

What These Student Debaters Learned From the 2020 Democratic Debates

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WASHINGTON — For the 20 Democratic candidates who tussled onstage in Detroit last week for their party’s nomination, the debates were a chance to goose poll numbers, undercut rivals and wring donations from potential voters.

For the nearly 200 students who attended a summer debate program last week run by the Washington Urban Debate League, the contests were something else: a lesson plan.

The program, a two-week boot camp for middle and high schoolers held at the Washington Latin Public Charter School, enrolls mostly minority students from underserved backgrounds. The presidential debates offered a teachable moment, said David Trigaux, the league’s program director.

“We always try to find ways to connect to what’s going on in the public discussion,” he said. “The timing of the debates couldn’t be better to provide examples of some things to do and some things not to do.”

Across two harried nights of intraparty sparring, the campers, sorted into “labs” according to experience, found examples of both. They are not yet old enough to vote, much less stand for the highest office in the land. But they could probably debate circles around those who are.

The camp has a scholastic feel; less hiking and canoeing, more nine-to-five instruction in the art of cross-examination and rebuttal. In a math classroom on Thursday, a lab of junior varsity debaters simulated Wednesday night’s presidential showdown, with each student adopting the role of a different candidate.

“Global warming is the first thing we should focus on,” said Brooke Roberson, 12, giving a convincing impression of Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington, who has staked his 2020 run on climate change. Earlier that day, she hunched over a laptop watching clips of debate highlights, absorbing the candidates’ platforms, attack lines and speaking styles.

“The first thing we have to worry about is how to beat Donald Trump,” countered Darrian Carroll, a University of Maryland doctoral student who helped lead the lab, mimicking former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. “We won’t stop global warming if we don’t beat Donald Trump.”

“But do you have a plan, other than to beat Trump?” pressed Tyler Davis, 13, channeling Representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii.

Role-playing the presidential contests helps less experienced debaters hone their rhetorical skills, said Hiba Sheikh, 24, the lab’s other leader. It also magnifies differences. In the type of competition the campers practice, called policy debate, judges grade opposing teams, each composed of two debaters, according to the strength of their arguments as well as the evidence they present. “Thinking about presidential debates through a policy debate lens makes you really see what claims they are making and how they are substantiating those claims,” Ms. Sheikh said of the presidential candidates. “And often they’re just not substantiating them.”

One floor away, a lab of 12 varsity debaters looked for parallels. The candidates’ liberal use of ad hominem attacks might not fly in a policy debate round, said Jackie Poapst, the assistant director for George Mason University’s debate team, who led the discussion. But deploying strong opening statements to prime an audience and stressing the far-reaching effects of policy certainly would.

Ms. Poapst’s students watched Wednesday’s debate as a homework assignment. For over an hour, they picked apart performances, zeroing in on effective attacks (Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York and Ms. Gabbard) and key clashes (Senator Kamala Harris of California versus Mr. Biden on health care; Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey versus Mr. Biden on criminal justice).

“It’s impressive just how much more they do than us and how much less they do than us at the same time,” said Timothy Neal, 15, comparing his fellow campers with the presidential hopefuls. “On one hand, we talk about one resolution a year, and they had, like, six of those in that one debate,” he added, using the term for the topic students debate over a 10-month season. “And on the other hand, we talk about one resolution a year, and we aren’t dodging questions and salting each other.”

The presidential debates can also influence the varsity students’ own arguments. In policy debate, students present real-world proposals and actionable plans to enact them. That often means considering shifting political winds. This season’s resolution, that the United States limit arms sales to foreign governments, is complicated by the impending election, said Lola Rogin, 14. “If something political changes, and it could be anything, it changes the trajectory of debates.”

In the past two years, the campers have sparred over issues like education and immigration — topics that bear directly on their own lives. Many of them come from immigrant backgrounds, and the issue of foreign arms sales can also sometimes hit close to home. “That’s something that they can really understand, because there’s gun violence in D.C.,” Mr. Trigaux said.

Since its inception in 2015, the camp has exploded from just 32 students to hundreds. The league has grown from a handful of schools to nearly 50, all of them public schools in Washington and nearby Prince George’s County, Md.

About 30 cities, including Baltimore, New York and Chicago, have urban debate leagues. (Detroit’s urban debate camp starts this week.) The leagues aim to bring debate to disadvantaged populations. The Washington league, which hosts tournaments during the school year, lowers barriers to participation, providing coaching resources and transportation to competitions. The camp, which is free, serves every attendee daily breakfast and lunch.

“We will never make the kids pay anything,” said Norman J. Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, whose foundation funds the camp. In 2015, Mr. Ornstein and his wife, Judy, started the foundation in memory of their son, Matthew, a former policy debate champion who died of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. The camp bears his name. Including facilities costs, payment for staff members and food, this year’s price tag approached \$100,000, Mr. Ornstein said.

Being in Washington also has its advantages: Volunteer judges have included Capitol Hill staff members, a Secret Service agent and other government employees. On Friday, at the close of a campwide tournament, Mr. Ornstein read from letters addressed to the students from Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. (High school debate “set me up for success in college, law school, in advocacy and law practice, politics, public service, and, of course, winning arguments with my husband!” Mrs. Clinton wrote.)

For some campers, studying the presidential contests made debate more relatable. “It’s cool to see that debating can be a real-life skill. It can persuade a lot of people,” said Shabad Singh, 12, who played Ms. Harris in her lab on Thursday.

Others find value defending multiple perspectives and watching the candidates present competing ideas. “It’s good to see your opinions played out on a larger scale,” said Paola Almendarez, 15. “Because some people, and I would include myself in this, are so locked into what they think is right.”

In Friday’s tournament, she and Ms. Rogin, her debate partner, placed first among the varsity students. With that under her belt, did she have any advice for any of the 2020 Democrats before the next bout?

“Oh,” she said, “where do I begin?”