

## OPINION

# It's not the debates, it's the caucuses and primaries that count

Robert Weiner and Ben Lasky, Guest columnists    Published 3:34 p.m. CT Sept. 17, 2019

The Washington Post's Dan Balz wrote a piece on July 15 headlined, "[In Debate, Hopefuls Didn't Do Much to Change Minds.](https://beta.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-houston-debate-changed-few-minds-but-may-have-opened-a-few/2019/09/14/d3f9ed60-d663-11e9-9610-fb56c5522e1c_story.html)" ([https://beta.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-houston-debate-changed-few-minds-but-may-have-opened-a-few/2019/09/14/d3f9ed60-d663-11e9-9610-fb56c5522e1c\\_story.html](https://beta.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-houston-debate-changed-few-minds-but-may-have-opened-a-few/2019/09/14/d3f9ed60-d663-11e9-9610-fb56c5522e1c_story.html)) What will make the difference? Iowa's nation-first caucuses dominate polling and projections, and likely will have far more impact than the debates, which to date have changed little in the standings of the front runners. Real votes count.

It's the coalitions that each candidate builds in the caucuses and primaries, and then in the general election, that determine the real winners — who gets the votes.

On Aug. 19's episode of "[All In with Chris Hayes.](https://www.msnbc.com/all)" (<https://www.msnbc.com/all>) the host said, "You're putting together this coalition of lots of different people, lots of different backgrounds and distinct experiences. And in some ways the doing of that in the primary is a real — is the ultimate test for this question of electability. Like, can you get different people from all walks of life and different experiences to back you?"

The pundits and newscasters have been filling the airwaves with X or Y group can determine the election. The truth is, it takes not just a village but a country of all different coalitions.

It's not just African Americans who know the coded words and actions of the White House, or the Parkland youth movement on guns, or Hispanics disenchanted with harsh immigration policies and parents who sympathize with caged children, or women who oppose Trump's treatment of them or his newfound pro-life mantra and his anti-choice judges, or farmers being tariffed to death, or middle-income workers who figured out they lose under the administration's trickle-down, or adults with high student loan obligations, or members of the LGBTQ community who realize they've gotten little from the White House. In elections as close as we have, it's all of these, and more.

In 2018, Democrats won the House and won several governorships and state legislative seats because they received votes from women, African Americans, young people, Latinos, etc. It wasn't one group that made the difference in the 2018 midterms, and it will take that same all-hands-on-deck approach to defeat Trump in 2020.



Democratic presidential candidates South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg, former Vice President Joe Biden, Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA), Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), former tech executive Andrew Yang, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) interact after the Democratic Presidential Debate at Texas Southern University on Sept. 12, 2019 in Houston, Texas. (Photo: Win McNamee, Getty Images)

About 32 million Latinos will be eligible to vote in 2020. For the first time, they will be the largest minority group in the U.S. But Democrats can't bank on Latinos to being so infuriated by Trump's insults about immigrants and his kidnapping of children that they will show up to the polls in droves. Trump began his run for the presidency by calling Mexicans rapists and double, tripled and quadrupled down on his immigrant attacks throughout the 2016 campaign. Yet Trump still won 28% of the Latino vote. Latinos who voted for Trump knew who he was.

Democrats also have to work for the black vote. Twice as many African Americans voted in the 2018 midterms compared to 2014. A study conducted by the NAACP and the African American Research Collaborative found that 90% of African Americans supported the Democratic candidate in competitive elections. However, according to the same study, 21% feel the Democratic Party is indifferent towards the black community. Democrats must speak passionately about further prison reforms, gun control and police shootings. Putting out actual policy proposals to deal with these issues instead of paying lip service would be even better.

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- [Our guide to the 2020 Democratic presidential field](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/iowa-poll/caucus/2019/06/09/who-running-president-and-what-do-iowans-think-candidates-iowa-poll-opinions/1359645001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=2721936002)

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- [September 2019: Elizabeth Warren leads Register's Iowa Poll for the first time, besting Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/iowa-poll/2019/09/22/iowa-poll-election-2020-iowa-caucus-elizabeth-warren-joe-biden-bernie-sanders-democrat-candidates/2370015001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=2721936002)

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One of those issues, gun control, played a large part in turning out young voters in 2018. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 31% of eligible voters aged 18-29 voted in 2018, by far the highest turnout in that age group in at least 25 years. The March for Our Lives following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, ignited young people all over the country to register to do the same in 2020 if they want real gun reform.

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When it comes to suburban women, it's simple: They hate Donald Trump. "It is making women physically sick. That is the word they use all the time — the word is 'nauseous,'" Christine Matthews, a Republican pollster told Vox in 2018. Whoever wins the primary needs to be a stark contrast to the president. He or she must demonstrate that if elected, the insults will stop. The cozying up to dictators will stop. Using Twitter at 5 a.m. to air grievances and announce policies (unknown to Cabinet members) will stop. The racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia will stop. The Democratic nominee has to convince people that if he or she is elected, citizens of the world can look at our president with at least a modicum of respect.

In November 2020, Democrats need everyone to show up. No group will make the difference and every group will make the difference. To defeat the president, Democrats will need overwhelming votes from every community

In other words, Democrats can't count on their "coalition." They have to work at it.

*Robert Weiner is a former spokesman for the Clinton White House, the House Government Operations Committee, and the House Aging Committee, and senior staff for Congressmen Pepper, Koch, Rangel, Conyers, and Sen. Ted Kennedy. Ben Lasky is senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.*

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