The Rhetorical Significance of the March 10 Primaries

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As outstanding votes were counted in the March 10 Democratic Presidential primaries, media pundits shifted their discussion to the inevitable nomination of former Vice President Joe Biden. They were preoccupied with the usual horse race game of speculating about how Bernie Sanders will respond to the latest round of defeats.

Such discourse, however, may obscure the real story—a story with a more positive and optimistic tone.

I submit that the most salient news emerging from the six primaries was the continued trend of large numbers of Democrats casting ballots and their persistent anger toward—as well as rebuke of—the unacceptable behavior of the 45th President. More than anything else, the results demonstrated a clear and forceful response to Donald Trump, as well as a desire to move the nation in a positive direction.

For example, unlike 2016, Democratic primary voters on March 10, especially in Michigan, a state still reeling from the fact that Trump won by only a handful of votes, were highly energized and motivated; this
time they took Trump seriously. This may be a good indicator of what will transpire in November.

Political strategist James Carville was on the mark, suggesting that it's time for the Democratic Party to stop quarreling among themselves, uniting and pivoting to the general election rather than continuing to highlight nuanced policy differences among the two remaining candidates.

I concur with David Axelrod, former senior adviser to President Obama, that the focus of Democratic campaign rhetoric going forward should be on empathy, humanity, decency and compassion—the biggest Trump deficits and his most serious liabilities. In view of the crises faced by the nation, most recently the coronavirus threat, Americans are looking for stability, rationality, a steady hand and a return to normalcy.

March 10 exit polls revealed that former Vice President Joe Biden was perceived by voters to be the best able to handle a national crisis, especially in view of the current coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, he may be the perfect contrast to the incumbent President and the candidate with the best chance of defeating him.

Biden’s quiet speech from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia (symbolically a meaningful location) following his Tuesday successes showed an astute rhetorical understanding of this. Harkening back to the announcement of his candidacy, Biden reminded Americans why he entered the race and repeated his claim that candidacy is on the ballot in 2020.

“Tonight,” declared Biden, “we're a step closer to restoring decency, dignity and honor to the White House.” He continued: “Our democracy is at stake in this election. As I said from the moment I announced, we’re in a battle for the soul of our nation. With Donald Trump as
President our core values, our standing in the world, our very democracy, everything that has made America is at stake.”

From a rhetorical perspective, the key is that Biden’s speech provided a positive theme, emphasizing that Americans are a good, resilient and decent people—and that our country can overcome the divisiveness of the past four years if we remember who we are.

In short, Tuesday’s primary results were less about Biden’s victories and more about a recognition of the need to unify the nation and reaffirm America’s sacred values and principles—the things that historically have made us great and allowed this democratic experiment to survive.

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