

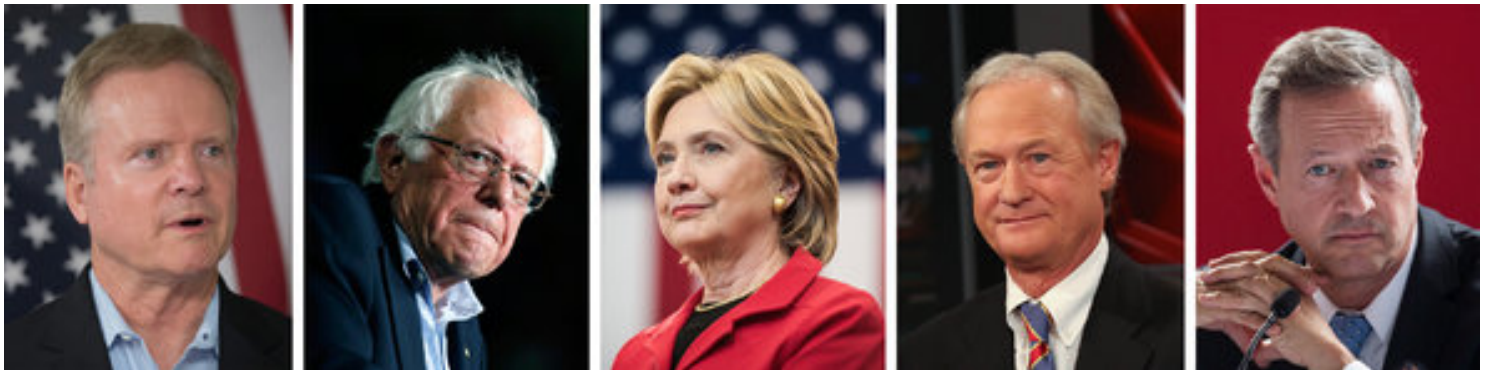
Democratic Debate: Candidates Meet in Las Vegas

Join us Tuesday (7:30 p.m. Central) for real-time updates and analysis of the first Democratic presidential debate featuring Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Martin O'Malley, Jim Webb and Lincoln Chafee.

Jonathan Martin

1:09 AM ET Mon Oct 12 2015

Democratic Debate Will Reveal Subtle Divides, if Not Wide Gaps



The Democratic presidential candidates who will participate in Tuesday night's debate in Las Vegas, from left: Jim Webb, Bernie Sanders, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Lincoln Chafee and Martin O'Malley. (Credit From Left: Scott Olson/Getty Images; Associated Press Photo, via Michael Dwyer; Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for The New York Times; Rob Kim, via Getty Images; Andrew Burton, via Getty Images)

After watching two viscerally divisive debates among the Republican presidential contenders, Americans are about to witness a confrontation by the Democrats that will most likely center on differences of degree, not direction, and on how hard they will push a liberal agenda, not where they hope to lead the nation.

The most telling aspect of Tuesday night's debate in Las Vegas may be how much the candidates agree on the issues. That could be bad news for CNN, which is hosting the event and is surely hoping for some Republican-style fireworks. But it could also offer insights about Hillary Rodham Clinton's strategic calculations and about the Democratic Party's growing confidence.

At this point in the 2008 campaign, the Democratic presidential hopefuls, led by Mrs. Clinton, wrestled with how to appeal to liberal activists without alienating the general election voters who had sent a Republican to the White House in the previous two elections. Now, the Democrats arrive at their first debate focused entirely on how to win over the left.

If the moderators are able to tempt Mrs. Clinton into sparring with Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont or Martin O'Malley, the former governor of Maryland, the arguments will most likely not be waged on substantive grounds. Fissures in the Democratic Party are few. Instead, any tensions or potential attacks would almost certainly involve disagreements about how fervently and sincerely the candidates embrace the progressive cause.

"The differences are more about how fast you got there and where you were in the past," said Joe Trippi, a longtime Democratic strategist.

After four years in the State Department, Mrs. Clinton wasted little time in catching up to her party's new center of gravity on cultural issues like immigration, same-sex marriage and criminal justice. And that was before Mr. Sanders's surge, which has only nudged her further left in such areas as economics, trade and the environment.

What is most striking about Mrs. Clinton's shifts is the assumption behind them: that accommodating the Democratic base will not imperil her should she be the party's nominee. Gone are the defensive politics practiced by her husband, former President Bill Clinton, who felt that the center-right nature of the American electorate in the 1990s demanded such caution.

Mrs. Clinton and the other current major Democratic hopefuls seem to believe that what they do to placate liberals this fall will not jeopardize their chances to win over moderates next November. It is the reverse of Jeb Bush's maxim: The Democrats see no need to risk losing the primary to win the general election.

"There is a consensus around the idea that the path to the nomination and the path to the White House necessitates mobilizing the Obama coalition," said Dan Pfeiffer, a former senior official in President Obama's campaigns and in his administration, referring to the growing bloc of young, liberal, nonwhite and unmarried female voters who were crucial to Mr. Obama's election. "That works for us because two things have happened: The country has moved to the left on social issues and economic issues, and the politics of national security now lean more toward avoiding the next Iraq than looking for the next Iraq."

What Democrats must say to mobilize their base, Mr. Pfeiffer asserted, is not detrimental to the party in appealing to the broader electorate.

It is not just Mrs. Clinton who has tried to align herself with the ascendant liberalism of the Obama era.

Mr. O'Malley has discarded the tough-on-crime ethos that largely defined his tenure as Baltimore's mayor, as he seeks support from Black Lives Matter activists focused on police misconduct and mass incarceration. And Mr. Sanders, who for years was unapologetic about stances on firearms that he thought were well suited to his rural Vermont constituency, has shifted toward a harder line on gun control.

Yet it is Mrs. Clinton who has most notably decided that she cannot risk turning off either Mr. Obama's loyalists or those liberals now backing Mr. Sanders. And on the issues where she has broken with Mr. Obama, she has largely done so to outflank him on the left.

She has sided with environmentalists by opposing the Keystone XL pipeline and Arctic drilling. She has stood with organized labor by coming out against the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact and the so-called Cadillac tax on costly health care plans. And she has moved toward the populist left by proposing a tax on high-frequency financial trading and by vowing to prosecute those who commit financial crimes.

It is no accident that Mrs. Clinton rolled out some of those positions in the weeks leading to the first debate, an event she and her advisers expected her rivals would use to attack her from the left.

Taking those stands allows Mrs. Clinton to instead enter the Las Vegas forum less exposed, giving her opponents and the moderators fewer openings to exploit. And establishing her positions offers her a better chance to shape the debate, where a strong performance could help bolster her standing in the polls.

"She has been under the gun for five months on the emails and no one has heard her message," Mr. Trippi said, referring to criticism of Mrs. Clinton's use of a private email server as secretary of state. "It's all email, email, email. So this will be the first time she has had the chance to consistently and methodically lay out her message while people are paying attention."

If Mrs. Clinton, who performed well in nearly all of the 2008 presidential debates in which she appeared, has the opportunity to allay concerns about her prospects, Mr. Sanders has an opening to broaden his appeal.

"This is Bernie's chance to get beyond just white progressives," Mr. Trippi said. "If he just comes in there and tries to light the left on fire, we may talk about how amazing he did, and he might get 40,000 people at his next rally, but he doesn't move the ball forward if that's what he does."

Mr. Sanders, in other words, needs to find a way to replicate what Mr. Obama accomplished in the 2008 primary, when he fused support from white liberals and blacks.

It was a novel coalition – previous Democratic insurgents had not been able to pull it off – and some in Mr. Obama’s party believed it was a weak foundation on which to build a general election campaign.

But it propelled the president to the first consecutive victories with a majority of the vote by a Democrat since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And it reordered the party’s thinking about how presidential elections are won. These lessons have been evident throughout the early months of this Democratic contest, and they will be on neon display Tuesday evening on the Las Vegas Strip.

Nick Corasaniti

7:40 AM ET Tue Oct 13 2015

Liberal Groups Press Candidates to Take Up Populist Agenda

A coalition of liberal groups is hoping to influence the tone and tenor of Tuesday night’s debate, pressing an agenda of economic populism with the candidates.

The self-described “Warren Wing,” made up of Democracy For America, MoveOn.org and Progressive Change Campaign Committee, has crafted a letter to candidates urging them to discuss issues championed by Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

The letter, which was sent to Hillary Rodham Clinton, Martin O’Malley and Senator Bernie Sanders, wishes the candidates well in the debate, and asks them to “put high on your radar some economic populism issues” during the debate.

It focuses specifically on four issues: college affordability, Social Security, the finance and banking industries and racial equality. Each letter is individually addressed to the candidates and follows mostly the same form, except for a few direct pleas to Mrs. Clinton.

Under the Expand Social Security section, for example, the group presses Mrs. Clinton on “expanding Social Security and urges her to commit to “never cutting” Social Security benefits.

And in the section labeled “Black Lives Matter,” the authors urge Mrs. Clinton “to explicitly address for-profit prisons, a problem that connects racial justice and economic populism.”

The groups also lay out liberal positions on gun safety and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but closes with a plea to focus on the four issues it outlines in the letter.

“Because these issues are important to millions of families and are key to motivating voters, we urge a special proactive approach to elevating them in the debate,” the letter states.