

Democratic Debate # 11: Trump Lost Before It Began; But Will There Be A Coronavirus Affect?

(And Two Important PR Lessons From the Political Scene For PR Pros, Plus Two Important Lessons For Future Political Office Seekers)

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If President Trump is reelected, he should invite the leadership of the Democratic National Committee to his inaugural party. Because by scheduling so many debates during which Democrats presidential hopefuls criticized other Democratic candidates, the Republicans didn't have to waste time and money planning attacks on the candidates: All they had to do was remind people to watch the debates.



In the aggregate, I thought that the first 10 debates did nothing to help the Democrats in the 2020 election. What it accomplished was the damaging of other Democratic candidates. Too many circular firing squads; too few attacks on Donald Trump, except by Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg. And what did that get them? Thumbs down by the primary voters. After the first 10 [debates](#), my score was Democrats' 6, Trump 4, not because of the Democrats' actions, but because of

Trump's manic, childish, narcissistic, grandiose behavior, and setting a U.S. presidential record for lying. And that was prior to his calling the coronavirus outbreak a "Democratic hoax" and fibbing about everything else associated with it. Thus even before Debate # 11 began, the score was Democrats 7, Trump 4.

But with the Democratic candidates' field shrinking to former veep Joe Biden and Sen. Sanders, did Debate # 11 provide less attacks on each other that could work to Trump's advantage? More on that later. *(But any advantage that Trump might have gained from Sanders and Biden attacking each other probably was eclipsed before the debate began by the president's inept handling and remarks regarding the coronavirus.)*

Because Sen. Sanders' followers are true believers (aka as fanatics in my dictionary), the coronavirus scare should play to his advantage during Tuesday's voting. Fanatics are much more likely to wait in line to vote, despite being advised by medical pros to stay away from crowds, than rationale voters. The flip side is that young voters, that make up the bulk of Sanders' supporters, don't vote in large numbers.

Before Commentating on Debate # 11, A Recap Of The Last Debate:

In my Super Tuesday round-up column I said the following about remaining candidates:

- **Joe Biden:** The former veep said that he considers himself a liberal, but a look at his record suggests he's a liberal – moderate, more liberal than most members of the Senate, but less than Sens. Sanders and Warren. If Biden becomes the candidate, he might have a tough time convincing Sanders voters to back him, instead of staying at home as they did in 2016 when Hillary Clinton was the nominee. While Biden had a generally liberal voting record as a senator he'll have

to defend his vote for the Iraq war and his sorry performance when, as the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he presided over the confirmation hearings in which Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment during his Supreme Court hearings in 1991. Nevertheless, his Super Tuesday performance was terrific and Bloomberg endorsing Biden the following day is certain to gain him additional support.

- **Bernie Sanders:** The Super Tuesday results showed that the senator's support is a mile long and an inch deep. In order to have a chance to win the Democratic presidential nomination he has to attract more than his fanatical supporters. That would mean moderating his policies, which could turn off some of his current base. No matter what Sanders does, I don't think he can attract liberal-moderate voters. And I don't think he will be nominated at the convention.
- **Elizabeth Warren:** My original choice for the nomination (for many months). But as the campaign continued, she reminded me of a female Bernie Sanders, sounding like she's the only person who knows what's right for the country. She positioned herself as the alternative to the ultra-liberal Sen. Sanders and suggested the other candidates were not liberal. While some people think that her debate performances of interrupting other candidates before they concluded their responses to questions and her vicious attacks on Bloomberg, who has done more to help liberal and Democratic office holders than all of the other candidates rolled into one, helped invigorate her campaign, I think it damaged her chances for the presidential nomination, even if there is a brokered convention.

Did anything happen between the Super

Tuesday voting on March 3 and Debate # 11 on March 15? Yes, some were the same old, same old. However, there were also significant new occurrences, one that was related to Super Tuesday but happened prior to it.

The most noteworthy event was Biden's resounding victory in the South Carolina primary, which carried over after his Super Tuesday success and continued until the voting on "Super Tuesday Jr." on March 10. It was the coalescing of the former veep's presidential opponents into a Biden support group. Helped by a string of endorsements by former candidates, Biden strengthened his delegate lead over Sanders with convincing victories on March 10. *(In my opinion, the nomination race is now over and Biden can seriously start thinking about his veep running mate, and Sanders should start thinking about how he will convince his fanatical supporters to vote for Biden in November.)*

The Biden support group trajectory:

- On March 4, former NYC Mayor Bloomberg acted in a statesmanlike manner saying that he entered the race to defeat President Trump and after the Super Tuesday results the best option for accomplishing that was to withdraw and endorse Joe Biden.
- Contrasting Bloomberg, on March 4, was Sen. Sanders, who immediately attacked Biden for his past stands on NAFTA, social security and Iraq.
- Sanders was counting on the Michigan primary on March 10 (Michigan has 125 pledged delegates) to revive his faltering campaign. But a possible fatal setback to the Vermont senator's plan occurred on March 5, when Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer endorsed Biden, and on

March 10, when other Michigan political leaders backed Biden.

- On March 5, Sen. Warren suspended her campaign. In theory, most of her followers would vote for Sen. Sanders in the remaining primaries. But I'd be willing to bet a Boston cream pie, with a cranberry topping and a side of baked navy beans that Biden will receive off-setting endorsements for the remainder of the primary season.
- [Former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick](#) joined the Biden band wagon on March 6.
- On Sunday, March 8 there were two significant occurrences: Sen. Sanders reiterated on Chris Wallace's TV program that he will definitely support Biden if the former veep gets the nomination. (*The question is will Sanders' fanatical supporters follow his lead or stay home as many did in the 2016 election, to Trump's advantage?*) The other significant occurrence was that Sen. Kamala Harris endorsed Biden prior to the voting in other primary states and said she will campaign in Michigan for Biden.
- Also on March 8, the Rev. Jesse Jackson endorsed Sen. Sanders and joined him in a rally in Michigan. (*In my view, Rev. Jackson's endorsement is less important than Sen. Harris' of Biden, because Harris is a rising star, Jackson a fading one.*)
- On March 9, Sen. Cory Booker endorsed Biden.
- On March 10, Andrew Yang, another fallen Democratic candidate, endorsed Biden.
- Of the major candidates only Sen. Warren has yet to endorse a candidate. I'm willing to give up punditry (but not for too long) if she doesn't eventually support Biden, because not doing so would weaken her ability to push for legislation she favors if Biden wins the presidency.

(There are too many endorsements to list them all. The above are

what I consider game changers in Biden's favor.)

A less important, but still significant, occurrence happened on March 11, the day after Sanders poor showing on Super Tuesday Jr. He made a speech during which he attempted to choreograph the questioning of the March 15 debate by enumerating a number of questions that he would ask Biden. The questions all were about Biden's stance on issues that Sanders has been campaigning on for years. It obviously was an attempt to get Biden to say he will promote Sanders' agenda. However, there were two important aspects in the speech. In the beginning and the conclusion, Sanders emphasized that he would do anything to help defeat President Trump, and unlike past Sanders' speech there were no attacks on Biden, which indicated to me that the senator would soon suspend his campaign and endorse Biden. Sanders also said that if Biden hoped to attract younger voters, the bulk of Sanders support, the former veep would have to embrace some of the Vermont senator's positions (which I believe is true and was borne out during exit interviews with voters who embraced much of the senator's agenda, even though they cast a ballot for Biden.)

With only two candidates remaining, the made-for-TV series should have provided a more detailed and fact-driven debate on March 15. In some aspects it did. But it also provided a comic disagreement between Sen. Sanders and Biden's staffers whether the two should stand or sit during the questioning.

There were two aspects about Debate # 11 that I thought were most important: Did the remaining two candidates continue to attack each other in a manner that could work to Trump's advantage? And did Sen. Sanders, after resounding defeats in South Carolina and on Super Tuesday and Super Tuesday Jr. change his debate strategy?

(During my previous debate articles, I've designated winners and losers, not to the debaters, but to the Democrats or President Trump, depending on what transpired during the

debates. In this case, I didn't have to wait until it was concluded before choosing a winner, or more precisely a loser. It was Trump because of his mishandling of the coronavirus epidemic, which was muddled and lying (that shouldn't be surprising), augmented by a Neanderthal-like view of science.)

Nevertheless Here's my evaluation regarding debate # 11:

(Thus far in my opinion, Sen. Sanders has outperformed Biden in every previous debate.)

- This was the best of all the debates because it was limited to just Biden and Sanders, providing them both with more time to explain their positions.
- There was a major difference between the approaches of the two candidates: Sanders talked in generalities; Biden in specifics.
- Sanders attacked Biden on the former veep's positions on social security, student loans, the Defense of Marriage act, the Hyde Amendment, gay rights, the Iraq war and NAFTA. Biden denied some of Sanders accusations.
- Biden attacked Sanders on his positions regarding Central America and particularly his comments about how some conditions in China and Cuba have improved. The Vermont senator replied that facts are facts but that he condemns dictatorships everywhere.
- Both Biden and Sanders agreed on many positions, but split over how to achieve them.

Because Biden provided specifics about how he would achieve his aims, I awarded this debate to him. Saying that, Sanders also did well, as he always does in these debates.

I also thought the CNN-Univision moderators, Ilia Calderon, of Univision, and CNN's chief political correspondent Dana Bash and anchor Jake Tapper turned in the best moderated debate of

the series.

They began and ended the debate with the major news of the week, questioning the candidates about how they would tackle the coronavirus.

The trio of moderators made CBS' Norah O'Donnell and Gayle King look like they flunked journalism 101, because even though the coronavirus was the big news on February 25, the day of their debate, they followed their prepared list of questions and didn't discuss the coronavirus situation until late in that debate. That was also one day after Sen. Sanders made his partial defense of Fidel Castro, which should have been the second questions asked. Just awful journalism.

What About The Future:

I believe that Sen. Sanders will suspend his campaign and call for his backers to support Biden before the end of March. And that Sen. Warren will endorse Biden shortly after.

My Take:

- In my estimation Mike Bloomberg is the MVP of the primary season and before. Even prior to suspending his campaign after a poor showing on Super Tuesday, the former NYC mayor has already done damage to President Trump. His support of Democrats running in the 2018 election helped Democrats win control of the House, which resulted in Trump being impeached. And his ads obviously have irked the president, who attacked Bloomberg even after he suspended his campaign. Even though he is no longer a candidate Bloomberg can still do considerable damage to Trump's reelection efforts by continuing to do what he did in 2018 and during his 2020 campaign: Providing the funds that Democratic candidates can use in their campaigns and by continuing his on-target ads condemning the Trump presidency. He has done

more to help Democratic office holders get elected than all of the other candidates combined. But that didn't stop Sen. Warren from viciously attacking him, a main reason I withdrew my support of her and switched to Bloomberg.

- No matter who the Democratic candidate is, the person cannot completely ignore Sen. Sanders' campaign messages. Together with Sen. Warren's ideas they make up a large portion of what the Democratic base believes, (including me, and I'm not a socialist, just a believer that when people need help they should get help from the government because they'll never get it from the private sector, which is all about profits.) The Democratic platform must embrace some of Sander's ideas, and the candidate must include some of them while campaigning during the lead-up to the November election. (*While I disagree with Sen. Sanders' remarks about U.S. foreign policy, I do believe a large portion of his economic message about conditions in the U.S. is correct and should be addressed.*)
- If I was strategizing the Democratic campaigns, I'd spend a lot of money on TV and social media on ads emphasizing how President Trump tried to cut The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funding.
- The ease of which the coronavirus is spreading across the U.S. caused Sen. Sanders and Biden to cancel rallies. (*Since most people who attend the rallies have already made up their minds about who to support, it will not do any lasting damage to the candidates. The losers will be the cable TV channels, which depend on the rallies for content and punditry comments.*) However, President Trump, who is also Chairperson of the Coronavirus Hunch, Flat Earth and Global Frozen Societies, scheduled a rally in the midst of the virus outbreak, and then postponed it.
- The similarity of political consultants and football and baseball managers: Ever notice how campaign mangers for

losing candidates are hired by other candidates? Or how losing football and baseball managers are hired by other teams? Or how losing campaign managers show up on cable TV as political experts? In none political and none sports businesses, winners, not losers, would be hired by other entities. (*Advice to novice PR people: Consider leaving your job and joining a political or sports organization. Unlike our field, bad work does not disqualify you from advancement.*)

- I take exception with the media, led by the sorry cable TV political shows, for dividing candidates into “progressives,” “moderates,” or “conservatives” categories. As someone who has worked on local, state and presidential campaigns, I know that a candidate can have different policy positions, which according to today’s media labeling would do the candidate an injustice by channeling the person into a one – size – fits – all grouping. I’ll use myself as an example: I lean left of center on most economic issues; slightly less left of center on social issues, and center or right of center on police and military issues. In fact, because I always give the benefit of the doubt to police actions (not to those who protest them) and I am against a volunteer Army and believe in a draft, “progressives” would consider me an “extreme right of center conservative,” which I am not (no matter what they say). Good journalism would detail how the candidates differ on specific issues, but doing so would go against the formula of the headline driven “Breaking News” reports on cable. Also, I’m willing to bet an expensive lunch or dinner that most of the cable reporters do not know the specific details of the candidates’ positions.
- A tale of Two Parties: Here’s what wrong about American politics today: Democrats – The color of a person’s skin is more important in selecting candidates than choosing the most qualified individuals. Republicans – Not standing up to a divisive, incompetent, ignorant

president (read his statements about the coronavirus and his being surprised to hear that the flu kills people). What is important to the GOP is not speaking out against the president and keeping their concerns about his behavior limited to “off-the-record” conversations with journalists.

- The bungled response by the White House, first by playing down the threat and then having President Trump contradict health experts and saying he had a “hunch” about the progress of the coronavirus, will give the Democratic candidate for president an unexpected line of attack. Even pro-Trump papers like the Wall Street Journal have had stories critical of how the president has responded to the outbreak. (*Example: On March 10, two articles in the WSJ were critical of the president’s response.*) Health legislation concerns were a big factor in the Democrats winning the House in 2018. They are certain, because of the coronavirus, to be even a stronger Democratic issue in November.
- My suggestion for lexicographers: New definition for “hoax.” Anything that President Trump disagrees with. Example: The coronavirus is a hoax.
- Health advice for political junkies: Don’t hold your breath waiting for the next debate. Even though the Democratic National Committee announced that there would be 12 debates, the final one has not yet been announced. If Biden sweeps Tuesday’s primaries and greatly extends his delegate lead over Sanders, Debate # 12 might never be held.

Important Lesson # 1 from the political scene for PR pros: Being the most competent person in your agency does not guarantee your rise to a high-ranking position.

Important Lesson # 2 from the political scene for PR pros: President Trump, who has been caught by fact checkers of lying about 16,000 times since he took office, has also lied about

the coronavirus. As a result, whatever he now says about the virus is taken with a grain of salt, no matter what lackeys like Vice President Pence says about the president's magnificent leadership during the epidemic. Remember: Never lie or mislead the press. Unlike the president, you, your agency or your client are not a "must" cover story. Get caught lying once and you might find yourself on the "Do not trust" list.

Important Lesson # 1 from the political scene for future political office seekers: As Sen. Sanders has learned, a "movement" doesn't mean most voters believe in it.

Important Lesson # 2 from the political scene for future political office seekers: As Sen. Sanders has learned, young voters talk a lot but they don't vote a lot.

Personal Experience Note: I hate to see airline employees laid off because the coronavirus is limiting travelers. But it's difficult to feel sorry for the airlines because of the way they treat passengers.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at arthursolomon4pr@juno.com or artsolomon4pr@optimum.net.