

*Say's reading materials for Group A*

*August 1, 2019*

*The Economist*

## **Joe Biden comes under fire in the second Democratic debate**

*The former vice-president tries to preserve his polling lead by defending moderation*

**Democracy in America**

Aug 1st 2019

by I.K. | WASHINGTON

“TONIGHT I THINK Democrats are expecting some engagement here—and I expect we’ll get it.” That was Joe Biden’s opening line in last night’s televised debate between ten of the party’s presidential candidates, and he made good on the promise. After a sleepy, stammering and unsteady performance in the first primary debates in June, Mr Biden, a former vice-president and current front-runner, came prepared to fend off attacks. He had been particularly savaged in the previous debate by Kamala Harris, a California senator who had rebuked his warm recollections of segregationist senators, along with his one-time opposition to mandatory school busing. No such moment materialised in this debate—neither for Ms Harris, the only other heavyweight to share the stage with him (Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg had all participated in another debate the previous night), nor for any of the eight other candidates, who barely register two percentage points apiece.

That was not for lack of trying. Mr Biden was attacked often and hard. He and Ms Harris tussled at the start over the wisdom of Medicare for All, as the idea of a single-payer health-care system is known. The former vice-president opposes it as a goal; the senator embraces it with the zeal of a

fresh convert. Mr Biden's plan, which would extend the framework of the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare), is judged insufficiently progressive by Ms Harris; she reckons it would leave 10m Americans uninsured. Julián Castro, a former housing secretary, attacked the front-runner for demurring at his bid to decriminalise illegal immigration. That idea has gained currency with remarkable speed among progressively minded Democratic candidates. Then Cory Booker, a senator from New Jersey, assailed Mr Biden for the tough-on-crime laws he had supported in Congress ("I'm happy you've evolved, but you've offered no redemption to the people in prison right now for life"). Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York senator, dug up an op-ed which Mr Biden had written 40 years ago, to imply that he had not thought women should join the workplace. Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York City, tried to pick fights with Mr Biden over deportations and trade. Finally Jay Inslee, Washington state's governor, damned Mr Biden's plan to tackle climate change as "middling".

Mr Biden acquitted himself much better than he had last time. Some of his answers trailed off, and he seemed to stumble over memorised talking points. But he was able to deflect most of the damage. "Thirty trillion dollars has to be paid. And I don't know what math you do in New York, I don't know what math you do in California, but I tell ya, that's a lot of money," he said, parrying criticism about his health-care plan by laying into the policies of Ms Harris and Mr de Blasio. Mr Biden would not be outflanked on immigration by Mr Castro, who served in Barack Obama's cabinet while he was vice-president, retorting that "I never heard him talk about any of this when he was the secretary". Likewise Mr Booker would have to answer for the policing practices in his own city of Newark before attacking him. Ms Gillibrand's broadsides, implying sexism on Mr Biden's part, landed oddly, given their recently warm working relationship to combat rape on college campuses. "I don't know what's happened, except that you're now running for president," he replied. If it was not a stirring performance, it probably sufficed to stave off another drop in the polls.

It is nonetheless striking that Mr Biden's left flank should draw such fire. The substance of his platform would have seemed radical just a few years ago. The new litmus tests of the primary debate—whether or not

candidates profess adulation for Medicare for All or the Green New Deal; whether they would decriminalise illegal immigration; and whether they would provide health insurance to those undocumented immigrants—have rapidly become benchmarks for defining the differences between moderate and progressive. The previous night's debate, featuring the true-believer progressive duo of Mr Sanders and Ms Warren, demonstrated the momentum of such thinking within the party.

There were some strong showings from the more marginal candidates, though none is likely to have achieved the sort of breakout moment needed to qualify for the next primary debate. Michael Bennet, an astute senator from Colorado but an underwhelming orator, may have showed enough spark to attract a second look. (Like Mr Biden, his instincts tend towards pragmatism on issues like health care and impeachment.) Andrew Yang, an entrepreneur from New York, was cogent and displayed a remarkable ability to redirect all questions towards his signature campaign pledge: universal basic income for Americans. Mr Booker, perhaps the most naturally gifted speaker on the stage, turned in another decent performance, though he left little time to explain his own signature policies, beyond “the call to unite in common cause and common purpose”.

Before the next debate, scheduled for September 12th in Houston, the eligibility requirements for participation are to be raised, in effect winnowing half the field. That means that the five front-runners from these first four events—kept apart thus far because of debate logistics and television ratings—will at last share a single stage. Expect more engagement.