

The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

Final Debate Before the South Carolina Primary and Super Tuesday

Tuesday night saw the last debate for Democratic presidential hopefuls before the crucial primaries coming up over the next week. South Carolina's primary is this Saturday, February 29th and will be followed by "Super Tuesday" on March 3rd, when 14 states and American Samoa will cast their votes. Traditionally, the race for the White House is shaped by the events of Super Tuesday, and each candidate's path to the presidency becomes clear in the aftermath. On the stage in Charleston, South Carolina on Tuesday was former New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg, Mayor of South Bend Pete Buttigieg, Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Amy Klobuchar, former Vice President Joe Biden, and entrepreneur and activist Tom Steyer.

The debate had a fiery beginning, with the moderators struggling to control the candidates. As Bernie Sanders is currently leading in most polls, the candidates took turns trying to win points at his expense. Mike Bloomberg criticized Sanders as being too polarizing to defeat President Trump in the general election, and referenced the alleged support his campaign was receiving from Russia. Elizabeth Warren condemned Sanders for not releasing exact figures on how he was planning to pay for his version of "Medicare for All," a central component of his campaign. Pete Buttigieg said Sanders was still caught up in the revolutionary politics of the 1960's, and that America deserved a more modern candidate. Joe Biden criticized Sanders for not being strong enough on gun control, referencing votes he had cast against the Brady Act, which mandated a waiting period on the purchase of handguns. The moderators also quizzed Sanders on his statements defending Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, which he doubled down on.

Vice President Biden used the debate to reinforce his message of being the best candidate available for African Americans. Biden hit Tom Steyer for his investment in private prisons, and promised to appoint an African American woman to the Supreme Court. The former vice president also reinforced his message of being electable due to his prior experience in the White House, something none of the other candidates had. Tom Steyer also tried to increase his support from the black community, promising reparations for slavery and trumpeting his efforts to end systematic racism in the criminal justice system. Steyer and Biden are expected to do well in South Carolina relative to their performance in the previous primaries, and both are counting on the support of African Americans to give their campaigns momentum going into Super Tuesday.

Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar have been frequent adversaries on the debate stage as they vie to win over moderate voters. However, they both redirected their attacks toward the more progressive candidates, with Sanders and Elizabeth Warren taking the brunt of their criticism. Buttigieg's campaign circulated a memo to donors in the aftermath of the debate saying their clearest path to victory was by limiting Sanders' success on Super Tuesday. This was consistent with Buttigieg's strategy during the debate, where he painted himself as a viable alternative to the current front runner.