

Bernie Sanders Is the Democrat to Beat

With less than a week to go before the official kickoff of the Democratic primaries, the parallels between the dynamics of the 2020 primaries and the contest in 2016 are almost uncanny. If there is both one key similarity and one major difference, they both involve the socialist senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders.

The similarity is that Sanders has found himself once again among the top-two candidates. The difference is that this time, he could actually win.

It is easy to have the reflexive opinion that a second Sanders run would be even more incredulous, less feasible, and not nearly as exciting to the Left 2016 bid was. His advanced age (he will be 79 on Inauguration Day next year) and his declining health (exemplified by a heart attack during a campaign event in October) are factors that immediately would doom any other candidate.

But Sanders has more than managed to make up for these negatives with one timeless positive that hasn't stopped working for him: His clear and oft-proven status as a political outsider.

Bernie vs. The DNC

Even as the senator is forced off the campaign trail for the immediate future by the impeachment trial of President Trump (which, in theory, should boost former Vice President Joe Biden even more than the establishment is otherwise inclined to do), it seems that one group is determined to campaign overtime for Sanders in 2020: the Democratic National Committee.

Of course, their help is not direct or intended. It has long since been confirmed beyond doubt that the DNC, as punishment for Sanders challenging Clinton's coronation four years ago, actively rigged the primaries against him via the use of superdelegates. Although they have been careful to avoid repeating the same mistake this time, they still cannot resist the urge to make their hatred of Sanders clear to voters.

First, his recent confrontation with Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) obviously was a coordinated hit on Sanders, orchestrated by Warren and CNN. The convenient leak of a story by CNN alleging that Sanders in 2018 told Warren that a woman could never be president came just two days before the seventh primary debate, which CNN hosted. The wording of the moderators' questions that repeatedly targeted Sanders on this issue – and directly implied that he was lying in his denial – was meant to boost Warren, [but only backfired](#) as Sanders' support, including among women, saw a rise rather than a decline.

After Warren's attempted hit failed, next came a hit from none other than the greatest loser herself, Hillary Clinton.

In an interview with [Hollywood Reporter](#) promoting the upcoming Hulu documentary series about her failed run, Clinton slammed Sanders by asserting that “nobody likes him, nobody wants to work with him,” and she even called him “a career politician.” And once again, this interjection of a failed establishment candidate's unwanted opinion only further strengthened the Sanders campaign, as he promises to do what Clinton failed to do.

Now the Democratic elite is preparing their biggest weapon: former President Barack Obama.

[Politico previously reported](#) in November that Obama has said privately he would consider speaking out against a possible Sanders nomination if the Vermont socialist appears poised to

win. [Recent additional reports](#) lend additional credibility to this report, setting up the real possibility that Obama might pull a Mitt Romney and give a public speech against a Sanders 2020 ticket. Therein lies another eerie similarity to the 2016 race, and it's a safe bet that this, too, will backfire tremendously and only energize the outsider and his base.

If a determination to avenge Sanders' mistreatment by the DNC in 2016 wasn't enough for the "Bernie Bros," then the Democratic establishment's continuing efforts to undermine Sanders even further are only adding fuel to that fire. It's the same political ["Streisand effect"](#) that boosted President Trump in 2016.

The Long March

The 2020 field, as the largest presidential primary field in history, has proven extremely unstable. Numerous ["flavor of the month"](#) candidates have risen and fallen since they first began announcing their bids in early 2019, from Beto O'Rourke and Andrew Yang to Senators Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) and Elizabeth Warren, with South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg experiencing two different surges before falling back down to reality both times. And that's to say nothing of the more than 20 other candidates who have been relegated to the margins of error in most polls.

In that sense, the 2020 Democratic field is more closely resembling the 2012 Republican field, where it was purely a matter of *when* a candidate would have his turn. Only after primary polling first circulated through Michelle Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, and Newt Gingrich, did it finally land on then-Senator Rick Santorum (R-Penn.), whose surge came right before the Iowa caucus. That alone enabled him to win that contest, and thus emerge as the *de facto* alternative to the consistent frontrunner, Romney.

It is the same with Sanders, as his much-needed surge in Iowa

takes place at this crucial moment. [As the New York Times reports](#), Sanders has surged into first place in a new statewide poll conducted by the *Times* and Siena College, with 25 percent; the next-highest is Buttigieg, at 18 percent. [Another poll](#) conducted by Emerson College has him up by nine points over Biden.

This is already good news for Sanders on the surface, but another key factor must be remembered: If 2016 proved anything, it's that polls cannot be trusted, especially when it comes to outsider candidates.

It's worth recalling that Sanders actually [outperformed polling expectations](#) in both Iowa and New Hampshire in 2016; in the former, he was projected to lose to Clinton by about four points, but lost by only 0.25. In New Hampshire, while he was largely expected to win, his actual margin of victory (22 percentage points) was even greater than what he was expected to achieve (a roughly 13 percentage point-margin). If Sanders is projected to win Iowa in any way this time around, then the only question is by how much; the same goes for New Hampshire.

Another metric of success to keep a close eye on besides polling is fundraising – and in this area, too, Sanders can only boast victory. In the fourth quarter of 2019, he [raised a staggering \\$34.5 million](#), far surpassing his competitors; the next-highest, Buttigieg, raised \$10 million less than that.

Echoes of 2016

If there is one more comparison that must be made between 2016 and 2020, then it's this: Sanders shares many of the same campaign pitfalls and strengths that Donald Trump had as a candidate.

Like Trump, Sanders can boast of a consistent core base that will follow him to the gates of Hell and back. Like Trump, Sanders may not have a very high approval rating ceiling, but

he also does not have a very low floor.

With consistently high marks in other key categories among primary voters, such as [personal favorability](#) and likelihood of being [many Democratic voters' second choice](#), Sanders has just enough going for him in ways that could push undecided voters (of which, as the *Times* notes, there are still plenty in Iowa) into his camp at the last moment.

And one last key detail that could secure Sanders' victory in the 2020 primaries is the same thing that ultimately guaranteed Trump the nomination before: A massive and divided field.

Although the current state of the race, with only 12 candidates remaining, is a far cry from its overall size of 29 (and peaked at 25 simultaneous candidates), there still remain plenty of candidates who can cut away large enough swaths of the electorate to keep any one of them away from an outright majority. In addition to the widely-accepted top four candidates (Sanders, Biden, Warren, and Buttigieg), others such as billionaires [Michael Bloomberg](#) and [Tom Steyer](#) could pull off strong performances in later contests as well, which will further widen the numerous rifts in this cycle.

Sanders was able to come within just 0.2 percentage points of beating Clinton in Iowa, and still bested her by a nearly 2-to-1 margin in New Hampshire, in a two-way race. In a four-, five-, or six-person race, Sanders' base could be more than enough to carry him to victory with a plurality alone in both states.

The Sanders Snowball?

At that point, it becomes a matter of snowballing his momentum. If he secures Iowa and New Hampshire (which increasingly looks likely), he will then be giving Biden a run for his money in Nevada. If Sanders can come in even just a

narrow second place there, he will still have far more enthusiasm (and more delegates) than the former vice president. At that point, even after Biden's all-but-guaranteed win in South Carolina thanks to the black vote, Sanders will still be the candidate to beat.

It is likely to come down to what perhaps will be the most consequential Super Tuesday since 2008. For the first time in recent memory, the grand prize of California will be voting significantly earlier in the year than its usual primary month of June. The Democratic stronghold will instead be voting on March 3, alongside the other mega-primary state, Texas, and 12 other states.

Four of the last five polls have Sanders winning in California, which is worth more than 400 delegates. And this is one state where Bloomberg could prove to be the decisive factor.

Like Steyer in South Carolina, Bloomberg is largely forgoing the early states in favor of [spending heavily](#) in the delegate gold mine that is the Golden State. And it's crystal clear which candidate is most hurt by a strong performance from Bloomberg, a self-styled moderate: It's Biden voters, not Sanders voters, who are more likely to be drawn to the New York mega-billionaire, and Sanders is the beneficiary of this split.

Of course, voters' sentiments change almost on a dime, and anything can happen. Sanders could still lose if voters flock to Biden in search of safety, or if Buttigieg reaps the rewards of his one-state campaign where he is betting everything on Iowa. If that last thing happens, Sanders could be crippled going into New Hampshire, and if he were to somehow lose the Granite State, then his campaign would enter a coma.

In the end, it will come down to whether or not Democratic

voters decide to go with a “safe” vote (Biden) or take a risk (Sanders). Fortunately for Sanders, it appears that the voters just might be preparing to give up on the malarkey and take that leap of faith after all. With all these indications coming at just the right time, this contest truly is Bernie Sanders’ to lose.

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