



A Closer Look at Electability

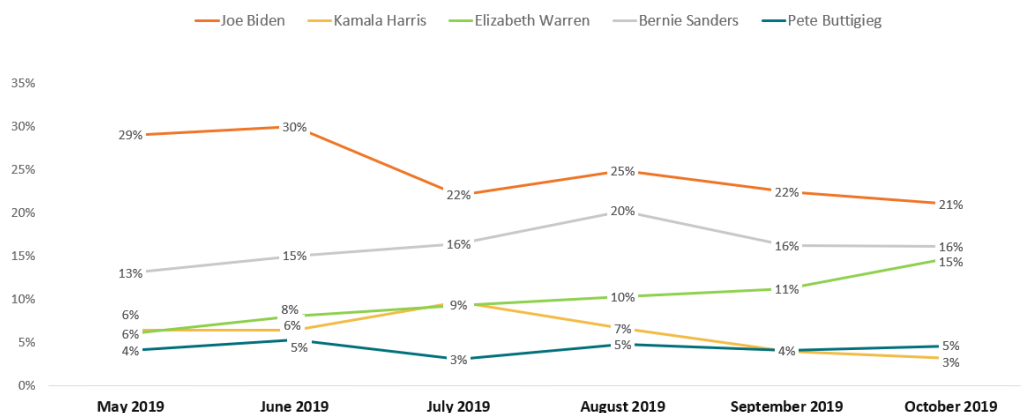
Biden still owns it, but for how long?

Washington, DC, October 30, 2019 — As of late, the media focus has been on President Trump—the Ukraine scandal, the Syria pullout, al-Baghdadi, boos at baseball, impeachment... However, there is still a Democratic primary election coming up, and we have no clear idea of who is going to win!

We are only 96 days away from the Iowa caucuses. **The conventional wisdom is that while Biden is the front runner, he is in trouble. Warren is on the rise, and keep an eye on Buttigieg.** But is that really the case? Let's look closer:

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2020 Democratic Primary Horserace - Trend



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If the 2020 Democratic presidential primary election were held today, and you had to choose from the list of candidates below, for whom would you vote?
Base: Democrats and Independents

Source: Ipsos/Reuters Data, April, June, July, August, September, October 2019



The national horse race polls confirm this general analysis. Biden and Sanders have lost ground over the last few months while Warren has slowly gained. We see this in our Reuters/Ipsos polls and the average of all other public polls ([FiveThirtyEight](#)).

Similar numbers can be seen in the early primary states as well. Biden started in the lead, but in Iowa and New Hampshire, Warren is steadily gaining ground. Also, our debate trackers with FiveThirtyEight indicated Warren won the two last debates ([FiveThirtyEight/Ipsos](#) Poll).

However, at this stage, horse race polls are fuzzy at best. Depending on the question, something like 30-40% of the electorate is undecided. Put simply, the race can change and quickly.



Polls are less reliable the further out

Time Before Election	Average Poll Error
One week	1.7%
One month	2.7%
Two months	3.8%
Three months	4.8%
Six months	5.8%
Nine months	6.9%
Twelve months	7.9%

Source: Ipsos analysis of 300 polls across 40 markets from 1980 through current

Instead of focusing on horse race polling (especially in the primaries), I focus on other leading indicators of relative strength: performance on “main problems” or “voter priorities.” In essence, the simple questions I try to answer are: **What do voters want, and which candidate do they think can deliver on that main priority?**

Such questions have two very interesting properties ([Ipsos Cognitive Battlefield](#)). First, people don't change their priorities on a whim; they are pretty stable over time. Indeed, in my 27-country analysis, the average wave-to-wave correlation in priorities is above 0.9. From an analytical perspective, we can treat such a metric as relatively fixed in the short- to medium-term.

Second, studies show that candidates who perform the strongest on voters' main priority win the election 85% of the time! Of course, campaigns are dynamic. A candidate perceived as strong on the main priority today might not be tomorrow. This is where campaigns can make their mark ([Armstrong, J. S., & Graefe, A. \(2012\). Predicting elections from the most important issue: A test of the take-the-best heuristic.](#))

Ultimately, keeping an eye on these metrics helps cut through the noise of horse race polls at the early stages of a contest. As an example, we used a similar approach in the recent Argentinian election where our ‘main issue’ measure indicated a lopsided-opposition-win three months before election day as opposed to the public polls that foretold a narrower first-round result. Our approach ended up being right.

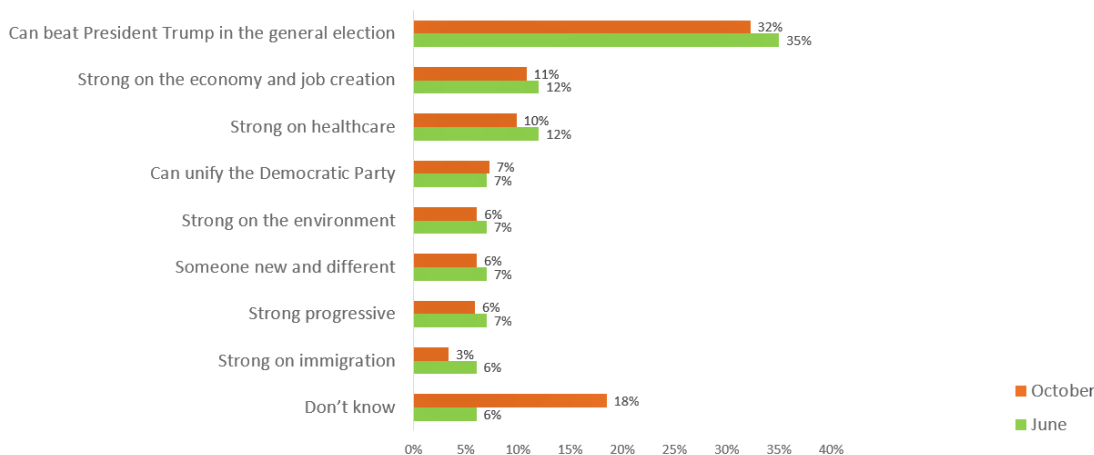
So, what are the key priorities for potential Democratic voters?



CLIFF'S TAKE OF THE WEEK

DEMOCRATS AND INDEPENDENTS

Most Important Campaign Issues



If the 2020 Democratic presidential primary election were held today, which of the following candidate traits would be the MOST important factor for you in deciding who to vote for?
© 2019 Ipsos
Source: Ipsos/Reuters Data October 2019, N=671; June 2019, N=2303

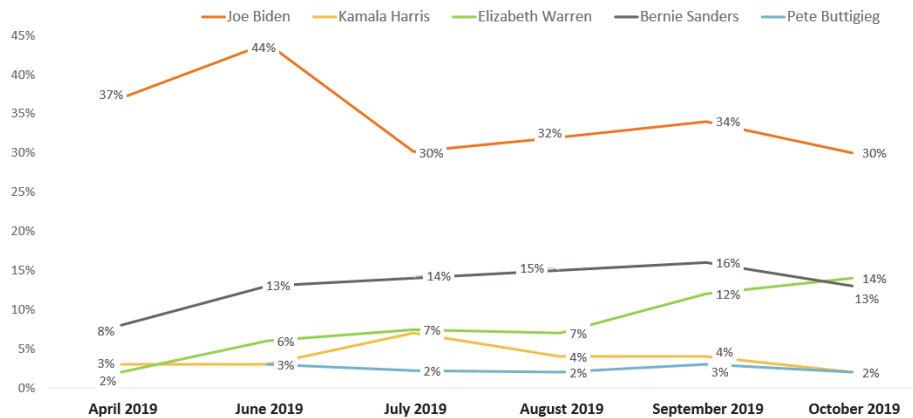


It is all about beating Trump. Indeed, a plurality (32%) cite beating Trump, or electability, as the key factor in their decision. This has not changed substantially since June. Other perennial main issues (and debate topics) like healthcare and the economy are only distant contenders compared to being able to win against Trump.

So, who do we see today as most likely to beat Trump?

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Most Likely to Beat Trump



For each of the following, selection the candidate from the list below you think is best on the particular issue. "Most likely to beat President Trump in the general election"
Base: Democrats and Independents
© 2019 Ipsos
Source: Ipsos/Reuters Data, April, June, July, August, September, October 2019





It is Biden by a wide margin. Even though his advantage has dwindled slightly since he launched his campaign, he enjoys a better than 2 to 1 advantage over the next closest Democratic contestants (Warren or Sanders).

Two key takeaways here:

- (1) Biden has lost some ground since his campaign launch in April, but his position has actually been quite stable since mid-summer.
- (2) Biden's performance on this metric seriously outperforms his horse race numbers. This for me suggests that he has more potential than commonly understood today.

So, Biden is the undisputed favorite at this point?

Well, not quite. Caveats are:

- (1) These are only national numbers. National polls do a good job of capturing the overall mood, but we don't have a national Democratic primary. In individual early states, opinions may differ from what we see here.
- (2) Electoral success (or lack thereof) can change perceptions around being able to beat Trump. Performance in Iowa and New Hampshire will be important signals to voters. If Biden does poorly, his electability advantage might dwindle. In contrast, if Warren does well, she can better build her case for electability.

This all said, Biden continues to have an important advantage at this point. This has been overlooked by analysts. Will he capitalize on it? Only time will tell. But I personally will be looking closely at these electability metrics.



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“Game Changers” — our tagline — summarizes our ambition to help our 5,000 clients to navigate more easily our deeply changing world.

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