Opinion

News

Sen. Elizabeth Warren speaks with attendees at the 2020 Iowa State Education Association Legislative Conference in West Des Moines, Iowa, Jan. 18. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)

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It is an open question whether or not a presidential campaign actually provides voters with the information they need to assess who would be the best president. The campaign does test a candidate's viability in the current moment and it tests a candidate's resilience. If the results of the Super Tuesday primaries have shown anything, it is that the candidate who wins is not the person who sails along a straight, ascending trajectory, but the one who falls and finds the grit to get up and fight again, the person who is undaunted and resolute in defeat. That is not a bad quality to have in a president, to be sure, but it is hardly exhaustive.

In the weeks ahead, as the task of uniting the Democratic Party becomes a pressing need, it is doubtful the campaign itself will assist that task: Negative ads and one more, likely nasty, debate are in the offing.

What do we look for in our candidates? It certainly helps if a president is able to articulate a vision for the country, but articulateness is more important on a debate stage than it is in the Oval Office. Campaign ads, such as Hillary Clinton's famous "It's 3 a.m." phone call ad, focused the attention of the voters on the need for a president capable of crisis management, but the ad itself was somewhat duplicitous. Any president, except of course the incumbent, when awakened at 3 a.m. by their national security adviser, would ask the same two questions: What do you recommend? How soon can we assemble the team?

Instead of asking who will answer the phone, it might be more important to know who is placing the call, which might help answer the larger question: Does a candidate have a knack for assembling a team of competent, intelligent advisers?

The ability to raise money may be an indicator of a candidate's popularity, but not necessarily that his or her popularity is broad-based.

For the first 160 years of the nation's history, legislative experience was very helpful, because Congress was considered the dominant branch of government, not

the executive, but legislative experience does not always translate into effective management of the executive branch.

On March 5, Harold Meyerson began his "On Tap" column at The American Prospect with these words: "Earlier today, the candidate who would have made the best president of the United States ended her candidacy." I agree entirely, and I would also agree with his verdict that "she wasn't the most compelling candidate" if I were permitted to modify it a tad: Sen. Elizabeth Warren started as the most compelling candidate, but her campaign robbed her of that.

I attended one of Warren's town halls in New Hampshire. I have never seen a more gifted communicator on the campaign trail. Not since Bill Clinton has there been a candidate who weaved together personal stories with policy prescriptions more effectively. Her energy level was extraordinary. Many people commented to me that they thought her down-home demeanor was fake, but that is who she is. Elizabeth Warren is many things, but a snob is not one of them.

A line forms for a selfie with Sen. Elizabeth Warren after a May 19, 2019, campaign event in Nashua, New Hampshire. (Wikimedia Commons/Marc Nozell)

For the first nine months of last year, Warren's campaign was in the ascendency. She eschewed the usual team of campaign consultants and, instead, assembled a group of very bright, very young policy wonks who devised plan after plan. For the first time since Ronald Reagan convinced Americans that "government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem," a candidate built her entire campaign around the idea that specific, precise government policies could make a positive change in people's lives. She began to rise in the polls. This was no amorphous promise to affect "hope and change." This was a detailed look at how political power could be rearranged and applied to improve the lives of the citizenry and the common health of the commonwealth.

In the autumn, it all started to fall apart. First, Warren had a disastrous debate in October when, repeatedly pressed to explain how she would pay for Medicare for All, she sounded like a politician, evasive and dodgy, ceding one of her campaign's greatest strengths: She is not a career politician but someone who was dragged into politics because of her life's work trying to combat income inequality and its various nasty effects. When she rolled out her health care plan, it rightly came under fire from organized labor and instead of steering into the spin, as one does when you hit ice, she again dodged and weaved.

What is more, in her campaign appearances, she became increasingly prone to voicing some of the tropes of woke political culture, tropes that really did make her look like she had just emerged from the faculty lounge at Harvard University. Just days before the Iowa caucuses, Warren said she would vet her secretary of education with a transgender 9-year-old. It was ridiculous. Warren made free college a centerpiece of her campaign but not once in any debate did she discuss how the government could help the millions of kids who do not go to college. (Neither has anyone else. And Democrats wonder why they lose.) Aimee Allison, the founder of She the People, meant it as a compliment but unwittingly explained why Warren's campaign fizzled when she told The New York Times, "She really comes up as the first white candidate for president who had an intersectional politics." Intersectionality? Yeesh.

All of that said, there is no denying the role that sexism, or at least sexism once removed, played in Warren's failure at the ballot box. Her numbers among male voters were routinely 10 to 15 points lower than her numbers among female voters. I do not think that this difference was attributable mainly to raw sexism. Those concerned to nominate "the strongest" challenger to President Donald Trump compared Warren to Clinton, even though it would be difficult to imagine two politicians less like each other *except for their gender*.

To be sure, there are some voters for whom the nomination of a woman would create an additional hurdle just as there were some voters for whom the nomination of a Catholic in 1960 or of a black man in 2008 was a bridge too far. The only way to confront such bigotry is to confront such bigotry. Besides, did anyone doubt she could go toe-to-toe on the debate stage with Trump and peel the bark off him like she did someone else?

Before she left the race, Warren did something wonderful for the Democratic Party: In about 30 seconds, she destroyed the candidacy of billionaire Mike Bloomberg. Four years ago, the Republican Party was the subject of a successful hostile takeover by a billionaire, but the Democrats refused to become the vehicle for any oligarchs. Howard Schultz never even entered the race. Tom Steyer dropped out after South Carolina. But Bloomberg spent half a billion dollars, more than all the other candidates combined. No one knew whether it would work. In the Nevada debate, Warren ended his campaign. His half of a billion spent allowed him to win American Samoa.

What should progressive Catholics do now? There is only one real option: It is time to unite behind the candidacy of Sen. Bernie Sanders, and that is a theme we will pick up on Wednesday.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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