BENNET FOR AMERICA

To:	Interested Parties
From:	Bennet for America
Re:	State of the Race
Date:	August 23, 2019

It has been nearly four months since Michael Bennet announced his candidacy to become the Democratic nominee for President and defeat Donald Trump. With about five months to go until the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary, we are assessing the field and sharing some of our strategic thinking.

Michael Bennet: An Initial Assessment

Were he to get the nomination, Bennet is the perfect general election candidate—the anti-Trump.

- Virtually every known voter survey shows that voters value, above all else, a candidate's likelihood of beating Trump. Right now, Biden is the front runner because voters believe he can defeat Trump. Bennet has the same attributes that make Biden appear electable; in fact, James Carville said Bennet would be better than Biden to defeat Trump because "he'd be new, different, younger and…could project forward."

- Coming from the middle of the country and having won tough elections in a swing state on issues important to this electorate, such as health care, contribute to our electability narrative.

- Bennet's "Make the Presidency Normal Again" approach and demeanor are what voters want; they are tired of the daily chaos created by Trump. Polling shows 60% of Democrats want a president who will restore normalcy and calm things down, while 36% want to fundamentally change things. In our internal research with Iowa Democrats, the numbers are even starker.

- Pundits as varied as George Will, Richard North Patterson, and James Carville have captured what makes Bennet the right candidate for 2020.

- The period leading up to the primaries is spring training for candidates, and Bennet's public presence is steadily improving.

Bennet's biggest hurdle is his "late" start, but his standing in early states is improving.

- The problem is not so much that Bennet started late, but that others started early compared to prior years. Looking at Bennet's trajectory, had he started running three to six months earlier, he'd be in the top of the second tier or bottom of the first tier by now.

- Bennet's late start and lack of a national profile and unlimited pool of money means he won't make the stage for the third DNC debate. Debates don't mean sh*t in terms of votes, so why do they matter so much for media coverage and fundraising?

- The paper of record in Iowa called for Bennet to get more attention. The *Des Moines Register's Editorial Board* called Bennet a "truth-teller" who "doesn't mince words." They wrote, "Iowa caucus goers—even those supporting other candidates—would be well-served to give Bennet more attention. He offers a much-needed reality check on the promises candidates are offering and what it will take to accomplish meaningful change."

- A recent New Hampshire poll by the *Boston Globe* showed Bennet at 2% and, more importantly, a surge in voters who consider Bennet their "second choice"—often a leading indicator for growth in overall support. That placed him ahead of many other candidates, including Bullock, Castro, O'Rourke, Inslee, Klobuchar, and de Blasio, while one in five New Hampshire voters remain undecided. Bennet placed sixth among all candidates for combined first and second choices, showing we have entered voters' consideration set. Other polls also had encouraging indicators that we are moving upward.

Bennet at the top of the ticket will help keep Democratic control of the House and give Democratic Senate candidates a nominee they can run with, not away from.

The Electorate: Progressive, not Radical

Michael Bennet is the candidate aligned with primary voters on the issues.

- By wide margins—two to one in most surveys—voters prefer Bennet's public option approach to achieving universal health care over the alternative Medicare for All approach. This is true among primary voters and general election voters.

- Free preschool and re-imagining high school and community college are viewed as more important than the Sanders-Warren preference for free college for all.

- Democratic voters and general election voters favor Bennet's position on immigration over open borders, which is supported by most other candidates.

- Yascha Mounk in *The Atlantic* [describes](#) that there is a gulf between candidates like Sanders and Warren and the Democratic electorate (and that's before we even get to the general).

To win in 2020, we have to look to 2018. In 2018 congressional primaries, Democrats nominated candidates who were pragmatic, well-positioned for the general election, and had compelling stories of service to our country and their communities.

- In the 40 districts that shifted from Republican to Democrat, only one Democrat supported Medicare for All.

- In districts where Democrats picked up seats in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, candidates who supported building on the Affordable Care Act with a public option defeated candidates who supported Medicare for All.

- Dan Sena, who, as head of the DCCC, was one of the chief architects of winning a Democratic majority in the House, is working for Bennet.

Bennet's track record matches his positions, demonstrating his authenticity. Unlike some other candidates who are announcing policies for the purpose of the campaign, Bennet's positions reflect what he has been saying for the past decade.

- Look at Harris' multiple attempts at a health care policy, Sanders' backtracking on union-negotiated plans, Buttigieg's restatement of Bennet's Medicare-X, and even Biden's articulation of a public option.

Electability: Top of Mind in 2020

Electability is a high priority for early state voters since Democratic primary voters justifiably loathe what Trump is doing to the country and fear what might happen if he secures a second term.

- The [majority of Democrats](#) prioritize a candidate who will beat Trump over one who agrees with them on all of the issues. The electability prioritization is [higher](#) than it was in the past, even in 2004.

- Much of Biden's support is driven by electability: [65%](#) of Democrats currently believe he would beat Trump. We believe that number could fluctuate during his campaign and erode his support.

Shifting positions to attract votes in the general election is going to be harder in 2020. Thanks to Trump-created chaos and misdirection, the news cycle is shifting from 24 hours to 24 minutes.

- Trump, who spends the majority of his time watching television, will be quick to use Twitter to point out fudging and flip-flops, as he is a primary driver of media.

- The disaggregated media landscape increases the desire of news outlets to play "gotcha."

Landscape: The Race is Wide Open

Believe it or not, it's still early. While the top candidates are receiving lots of media attention and the political class is very engaged, most voters haven't made their choice and aren't paying attention yet. The early start of the DNC debates and media attention to early polls have created a false impression that the race has solidified.

- Most early state voters make their final decisions on who to support late. In our internal research, 69% of likely caucus goers remain undecided. Of those who are undecided, 50% say they won't decide until December or January.

- This reflects previous primary seasons. Candidates' standings did not shift after debates five months out—but they did shift significantly in the closing weeks of each campaign.

- This mirrors past caucuses in Iowa. As far back as November 1975, voters' top choices were Senator Ted Kennedy, Governor George Wallace, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey—only to have Governor Jimmy Carter win the Iowa caucus months later. In 2003, John Kerry entered the race in February, and in December of that year, was polling at 4%. Just weeks before the caucus in 2004, Kerry surpassed Howard Dean and Dick Gephardt; in the final weeks of 2008, Barack Obama emerged as the out-of-nowhere surprise victor against Hillary Clinton and John Edwards; and of course, Bernie Sanders closed the gap against Hillary Clinton in the final weeks of 2016.

- Bill Clinton had not even announced his candidacy at this time in 1991; he announced on October 4.

Candidate support is VERY soft. Our internal research shows that even voters who have chosen a candidate are open to making a different choice.

- Fully *two thirds* of those who chose Biden, Sanders, Warren, Harris, or Buttigieg say they might change their mind.

- Warren's support is the weakest—82% say they might change their mind—and Sanders' support is strongest, if you count 52% saying they might change their mind as strong. Biden falls in-between, with 60% saying they might change their mind.

- Vote instability creates lots of room for Bennet.

The DNC Debates: All Bark, No Bite

The DNC debates have not generated lasting movement for candidates. The DNC debates have not changed the race or truly impacted its course.

- "Polling bumps" right after the first two debates normalized shortly thereafter.

- The debates in 2003, 2007, and 2015 produced few, if any, memorable moments and did not fundamentally shift the course of the primary contests. That has been true this year, too.

The DNC is taking the unprecedented step of using debate criteria to artificially winnow the field. At a time when the RNC is building a field juggernaut and poised to outspend the DNC by hundreds of millions of dollars, the DNC is arbitrarily excluding senators, governors, and big-city mayors from the debate stage.

- DNC Chair Tom Perez told *The Atlantic* that he's following the system Democrats have always had: "We have been doing exactly what happens in every Democratic primary process." That's simply not true! This is unprecedented. In prior years, the DNC has not sought to limit participation or increase the threshold prior to the first contests. In 2007, there were no requirements for DNC sanctioned debates.

- Perez added, "The closer you get to the first elections, we raise the bar gradually, fairly and transparently." Also not true! It is unprecedented to increase the threshold in the year prior to the first caucus or primary. Also the process is *still* not transparent—campaigns do not know the arbitrary criteria for the fifth and sixth debates.

- The first debate in 2015 was in October. To be included, a candidate had to achieve an average of at least 1% in three nationally recognized polls released between August 1 and October 10. And that was when the DNC was said to be heavily slanted.

- The DNC's rules have created a reality show with unending coverage on process rather than substance. In no way does that coverage or stifling debate strengthen our party or enhance our ability to defeat Trump.

The DNC's fundraising criteria is an embarrassment to the party that wants to end *Citizens United*. If we wanted to be in a party that excluded people, we'd be Republicans. And if we wanted to be the party that set up rules that game the system in favor of billionaires, we'd be Republicans. But that's what the DNC has done with their current rules.

- Fundraising has never been a gating requirement.

- The fundraising requirement has [little to do with viability](link). Steyer admitting that he bought his way onto the debate stage may be the most obvious travesty, but it is not the only one. Other candidates have had to spend millions to acquire donors on Facebook, instead of communicating with voters and laying the groundwork to beat Trump.

- The fundraising requirement arbitrarily favors candidates who started early. The candidates who have qualified for the third debate started running as early as November 2017 and as late as March 15th, if you don't count the former Vice President who announced in April. Take Bennet (or Bullock or De Blasio): If you don't already have a national profile, a history of running before, or billions of dollars, it's impossible to meet that threshold in less than four months.

Conclusion

Bennet's path to the Democratic nomination and the presidency runs through the early states. Our emphasis is on overperforming in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina, which will be a true signal to determine who will live on and who will make it to the marathon states.

Bennet is prepared to run an insurgent campaign until he catches on. The latest financial reports showed our relative financial health compared to other candidates; we are budgeting for a long campaign, and know this nomination will not be decided until at least the spring of 2020.

Bennet stands to gain as voters cycle through other candidates. Bennet can effectively compete for the voters who are currently with Biden because they view him as the most electable. He can effectively compete for the Warren voters who are concerned that she is not electable.

At the end of the day, Bennet will win this race the way he always has: by putting his head down, building a formidable organization, talking with voters about what they care about, raising the necessary resources, and presenting a coherent, compelling, and unifying vision for our country.