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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Daniel Szeligowski  
Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Szymon Zaręba • Tomasz Żornaczuk

## The Democratic Party Ahead of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election: An Early Review

Mateusz Piotrowski

*Next year's Democratic Party primaries will be unprecedented, not only because of the number of candidates likely competing for the nomination but mainly because of the profound changes taking place within the party. Moreover, the good economic situation during Trump's presidency will make it difficult for Democrats to compete with him in this area. Instead, other domestic topics and foreign policy issues will be important in the campaign debates.*

Although the first Democratic caucus will take place in February 2020 and the party's national convention, when the nominee is formally selected, is planned for July 2020, already 24 candidates seeking the Democratic Party nomination have officially begun their campaigns. It is too early to assess their chances of being the nominee, let alone the possibility of defeating Donald Trump in the November 2020 elections. However, the first framework of the campaign debate is already outlined.

**The Party after the 2016 Elections.** Since the last presidential elections, the progressive wing of the party has strengthened and is broadening its electorate, effectively differentiating itself not only from Trump but also from the party establishment. [After the midterm elections to Congress in 2018 when the Democrats took over the House of Representatives, winning 235 seats](#), 96 of them are occupied by politicians connected to the progressive wing.

With the growing importance of this faction, the division lines have sharpened inside the party. The progressives' programme mainly concerns social issues—universal healthcare, abolition of high interest fees, cancelation of debt related to education, and an increase in minimum wages. Their agenda also includes taxation of the wealthiest Americans (those with incomes of at least \$10 million per year), termination of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a controversial special division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the abandonment of campaign financing by corporations.

A consequence of the rise of this faction has been the distancing of many of these newer Democratic politicians from well-established activists associated with the party. Candidates with little name recognition see the chance to build public support without having to seek the establishment's patronage. This, along with a leadership crisis that has persisted since the 2016 presidential election loss by Hillary Clinton, the number of candidates in the primaries is now quite large. Along with the early start of campaigning, the large field may in turn facilitate a fight for funds and experienced staff. However, most of the candidates, including those who might still announce their campaigns, will not make it until the end of the primaries, probably dropping out after the first caucus because of insufficient funding or lack of name recognition resulting in low support from voters.

Among the candidates for the nomination are progressives, primarily Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, Clinton's main opponent in the 2016 primaries, and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren. Other candidates linked at least partly to the progressive wing include California Senator Kamala Harris, Beto O'Rourke, a former Texas state representative, and Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana. The only candidate of the national

party establishment is Joe Biden, the well-known former vice president and long-time senator from Delaware. In the first polls since he announced his candidacy, he has had a clear advantage over the other candidates, who are splitting the votes of voters sympathetic to the progressive wing.

**Potential Campaign Themes.** Usually the economy is the main topic of U.S. election campaigns; however, the American economy so far under Trump's presidency has been generally good, with GDP growth of 2.3% in 2017 and 2.9% in 2018, and the lowest unemployment in 50 years. That leaves the Democrats little room to attack the administration or submit counter-proposals in this area.

The debate will focus instead on topics most relevant to Democratic Party voters—universal healthcare, restrictions on firearms, and immigration policy. An important part of the primaries will also be the matter of [the recently completed investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller and potential impeachment of the president](#). Although impeachment seems unlikely before the elections and getting a guilty verdict from the Republican-controlled Senate near to impossible, some candidates favour starting the process to gain media coverage and attempt to weaken Trump.

The large group competing for the party's nomination means that they have to look for diversity in their views and proposals at an early stage of the primaries. The campaign teams must also factor in that highly detailed promises addressed to the Democratic electorate may discourage independent voters and some Republicans who voted for Trump in 2016 but are dissatisfied with his presidency. Therefore, the candidates may seek other topics for the campaign that are not already in political dispute, including areas of foreign policy.

**Foreign Policy in the Candidate's Programmes.** The struggle of the candidates to break through to voters' consciousness did not start with the presentation of detailed plans for foreign policy because it is less significant to voters than the numerous domestic issues. However, the changes the party is going through have set the general framework within which candidates will move to raising foreign affairs. It can be expected that their programmes will be based on a policy direction opposite to the assumptions of the Trump administration. This is evidenced by the announcements of "reversing" some of his decisions that, according to the candidates, are harmful to the U.S., such as [the withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran](#).

However, each of the candidates will try to present a different proposal to differentiate themselves from the others and depending on whether they are part of the party establishment, which considers the policy of the end of the Obama presidency as the desired *status quo*, or if progressives, desiring a more significant change. Progressives primarily break from the establishment by clearly dividing domestic and international issues, referring to foreign policy concepts in terms of how they impact the image of the United States. In addition, they want to redefine the approach to alliances, seeking to base them on common goals and values rather than raw strategic interests. They also oppose the numerous engagements in military interventions and want strong promotion of democracy, which is also connected with demands to reduce the defence budget and redirect spending on the military to other core progressive interests.

In foreign policy, they contend that proposals for bilateral relations with Russia should not aim to ease the tension. Democrats continue to blame Russia for Clinton's failure, pointing to evidence of Russian interference in the elections. However, if there were proposals to restrict relations and harden the U.S. stance towards Russia, they would only concern the political sphere.

Their policy towards China is focused on trade and economic issues, and it is doubtful that the Democrats will attempt to attack Trump in this area. The need for a response to intellectual property theft and China's dishonest trade practices is, moreover, strongly bipartisan. Ideas similar to Trump administration policy are also presented by some of the Democratic candidates in the context of economic relations with the EU. This may signal an increase in isolationist trends in the Democratic Party.

The candidates are also unlikely to outline a broader policy plan regarding the Middle East before being nominated. This results not only from the complexity of the situation but also from the tensions in relations with Israel. In the party electorate—especially among the progressive faction—support for U.S. policy towards Israel has fallen significantly. [The U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and declaration of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights](#) has been criticized by many Democratic politicians.

**Perspectives.** The party's programme is increasingly influenced by the progressive faction and the victory of some of its candidate in the primaries would strengthen this trend. Some reorientation is already visible, as expressed in the plans to maintain the medical care system put in place by the Obama administration and proposals for further healthcare reform towards greater accessibility, along with fighting climate change and the protection of irregular immigrants and increasing their rights (including legalisation of their stay).

Although the Democrats have criticized Trump for increasing tensions with U.S. allies within NATO, the reduction of the defence budget proposed by some candidates would have a clear impact on operational U.S. military engagement abroad. This could result, for example, in reduced participation of troops in joint exercises with allies or the withdrawal of rotating units, including those on NATO's Eastern Flank. A reduction in the role of the military in foreign policy by a future administration could also contribute to reducing the political significance of American partners who base their relations with the U.S. on cooperation in defence and security.