggressive and making it more difficult to unite the Democratic Party behind the eventual nominee.

As has been the case in the previous ten Democratic debates, there was little discussion of foreign policy, despite Biden’s pretensions to having played a major role in that sphere for many decades, including chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and responsibility for Iraq and Afghanistan during the Obama administration.

Biden did make certain scripted gestures to the “left” wing of the Democratic Party, invoking the name of Senator Elizabeth Warren, the day after reversing himself and declaring his support for some of proposals made by Warren and Sanders on bankruptcy laws and student loan debt.

More significant was his declaration that he would name a female running mate, and if elected, would fill

the next Supreme Court vacancy with a black woman. As *Politico* noted, Biden’s announcement of a woman vice president “is historically unprecedented: No major candidate has ever made such a pledge based on demographic characteristics ...”

Biden was acknowledging the dominant role of identity politics in the Democratic Party, which appeals to the American population on the basis of race and gender to the exclusion of class. Such appeals play a fundamentally reactionary role, seeking to line up working people behind a highly privileged section of the upper middle class, while treating white workers as though they were the “natural” constituency of Trump and the fascistic right.

Voting was scheduled to take place Tuesday in four states, Arizona, Illinois, Florida and Ohio, although Ohio Governor Michael DeWine said Monday he was in favor of suspending in-person voting in his state and conducting the primary entirely by mail ballot. Biden has large leads in the polls in all four states, although it was unclear who would actually turn out to vote under conditions of the coronavirus crisis.

These are likely to be the last primaries for some time, as Georgia has postponed its March 24 vote to May 19, while Louisiana has pushed back the April 4 primary until June 20. The Democratic Party of Puerto Rico said it would postpone the primary set for March 29.



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