

A Democrat Who Can Beat Trump

By [David Leonhardt](#) Jan. 5, 2020

Why Amy Klobuchar still has a chance.



Amy Klobuchar at a campaign event in Las Vegas. Joe Buglewicz for The New York Times

If you're like a lot of Democrats, you worry that Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are too liberal — or at least that other voters [think so](#). You're also not buying the Pete Buttigieg hype. And you get nervous every time Joe Biden opens his mouth.

So where are you supposed to find a comfortably electable, qualified candidate who won't turn 80 while in office?

Senator Amy Klobuchar has become an answer to that question in the final month before voting begins. She has outlasted more than a dozen other candidates and has two big strengths: A savvy understanding of how to campaign against President Trump and [a track record](#) of winning the sorts of swing voters Democrats will likely need this year.

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Klobuchar, to be sure, is not a finished product as a presidential candidate. Too often, she sounds like a senator speaking in legislative to-do lists rather than a future president who can inspire voters. That tendency — along with too much needling of other candidates, instead of focusing on her own message — was evident in the most recent debate.

Yet she still emerged as one of the debate's [winners](#), and she is enjoying a [burst](#) of [new attention](#). She raised more than twice as much money, \$11.4 million, in the fourth quarter of 2019 than the third quarter. When I ask top Democrats which candidate has the best chance of beating Trump, Klobuchar is often their answer. If party leaders [still chose](#) nominees, she might now be the favorite.

In that way, she reminds me of another Midwestern senator who once seemed too ordinary to be president: Harry Truman. In the summer of 1944, an even more perilous time for global democracy than now, Democratic Party grandees chose Truman as vice president with [the belief](#) that he would soon be president, given Franklin Roosevelt's declining health.

Truman was (as Klobuchar is) a loyal Democrat with [populist leanings](#) whom many Republicans, both senators and voters, nonetheless felt some affection for. He had a folksy manner and heartland accent. He was also a long shot for the nomination when the process began. The analogy extends to Klobuchar's best-known [weakness](#): Truman had [a temper](#), too.

Of course, Klobuchar needs to win over millions of primary voters, not just hundreds of convention delegates, which is why she remains an underdog. But [the path](#) is the same one that her campaign had always seen: Do well enough in Iowa,

which is next door to her home state of Minnesota, and then in New Hampshire to be one of the final two or three candidates standing.

Her greatest strength is her understanding of how to beat Republicans. They like to portray Democrats as self-serious elites who look down on ordinary Americans. (Think about the caricatures of John Kerry, Al Gore and Michael Dukakis.) Klobuchar has built her political career on an image that combines working class and middle class.

She grew up in a family that struggled with alcoholism and divorce, and she [talks](#) about it. When her husband, John Bessler, was a child, he lived with his five brothers and parents in a trailer home. Klobuchar's [memoir](#) is called "The Senator Next Door." She tells too many self-deprecating jokes to seem earnest. Some of them are even funny.

She is still a relative city slicker, having lived most of her life around the Twin Cities and attended Yale and the University of Chicago's law school. But she knows how to persuade voters who are different from her that she respects them. She has learned the minutia of farm policy and rural development. She [visits](#) all of Minnesota's 87 counties every year.

Klobuchar combines this persona with tough, clear explanations of how Republican policies will hurt the middle

class: They will make prescription drugs more expensive, health insurance harder to get and climate destruction worse. If she's elected, she [promises](#) to raise taxes on the rich, lift take-home pay for everyone else, take on big-business abuses and combat climate change.

In the 2018 midterms, as Klobuchar points out, Democrats [focused](#) on bread-and-butter issues while largely avoiding divisive ideas like Medicare for All. "If you don't think that worked, I have four words for you: Former Gov. Scott Walker," [she said](#) on Pod Save America, referring to the Wisconsin conservative hero who lost. Democrats also won [the statewide congressional vote](#) in Iowa, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Florida, on their way to retaking the House.

This year will probably be harder, because incumbent presidents usually win re-election. But Klobuchar's own electoral history is deeply impressive. She has won all three of her Senate elections by more than 20 percentage points. In 2018, she [carried](#) 51 of Minnesota's 87 counties; two years earlier, Hillary Clinton had carried [only nine](#).

I am also struck by Klobuchar's views about how to run against Trump this time — to talk about how he has let down the country (which gives his old supporters permission to switch sides), to use [humor](#) against his demagoguery and to appeal to voters' emotions and

patriotism.

On that last point, her primary campaign could benefit from her own advice: Klobuchar would improve her chances if she could find the grace notes that lift the best campaigns by telling a story about America.

I'm not saying that Democrats should necessarily vote for Klobuchar. Other candidates have strengths she doesn't. Buttigieg, for example, summons those grace notes naturally. And Warren has [an unmatched grasp](#) of the economy's problems, which could make her a transformational president.

I'm merely saying this: Many Democratic voters [care more](#) about beating Trump than anything else. For them, Klobuchar deserves a look.