



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 4, 2019

Biden's Front-Runner Status Faces Challenge in Polling and Fund-Raising

Former Vice President Joe Biden (shown) began his quest for the 2020 Democratic Party nomination for president as the unquestioned front-runner, having served 36 years in the U.S. Senate and eight years as vice president with President Barack Obama.

Name identification — always an important factor in politics — explained much of Biden's huge lead in the early polls, along with a desire among many Democrats for someone who could actually defeat President Donald Trump.



But now, Biden has lost ground in both polls and in fundraising. His recent lackluster performance in the first Democratic debate has raised questions as to whether he would repeat his less-than-stellar performance on the stage with Trump. Senator Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) now has almost caught up with Biden in the Quinnipiac University poll. Her 20 percent is actually within the margin of error, when compared with Biden's new numbers at 22 percent.

Biden is even having trouble in fundraising. Biden has raised \$21.5 million since the beginning of his campaign in April, but Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, has raised even more: \$24.8 million.

The Quinnipiac Poll — conducted from June 28 to July 1 — had Buttigieg at only four percent support, however, leaving him in fifth place. Trailing Biden and Harris, in third place was Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), with Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) in fourth place, with 14 percent and 13 percent support, respectively. Other candidates were far behind.

"Round 1 of the Democratic debates puts Senator Kamala Harris and former Vice President Joe Biden on two different trajectories, as support for Harris surges but continues to slip for Biden," explained polling analyst Mary Snow. "Biden's once-commanding lead has evaporated."

Harris, who is black, benefitted in the poll by Biden's loss of support from African-American Democrats, which fell from 48 percent to 31 percent in last month's poll. Harris, meanwhile, had a dramatic gain of 16 points — from 11 percent support among black Democrats to 27 percent. Overall, in the June poll, Biden had 30 percent support to only seven percent for Harris.

But not only did Biden slip, so did Sanders — from 19 percent to 13 percent. Warren's numbers remained essentially unchanged. She had 15 percent last month, and now has 14 percent. Despite his fundraising prowess, Buttigieg, who has received very favorable coverage from the national media, nevertheless slipped from eight percent to a mere four percent.

Still, 42 percent of respondents believe that Biden has the best chance of any candidate in the field to defeat Trump (but that is also down from a previous 56 percent).



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A Reuters Poll, also conducted in the aftermath of the first Democratic debates (because of there being 20 candidates on the stage, the candidates were assigned a spot on one of two nights, back to back), also found significant slippage in Biden's level of support.

Although Biden has long years of experience in politics, he appeared unprepared for Harris's stiff attack on him during the debate. Which seems odd, considering that he should understand that his status as the front-runner would likely make him the object of such an attack, from somebody.

Biden has made much of his working-class background, and most political experts have contended this might help him challenge Trump's support among white, working class voters in states such as Pennsylvania (the state in which Biden was born). But Harris was able to leave the impression that she, not Biden, was the candidate who had to overcome the more difficult economic challenges.

At least since the days of Andrew Jackson, it has been a staple of American politics for candidates to play up their supposedly economically difficult up-bringing, with allusions to log cabins, and the like. Who can forget Jimmy Carter using his image as being "just" a peanut farmer (when he was actually a millionaire)? The joke is that during the 19th century, the best thing a presidential candidate could say is that he was raised in a log cabin he built with his own hands.

Harris, whose father was an economics professor at Stanford, and her mother a breast cancer researcher, did not grow up in a poor household. Yet, she was able to convey the appearance that she, not Biden, was the candidate with the poorer background. (Biden's father was a used-car salesman.)

Another possible reason for Biden's loss of African-American support was his rather clumsy use of two segregationist Democrats to demonstrate his ability to work with people with whom he disagrees to get things done.

Steve Westly, a venture capitalist who is raising funds for Biden, tried to put the poor debate performance into perspective. "When you are the far and away front-runner, everybody is shooting at you."

Indeed, poor debate performances have been overcome in the past, such as President Ronald Reagan's recovery from one debate to the next in 1984, when he mitigated the perception that he was too old, by saying that he would not make age an issue of the campaign by stressing the "youth and inexperience" of his Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale.

This age issue could quickly become a problem for Biden, if he doesn't do better in the next debate, by repeating Reagan's comeback. As Westly noted, "One thing you have to keep in mind is this campaign is a marathon."

Photo of Joe Biden: AP Images

Steve Byas is a college history instructor and author of History's Greatest Libels.



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