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THE BODY POLITIC | JULY 3, 2019

# Politics Is Changing; Why Aren't the Pundits Who Cover It? The Donny Deutsch problem in media.

By Rebecca Traister



Donny Deutsch. Photo: Michael Loccisano/Getty Images

**I**n past weeks, the curtain has officially been raised on the vast and diverse field of candidates for the Democratic nomination, many of them politicians who would not have been seen on a presidential debate stage — and *never* in these numbers — even a decade ago. Six of the 25 declared candidates are not men; six of them are not white; there is one openly gay man and one Jew who's also a democratic socialist. During the first round of debates, several candidates made efforts to speak Spanish that, while performative, reflected

an overdue acknowledgment that they were speaking to a broader swath of the country than the moderate white men in diners to whom so much Democratic messaging has been directed for decades. Beyond their representational expansion, many of the candidates are offering up compelling, progressive policy ideas: pushing the party into fights for single-payer health care, subsidized child care, free college, a Green New Deal, a stronger commitment to reproductive justice and a push for more humane immigration policies.

But we're also getting our first real taste of the punditry that will frame this next year and a half, and so far, it is the opposite of fresh, diverse, or forward-thinking. Rather, the analysis coughed up by some of the nation's loudest and most prominent talking heads sounds familiar and stale. The dispiriting truth is that many of those tasked with interpreting our politics are — in addition to being extremely freaked out by the race they're covering — totally ill-equipped for the historic task ahead of them.

Where many Americans have seen the emergence of compelling and charismatic candidates who don't look like those who've preceded them (but *do* look more like the country they want to lead), some prominent pundits seem to be looking at a field of people they simply can't recognize as presidential. Where many hear Democratic politicians arguing vigorously on behalf of more justice and access to resources for people who have historically been kept at the margins of power, some prominent columnists are hearing a scary call to destabilization and chaos, imagining themselves on the outside of politics they've long assumed should be centered around them.

Altogether, what's emerging is a view of a presidential commentariat that — in terms of both ideas and diversity — is embarrassingly outpaced by the candidates, many of whom appear smarter, more thoughtful, and to have a nimbler grasp of American history and structural inequities than the television journalists being paid to cover them.

The day after the first pair of debates, *Morning Joe* host Joe Scarborough declared them “a disaster for the Democratic Party,” and hoped that no one had been watching (in fact, they *had* been watching; ratings were startlingly robust). Scarborough particularly bemoaned candidates' opinions on immigration — namely that crossing the border should be reclassified as a federal misdemeanor, not a crime; and that immigrants should be entitled to health care — chiding that these ideas “may make Democrats feel really good about themselves,” but

would lose them the election. This week, Scarborough went on a Twitter tear, venting against “woke Democrats” and their drive left, later deleting his thread.

Meanwhile, the *Washington Post's* Robert J. Samuelson asserted that the Democratic candidates resemble “a gaggle of graduate students.” At the debates, all of them, he conceded, “seemed articulate and intelligent ... None, however, seemed ‘presidential.’” At the *New York Times*, Never Trump conservative Bret Stephens was worse, arguing that if Democrats continue to do things like speak Spanish and argue for universal health care, they’ll not only “lose the elections,” they’ll “deserve it,” and suggesting that the candidates’ fights on behalf of immigrants, workers, the uninsured, and the economically struggling shows that Democrats are more invested “in *them* instead of *us*,” a formulation in which “us” seems clearly to stand for the white and the well-off, and “them” is ... everyone else.

In particular, Stephens criticized Kamala Harris’s “scurrilous attack” on Joe Biden during the second debate, in which she confronted the former vice-president over his praise for segregationists he’d boasted of working alongside in his Senate career and pointed out that the very busing measures he’d sided with Republicans to oppose had been what enabled her to attend an integrated elementary school. Stephens compared Harris critically to Barack Obama, writing of the former president’s ability to “[make] you feel comfortable no matter the color of your skin,” and argued that Harris, by contrast, made “white Americans feel racially on trial.”

Of course, newspaper columnists — especially conservative ones like Stephens — are going to columnize, and increasingly, they do so in company that is slightly more diverse, ideologically and in other ways, than it was even a few short years ago. But Stephens’s troubling assertion that a black person’s description of her experience of discrimination is tantamount to a prosecution of white people found a broader foothold in television commentary. During post-debate coverage, MSNBC host Chris Matthews — who is still tasked with interviewing presidential candidates, despite having been revealed to have joked before a 2016 interview with Hillary Clinton about putting a “Bill Cosby pill” in her water — was questioning Harris about the stories she’d told about friends not being allowed to play with her because she was black. Prefacing his question about race with the assertion that he did not “like the word ‘race,’” Matthews asked her, “How did you come out of that and not have hate toward white people generally?” Matthews was surely trying to side with Harris in some way, but did so by framing her challenge of segregationist policies, rooted in her personal experience, as logically akin to a hatred of white people — precisely the specter of punitive racial resentment that Stephens had been trying to rouse.

Cable news analysis hit another low when Donny Deutsch, an advertising and branding executive who for years had his own CNBC show and was recently hired by MSNBC to host a weekly political talk show, said of Elizabeth Warren, whom he has predicted will lose 48 states should she become the nominee: “I think she’s delightful, I think she’s wonderful, I’m a big fan, I just don’t think she has what it takes to beat this president the same way ... an idealized version of Joe Biden [does].” When challenged by MSNBC host Lawrence O’Donnell, Deutsch got defensive: “I am understanding Donald Trump, the way he connects with this country, and the strength he exudes. We need to exude a stronger strength.” Deutsch exuded his own stronger strength by affirming that he is “a guy who’s done this for 30 years and watched human behavior.”

In this, if nothing else, Deutsch was correct: He has been doling out weird gender essentialism for eons. In his 2005 book *Often Wrong, Never in Doubt*, Deutsch wrote, “I cannot remember a time in my career when I was not having either a flirtation with a woman in the office, or a friendship, a fantasy, or all of the above. I am at my best when women are there to energize and excite me.” More recently, he told Nicolle Wallace of Joe Biden: “I love him onstage next to Trump. I love his height. I love that he threatened to get into a fistfight with Trump.” Back in 2008, Deutsch loved vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in a different way, as a “new feminist ideal:” “I want her watching my kids ... I want her laying in bed next to me,” Deutsch said at the time, arguing that “women want to be her, men want to mate with her.”

The problem here is not simply that Matthews and Deutsch still have their high-paid media jobs, despite lengthy records of mediocre analysis, grotesque speech about women, and relative cluelessness about race. It’s that their jobs are crucial to how the story of the presidential race will be told to the millions of people who watch them.

This is the suffocatingly grim reality: *Even* after the peeling off of a layer of the political media’s most prominent interlocutors during #MeToo — including Charlie Rose, Mark Halperin, Bill O’Reilly and Matt Lauer — television coverage of the 2020 election is still being led by men who have sketchy histories around gender and power. Even after a midterm season in which women — many of them women of color, some of them very progressive — won elections in historic numbers; even in the midst of a presidential crisis during which poor, black, brown, and immigrant communities have been made more vulnerable than ever, and have been brought closer to the center — finally — of left political engagement and activism; *even* given all of this, so many of the voices interpreting the events around us still belong to the guys who’ve been clumsily telling us what to think about politics for ages.

Of course, it's the swiftness of the political current that is making so many long-entrenched pundits so uncomfortable. They feel left behind and are convinced that the electorate reflects their own perspectives — as Donny Deutsch said last week to O'Donnell, “I guarantee you 90 percent of our audience agrees with me.” These analysts feel that a Democratic Party that's moving left is ditching not just them, but their platonic ideal of a Democratic voter — concocted in the same spirit that Deutsch may imagine an “idealized version of Joe Biden”: a white centrist they are sure not only represents the average American, but the Democratic base. But in all of their hand-wringing, they seem not to have noticed that, in fact, assumptions about a safe center are crumbling in the hands of a new generation of political leaders willing to make a stirring case for radical ideas.

Support for the Green New Deal, a policy proposal which was treated as a joke not just by Republicans but by many in the Democratic Party and the press upon its inception, appears to have risen precipitously; a majority of voters support Medicare for All (even as many don't totally understand what it entails). The majority of Americans support the kind of wealth tax that Elizabeth Warren is proposing, even as some economists criticize it as unrealistic. In fact, in this period during which mainstream political analysts talk so much about the perils of Democrats getting ever more progressive, a study released by the University of North Carolina last month showed American support for left-wing policy to be at a 60-year high, suggesting that perhaps the prescription being offered by these men — which if I'm piecing it all together correctly would be a moderate show of masculine prowess and deficit-wary conservatism that makes white people feel good about themselves — might be the very thing that has kept many voters from investing energetically in the Democratic Party until now. And the thing they fear most — these women and nonwhite guys with their angry voices and memories of being discriminated against who are not tall enough to debate Trump — may be what galvanizes the party.

The disconnect between the candidates and how the candidates are being received by many in the political media also tells us something about how politics, even presidential politics, remains much more susceptible to speedy alteration than institutional journalism.

After all, 11 years ago, when Deutsch was on television holding forth on Sarah Palin's maternal hotness, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — who's not running for president but is clearly one of the transformational figures who's bugging the hell out of many of these same men (Deutsch has predicted that she is “going to hand the presidency back to Donald Trump”; Stephens

described her form of democratic socialism as “political hemlock”) was a college freshman. Elizabeth Warren was a law professor; Kamala Harris was the district attorney of San Francisco; Julián Castro was a former San Antonio city council member who'd lost his first campaign for mayor and was about to embark on his second. If you'd told many of the men covering 2020 that these would be the energetic leaders of a Democratic Party in 2019, they might have laughed. But they would have done their laughing on television or in newspapers because many of them ... were doing the same, or similar, jobs as they are today.

We're regularly told — sometimes by these very same guys! — that powerful white men are frightened, under attack by a mob of politically correct bullies who lack nuance. Yet in reality, these men's own missteps — joking about slipping a roofie to a presidential candidate, bragging about flirting with women at work, having lied about their own journalism careers, as current MSNBC anchor Brian Williams did — have not resulted in permanent expulsion from their jobs. In fact, many of these men have been paid handsomely to *continue* telling their authoritative version of the story of American politics, over a period of decades during which those politics have been transformed, ideologically and representationally.

The absolute security and steadiness of their powerful perches has meant that many of these pundits have never been truly forced to think seriously about how they've benefited from racial and gendered bias, how colleagues and subjects who are smarter and more talented than they are don't have their reach, their pulpits, their platforms.

And in this small but serious way, some of these pundits *do* reflect one angle of what's been happening in the primary field: the front-runner status of Joe Biden, a man who has flamed out of two previous presidential primary campaigns — one in which he was caught plagiarizing, one in which he spoke in affably racist terms about his competitor, Barack Obama, then won less than one percent of the Iowa caucus vote — yet has nonetheless continued to wield political power, and to lead this year's presidential pack in terms of fundraising, polling, and press coverage.

Biden, like many of the most prominent men covering him, was born into a world in which every system was set up to help him build and preserve his own power, even — in fact by definition — at the expense of others. These guys are on some level unprepared for a universe in which others, people whose childhoods were shaped by the busing policies they were creating, might one day stand up and challenge them; in which a woman whose family once teetered on the brink of home foreclosure might fight them tooth and nail on bankruptcy

reform, or in which they would be forced to reckon with a debate stage filled with those who felt it important to speak Spanish.

These pundits may turn out to be right that these dynamics will make some voters feel as uncomfortable as they are being made to feel, and that those voters will ultimately prefer people who, like Trump, call back to a more comfortingly hierarchical past.

But the argument that many of the presidential candidates they're covering are forcefully advancing is something I've rarely heard as clearly from potential front-runners before: that this comfortable path backward, even in service of electing a Democrat, is unacceptable and a reflection of the very inequities that have left the nation broken and perilous for so many. They are insisting on a different, faster, smarter, lefter turn toward the future.

If only our pundits could catch up to them in class.

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22 MINS AGO

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10:35 A.M.

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9:59 A.M.

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9:50 A.M.

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9:50 A.M.

**HOW I GET IT DONE | 8:00 A.M.**

Sara Nelson is the woman credited  
with helping to end last year's government shutdown.

By Bridget Read

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YESTERDAY AT 11:06 P.M.

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YESTERDAY AT 10:58 P.M.

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YESTERDAY AT 10:58 P.M.

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YESTERDAY AT 10:34 P.M.

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**RED CARPET | YESTERDAY AT 9:56 P.M.**

From Billy Porter to  
Billie Eilish.

By Emilia Petrarca

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**OSCARS 2020 | YESTERDAY AT 9:12 P.M.**

Hair scarves, pearl parts, and  
van Gogh nails.

By Erica Smith

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YESTERDAY AT 8:55 P.M.

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**ASTROLOGY | YESTERDAY AT 8:30 P.M.**

# with a powerful full moon in Leo.

By Claire Comstock-Gay

YESTERDAY AT 8:00 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 7:48 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 7:48 P.M.

**RED CARPET DERBY** | YESTERDAY AT 6:00 P.M.

Updated live, right here. 

By Lee Musho

**NYFW FALL 2020** | YESTERDAY AT 2:24 P.M.

R13 and Christopher John Rogers are doing it right.

By Cathy Horyn

YESTERDAY AT 1:39 P.M.

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