

Democrats' first debate set for Tuesday

---

12/10/2015



They and three other candidates will face the nation Tuesday night in the first Democratic presidential debate, in Las Vegas. They'll be scrutinized for their self-assurance and command of issues, and whether they demonstrate empathy toward voters feeling wounded by years of economic turmoil.

The debate is the opening chapter of a new, intense phase for a Democratic campaign fought so far in the media and in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. The next acts will come quickly — Clinton appears before the House of Representatives' Benghazi committee nine days later, and the candidates debate again Nov. 14 and Dec. 19.

So far, the Democratic race is between Clinton and Sanders. Clinton, the former secretary of state, has the résumé but has struggled to convey sensitivity. Sanders, a U.S. senator from Vermont, has a feel for worried Americans but an unorthodox political background as a socialist Democrat.

Clinton has the stature. Sanders has the passion.

Clinton has to answer about the contents, and the very existence, of the private email server that she used while secretary of state. Sanders needs to explain what having socialist sympathies means and how he would pay for the government expansion he proposes.

The others face bigger obstacles, notably reminding voters that they're even in the race.

Despite his credentials, Martin O'Malley, a former governor of Maryland and mayor of Baltimore, has been barely noticed. Neither has Lincoln Chafee, a former U.S. senator and former governor of Rhode Island, and Jim Webb, a former senator from Virginia.

Here's how the candidates can help themselves:

- **HILLARY CLINTON:** She's competing Tuesday not only with Sanders but also with her past. Clinton's negatives have been well-documented — her icy demeanor, her private email server, and so on.

Clinton has stepped up her efforts to reintroduce herself. She took a tough stand on gun control, starred in a "Saturday Night Live" skit, and launched a cable TV ad highlighting House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy's claim that her poll numbers plunged because of the Republican-led Benghazi committee's work.

Tuesday, she has to be both a tough leader and a gentle soul. Can she project warmth and self-confidence without crossing the line to smugness and arrogance?

More consequential is the question that's dogged Clinton for years: Can she convince voters that they can trust her? Why, for instance, did she change her position last week and oppose the Trans Pacific Partnership treaty after calling it the "gold standard" of trade deals in 2012?

And why did Clinton even have a private email server while at the State Department?

The substance of her answers, and, more important, her tone, will go a long way toward determining how she fares.

- **BERNIE SANDERS:** The Democrats' summer star now has two more daunting tasks: How can he expand his constituency? And how can he make voters envision him as a commander in chief?

Sanders routinely draws big, enthusiastic audiences eager to work on his behalf. His views, though, tend to be well outside what's considered the American political mainstream. A trillion-dollar infrastructure program? Free college tuition? Government-run health care? And higher taxes? That's a tough sell in a general election, let alone in a battle for the Democratic nomination.

Sanders, though, has tapped into deeply felt outrage toward big business and government. Consumers still aren't over the economic shocks of the 2007-09 recession, and are still wary of the relationship between financial institutions and the government. Sanders has long had credibility as a fighter against those excesses. But while people may appreciate his fight, will they want him in the White House?

- **MARTIN O'MALLEY:** Why can't he get any traction? Even in his home state, a new Goucher Poll found he was the choice of 2 percent of Democrats. O'Malley takes positions popular with the Democratic base, has a respected resume and at 52 is by far the youngest of the five candidates. But he hasn't broken through yet, and what it would take for him to surge is a mystery.

- **LINCOLN CHAFEE:** How hard will he challenge Clinton? Chafee, then a Republican U.S. senator, voted against the Iraq War in 2002. Clinton, then a U.S. senator from New York, voted

for it. That vote dogged her during her 2008 presidential campaign, and in her memoir last year, she said she “got it wrong.” Chafee, though, has little money and little visible support. To get noticed, he’s going to have to distinguish himself from the rest and offer a more dynamic image than he’s used to presenting.

- **JIM WEBB:** Are there Democrats eager for his tough-guy message? Webb has never been easy to classify politically. A decorated Vietnam veteran, he was secretary of the Navy under President Ronald Reagan, and then won a Senate seat in Virginia in 2006 as a Democrat. His strength is national security, and he says he would not have voted to authorize the Iraq invasion.

---