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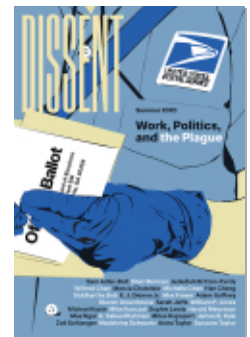
## Diversity and the Democrats

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# Diversity and the Democrats

Marcia Chatelain

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By the summer of 2019, the Democratic Party's line up of presidential hopefuls resembled the images in a college recruitment pamphlet filled with racially and ethnically diverse students and faculty members. In the same spirit, the party's celebration of diversity obscured the realities of the long-standing power dynamics that make it hard for women, newcomers, and people of color to rise in its ranks. After months of debates hosting many firsts and trailblazers, the field was whittled down to two of the oldest, most politically experienced, white, male candidates. Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders may have represented two ends of the Democratic Party's ideological spectrum, but their gender and race gave some voters—including some voters of color—comfort, as pundits questioned whether it was too risky for a woman candidate or a black candidate or a Jewish candidate to run against Donald Trump. Although Sanders was able to gain support among a diverse, cross-section of the electorate, including Latinx and Muslim Democrats, he failed to win over a majority, and especially struggled with older black voters.

With Biden as the nominee and the general election campaign underway, there may be an impulse to forget what is now behind us, in the interest of simply dealing with what is in front. Yet the time is always right to consider how the party can move beyond rhetorical commitments to diversity. Competing against a Republican Party that has pandered to white nationalists requires a serious reckoning with the unfinished business of process and policy.

## Diversity for Diversity's Sake

This year's Democratic primary began with the most demographically diverse cohort of presidential hopefuls in history. On the debate stage and in the press, candidates of color tried to craft coherent and relatable narratives out of their origins to an electorate in which whites are still the majority.

Most Democratic leaders have long believed they can give their centrist politics a progressive sheen by supporting candidates of color. Yet, at times, the lead up to 2020 read like a poorly choreographed diversity training video, or awkward corporate sponsorship (think Wells Fargo sponsoring a Black Lives Matter lecture while discriminating against home buyers and credit seekers of color). In presidential politics, the celebration of diversity can sometimes obscure the substance of candidates.

This is why it is so important for political critics to press candidates to speak in specific terms about how racism pervades the lives of all people, especially the poor and the working class. After an early debate, DNC Chairman Tom Perez evaded questions about Kamala Harris's challenge of Joe Biden's earlier stance on busing by pointing to the party's "overall record on civil rights." Perez's pivot wasn't surprising, perhaps, but it's worth emphasizing that overall record doesn't tell us much about how a particular candidate might approach racial inequality. This moment also shows the importance of diversity: the questions that emerged about Biden's record on race may have not happened if he were not competing against a black woman candidate.

Primaries serve a role in advertising a party to prospective voters, but they don't always tell a full story. Even if the political nomination process alienates black voters, the majority still turn out to vote in presidential elections because they believe the stakes are too high for them to abstain. Black Americans are more likely to rely on resources that are state-supported, like public education, and are most susceptible to cuts in the social safety net and economic downturns. According to a recent Pew poll, a quarter of black Democrats identify as conservative and nearly twice as many identify as moderate. Many black voters support the military and value membership in a religious institution, but these connections do not draw them toward the Republican Party, because they correctly perceive Republican policy as indifferent to the needs of society's most vulnerable. Knowing this base is secure, DNC leaders often don't feel the need to cater to voters of color.

Although black voters can be counted on to choose the Democratic candidate, turnout is key to the party's success. In the 2008 and 2012 elections, black voter turnout was above 65 percent; in 2016 it dipped below 60 percent. Soon after Perez became the first Latinx chair of the DNC in 2017, he received a letter from black women Democrats who expressed concern that he had not met with or hired any black women in his first few months on the job. The letter cautioned against resting on the laurels of the modest, but high-profile, elections of Ilhan Omar in Minnesota or Lisa Blunt Rochester in Delaware and reminded Perez that in the 115th Congress, only twenty black women were members. It noted that with black women voters having "the highest voter turnout of any racial or gender group" in 2008 and 2012, the party needed to acknowledge the leadership and priorities of



Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm announces her candidacy for president in 1972.  
(Thomas J. O'Halloran via the Library of Congress)

“the very Party that we have carried on our back.” Perez promptly responded to the letter and, after meeting with the writers, appointed more black women to leadership roles within the DNC, and apologized for taking black voters for granted.

Democratic leaders should also consider how they develop and mobilize activists and voters of color between election years. They have done little to nurture Asian-American and Pacific Islander operatives, even though these groups have recently been voting heavily Democratic. Between 2014 and 2018, the percentage of Asian Americans who voted for Democrats in midterm races increased from 49 to 77 percent, in part because of the

Trump administration's anti-immigrant stances. But according to political scientist Janelle Wong, "Outreach has always been something that parties and candidates do at the last minute when it involves Asian Americans, partly because Asian Americans tend to be concentrated outside of the swing states." This failing should be a concern if diversity really matters to the party.

### **The Closing of the Democratic Imagination**

In 1972, when Shirley Chisholm declared her intention to seek the Democratic nomination for president, she took on the question of whether a black feminist could represent the entire nation. "I am not the candidate of black America," she announced, "although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and I'm equally proud of that." During this year's campaign, the Democratic candidates uttered variations of Chisholm's proclamation: I may not be you, but I can be for you.

This guarantee may have inspired some voters under normal circumstances. But anxiety over another four years of Trump hampered the race before it even started. The calculation of "who will beat Trump," rather than who could capture voters' political imagination was in part shaped by three years of news coverage about Trump supporters as objects of sympathy and misunderstanding. The obsession of many white liberals, moderates, and Never Trump Republicans with winning over Trump supporters helped Biden achieve his victory.

Leading Democrats tend to neglect an important segment of the electorate that also oscillates, not between the parties, but between showing up to the polls and staying home. Historian Ibram X. Kendi has argued that "people of color and young people, and especially young people of color, are more likely than white people and older people to swing between voting Democrat and not voting (or voting third party)." Hillary Clinton's uninspiring bid in 2016 may have kept some black voters home, especially in the critical states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Party officials gesture toward the future of a "majority-minority" nation and know that Barack Obama won by bringing millions of new, young voters—many of them of color—to the electoral process for the first time. Beating Trump is crucial, but so is building political coalitions that can secure progressive victories long after he is out of office.

### **Unequal Ground**

During the 2020 primaries, candidates needed to have the support of the wealthy donors willing to support them through multiple state contests or an infrastructure to recruit a sustainable mass mobilization of small

contributors. Initially, to qualify for a debate, a candidate had to poll at 1 percent or greater in surveys of voters nationwide or in states that would hold early contests. This requirement was waived if the campaign received donations from 65,000 individuals. By the winter, candidates had to clear the threshold of 5 percent in four nationwide polls (or garner 7 percent of support in two states) and the donor number rose more than three times to 225,000. Despite surges in contributions to the campaigns of Senator Kamala Harris and strong fundraising turnouts for businessman Andrew Yang and Senator Cory Booker, their ability to survive after the critical Iowa primaries was limited. These rules also deprived Julian Castro of gaining the visibility he needed. As the only Latinx person in the race, he might have galvanized the estimated 13.3 percent of eligible voters from his ethnic group, but, with little cash, he dropped out just before the Iowa caucuses.

Castro and Booker both criticized Perez's management of the debate rules after Harris exited the race in December, but they did so too late to prevent the eventual whitening of the roster. Even before voters in the overwhelmingly white states of Iowa and New Hampshire had their say, pundits who had earlier praised the Democratic contenders for reflecting the nation's demographics were wondering why so few non-white candidates were still competing.

### **The Limits of Proximity**

Those who develop diversity initiatives in the public and private sectors often assume that proximity will lead to greater empathy, connection across social divides, and perhaps lasting change. Having shared a debate stage with a cohort that more accurately represented the nation might mean Biden is more open to policies that help address race and class disparities in health outcomes and life expectancy. His recent development of task forces with former Sanders and Elizabeth Warren supporters suggests that he can be pushed to use government creatively to solve big problems. Biden has called for a public option on healthcare and to "reduce our nation's unacceptably high maternal mortality rate." He seems to have done some listening.

Yet, Biden's career—even if he selects a progressive woman to run on the ticket with him—does not inspire much confidence that he will fight hard for racial justice. During his decades in politics, he has always struggled to articulate his positions in this arena beyond referring to his popularity with black voters, his former boss, or by simply changing the subject. Biden and the Democrats have long benefitted from the diversity of the party's base because of the political pragmatism that has shaped how non-white voters engage with the party. The possibility of another four years of President Trump makes such pragmatism especially urgent. But it's an unexciting situation, which may lead to further stagnation in the Democratic Party.

We should not forget about how diverse the initial roster of Democratic candidates truly was during the nomination cycle. At the start, four African Americans, an Asian American, a Pacific Islander, and one Latinx person were competing, as were four white women. This helped ensure that all candidates had to speak about their commitments to battle racism and gender inequity, but it wasn't enough to transform the political landscape in which they competed. In order to move beyond a superficial politics of representation, the Democratic Party has to be prepared to cultivate talent, change its rules, and consider what it means to sustain and redefine real diversity.

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