

Electability, Democracy, and the 2020 Primaries: What to Watch

Rachael Dean Wilson

The Iowa caucuses mark the start the 2020 presidential election in the United States. The Democratic field has already dwindled from 28 candidates to a more manageable 12. Over the course of three months, all 50 states and U.S. territories will cast ballots to determine the next Democratic nominee to be President Donald Trump's opponent in the general election in November. The exceptionally messy process of a primary campaign gives any party leader heartburn. Republicans used to cite President Ronald Reagan's Eleventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not speak ill of another Republican," to call for civility during their primaries. But the truth is that an open race like the Democratic one this year is the time for a party to sort out its priorities and chart its direction for the general election ahead. Intra-party squabbling is uncomfortable—but it is a vital part of the nominating process. Voters deserve the opportunity to understand and vote on what each candidate stands for.

There are countless plots and subplots to follow throughout these contests, but three key issues are worth watching.

Electability is the Democratic buzzword of 2020. Everyone—from candidates to reporters to voters—wants to talk about which candidate can beat Trump. The challenge here is that the idea of "electability" is subjective, and one cannot be sure how it will factor into voters' decisions. Prioritizing that attribute can in practice mean a lot of guesswork for someone casting a ballot. Even at the basic local level, it involves guessing how their neighbor might vote. Even more challenging, how would independent voters in swing states react to a certain candidate? It is essentially voting based on mind-reading, and probably not a helpful guidepost.

Electability is the Democratic buzzword of 2020.

Complicating the electability consideration, Democrats have a clear choice between centrist and progressive candidates. In other words, primary voters will decide if they want a candidate who offers structural change to government's role in key functions such as healthcare and financial regulation—like Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren—or one who seeks to work within the existing system—like Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, or Amy Klobuchar. In this regard, this is a crucial year for the Democratic Party as the nominee chosen will impact down-ballot candidates in this race and, potentially, in election cycles for years to come.

Finally, there is the matter of foreign actors' efforts to undermine trust in the U.S. democratic system. Russia interfered in the 2016 election in a "sweeping and systematic" manner, according to Special Counsel Robert Mueller's final report. As part of that effort, a Russian government-sponsored troll farm capitalized on the tensions between the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders during the 2016 primaries and throughout the general election to amplify divisions among Democratic voters and, more significantly, to undermine faith in the democratic process by playing to fears of a "rigged" election.

Russian state-backed media is not just capitalizing on candidate division.

This year, they seem to be following much the same playbook. Hamilton 2.0, the Alliance for Securing Democracy's dashboard that tracks Russian state-backed media and official accounts, already reveals a repeat of this strategy. This time, as well as focusing on amplifying the progressive/centrist divide, they are also targeting the disagreements between the two main progressive candidates, Warren and Sanders. But Russian state-backed media is not just capitalizing on candidate division; its messaging spreads the idea of a rigged election by placing blame on "corporate media" as well. It will be important to see if these claims, likely made by U.S. actors as well, take hold with during this primary season. All Americans—from candidates and political parties to voters and local elected officials—have a responsibility to share thoughts online responsibly and speak so as not amplify such narratives in a way that undermines faith in our democratic system.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC

www.gmfus.org