

# The Washington Post

The Fix

## Thursday's debate could be Bernie Sanders's last, best chance to appeal to black voters

By Callum Borchers February 11 at 12:23 PM

Bernie Sanders is riding high after a decisive win in New Hampshire's Democratic presidential primary, but one of the top reasons to doubt his ability to win the party's nomination remains his weak poll numbers among racial minorities, who have traditionally been critical to Democrats' success — not to mention their nominating process. A recent Marist survey in South Carolina, site of the next primary (after caucuses in Nevada), showed Hillary Clinton leading Sanders 74-17 among black voters.

The knock on Sanders — articulated nicely by The Fix's Janell Ross — is that he seems to be waiting for black voters, in particular, to just come around, rather than making a concerted effort to appeal to them directly on a range of issues. And as former Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter (D) put it Tuesday night on CNN, after the Vermont senator's victory speech in New Hampshire, "almost every time I've heard him talk about African Americans and Latinos, it's been with regard to either jail or criminal justice. I find that slightly offensive."

Well, if past is prologue, Sanders will have no choice but to discuss race in greater depth during Thursday's PBS debate in Milwaukee than he has at any point so far in this campaign. The last time PBS oversaw a Democratic primary debate, during the 2008 election cycle, race dominated the early discussion — so much so that about halfway through the evening, when little else had been covered, moderator Tavis Smiley announced he would cut response times from one minute to 30 seconds, in an effort to address more topics.

---

**Campaign 2016**    Email Updates

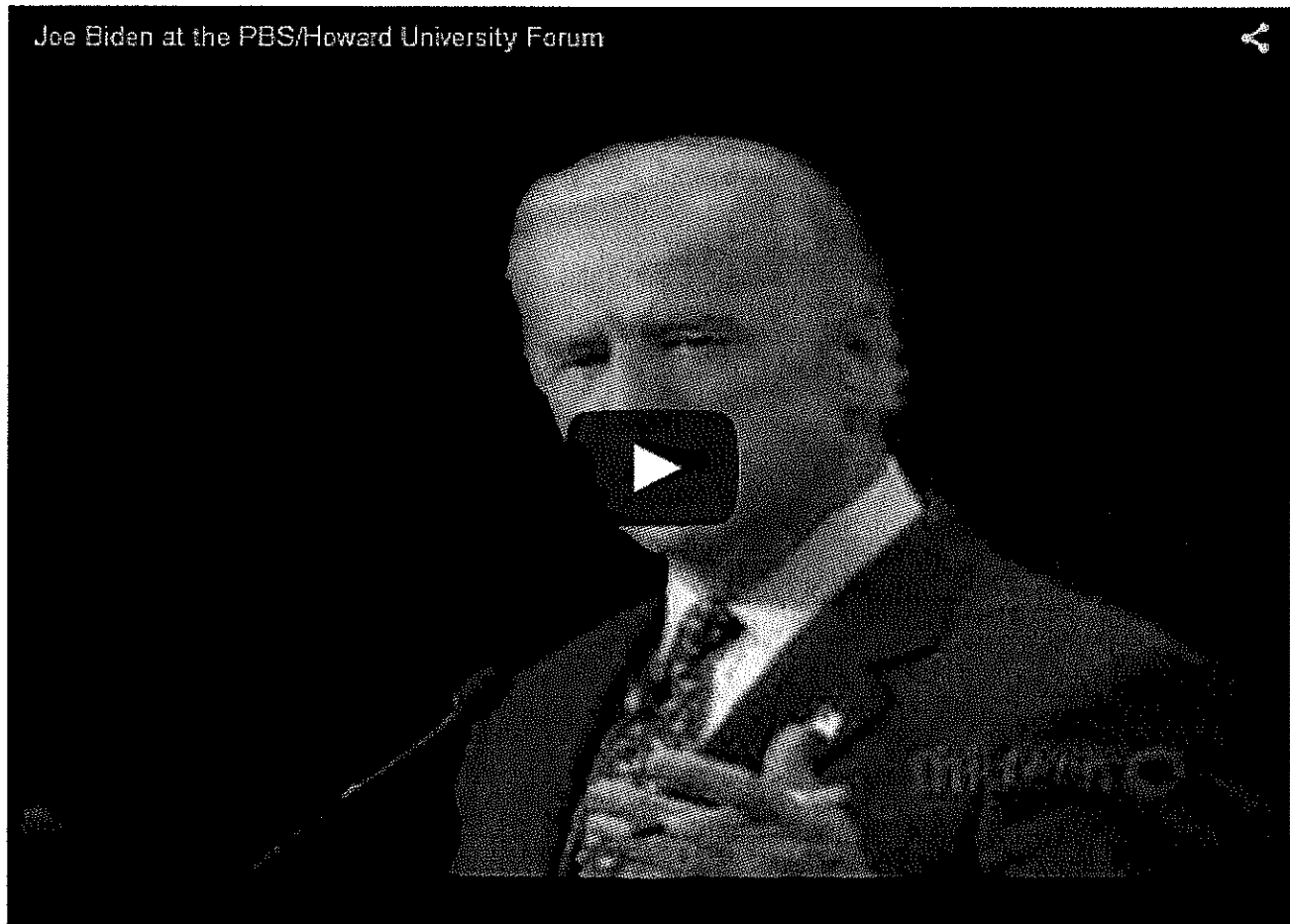
[Sign up](#)

**Get the biggest election stories in your inbox.**

---

"Is race still the most intractable issue in America?" was the opening question that night. Next: "According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2006 the unemployment rate of black high school graduates — black high school graduates — was 33 percent higher than the unemployment rate for white high school dropouts. To what do you attribute this inequity, which keeps many black families locked in the grip of poverty?"

The heavy focus on race was dictated, in part, by the venue and current events. Howard University, a historically black college, hosted the event, and the Supreme Court earlier in the day had issued a decision that limited the ability of public school districts to set racial diversity criteria when assigning children to schools. No such conditions will exist tonight in Wisconsin.



But there are other reasons why PBS moderators Gwen Ifill and Judy Woodruff might devote significant time to race, not the least of which is Sanders's aforementioned polling deficit. He met with civil rights leader Al Sharpton on Wednesday; it would be natural to ask what they talked about and what the senator took away. On the flip side, Clinton could be pressed on whether she is taking minority voters — sometimes described as her "firewall" against Sanders — for granted. The Nation, a leading liberal magazine that has endorsed Sanders, ran a scathing article on Wednesday that argued for why Clinton "doesn't deserve the black vote."

Meanwhile, Black Lives Matter remains a significant and polarizing presence on the political landscape — made all the more relevant on Super Bowl Sunday by Beyonce's halftime performance. The singer and her backup dancers wore outfits that evoked the look of the Black Panther Party and arranged themselves

into an "X" formation, seemingly a reference to the late activist Malcolm X. Protesters outraged by the apparent political statement are planning a demonstration outside NFL headquarters next Tuesday.

Also next Tuesday, PBS will air a documentary in primetime called "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution." And even a public broadcaster can't possibly resist a newsy excuse to plug its own programming, right?

And finally, keep in mind that this is the final Democratic debate before voters head to the polls in Nevada on Feb. 20, South Carolina on Feb. 27 and a whole host of Southern states on March 1. The race could effectively be decided by the next debate, making this perhaps Sanders's last, best chance to appeal to minority voters directly and without a media filter. He needs to set the tone on an issue that continues to do

It's possible, of course, that PBS will take the debate in an entirely different direction. But considering its history, the state of the campaign, and the news of the moment, the Democratic candidates -- and Sanders in particular -- better be ready to talk race. At length.

---

Callum Borchers covers the intersection of politics and media.

---

---

Campaign 2016

×

Where the race stands

>

---