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Pete Buttigieg runs as a moderate while championing far-left policies

David Sherfinski and S.A. Miller

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Pete Buttigieg emerged as a front-runner in the Democratic presidential race by running as a middle-of-the-road liberal, but his policies — including near-unlimited abortion rights and spending plans that could make former President Barack Obama blush — don't always fit neatly into the moderate lane.

He declared that confiscating military-style rifles would go too far, but he advocates licensing every firearm owner, which Second Amendment advocates view as a step toward confiscation.

He stops short of the far-left's "Medicare-for-All" government takeover of health care, but he offers a public option that his campaign acknowledges sets the stage for a single-payer system.

He talks about tackling federal deficits and debt but offers a liberal policy solution of tax increases on the wealthy and carbon emissions that some analysts warn would blunt economic growth.

He said decriminalizing border jumpers is a bridge too far. Instead, he proposed a massive expansion of legal immigration, a path to citizenship and more government services for illegal immigrants, and a cutback on the list of offenses that result in deportation.

With these pitches, Mr. Buttigieg is aiming to win over "future former Republicans" while touting himself as someone who will be "the most progressive presidential nominee" in a generation.

"With a president this divisive, we cannot risk dividing Americans' future further saying that you must be either for a revolution or you must be for the status quo," he said Saturday at the New Hampshire Democratic Party's McIntyre-Shaheen 100 Club dinner. "Let's make room for everybody in this movement."

Shortly after delivering that line, he was besieged with jeers and chants of "Wall Street Pete" from raucous supporters of a socialist rival, Sen. Bernard Sanders of Vermont.

Still, Mr. Buttigieg, a former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, doesn't stray far from Mr. Sanders' agenda and tacks left on matters of liberal orthodoxy.

Several times in recent weeks, Mr. Buttigieg pointedly declined to put any limits on abortion rights and said he would not try to fool pro-lifers into voting for him.

"This is less than 1% of cases," he said at a forum in Concord when asked about late-term abortion. "In those situations, what we know is that decision will not be made any better, medically or morally, because it is being dictated by some government official."

His position angered pro-life advocates on both the right and the left.

Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life of America, said she and like-minded Democratic voters had high hopes that Mr. Buttigieg would be at least sympathetic to their cause.

“Being from South Bend, there’s a lot of pro-life Democrats there,” she said. “We thought that of all the candidates, he might be the one that would understand where we’re coming from and we want to be in the party.”

Ms. Day got into a memorable exchange with Mr. Buttigieg at a town hall last month in Iowa when she asked what he thought about the Democratic Party’s pre-2008 platform language, which acknowledged respect for the conscience of Americans and said abortions should be rare.

“That’s all we were asking Mayor Pete to consider,” she said. “I said that to him, and when I had the follow-up question, yet he just doubled down on his pro-choice position — something that I already knew and didn’t ask about.”

On health care, Mr. Buttigieg pitched a plan he calls “Medicare for All Who Want It,” slamming the single-payer plans envisioned by Mr. Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts as too costly and disruptive.

With his new twist on Medicare for All, the government takeover of health care championed by the far left, he was accused of being a flip-flopper.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, who is fighting to gain traction in the race’s more moderate lane, reminded voters at Friday’s debate that Mr. Buttigieg claimed to be 100% in favor of Medicare for All as recently as 2018.

Faiz Shakir, Mr. Sanders’ campaign manager, said Mr. Buttigieg isn’t being forthright on the issue and that he tells different audiences what he thinks they want to hear.

“He’s good with the turn of the phrase, and he pitches what he thinks sounds good,” Mr. Shakir said. “It’s our job to make sure that ... he’s being accurate. And it is accurate to say that he used to be for Medicare for All and no longer is.”

Mr. Buttigieg and his allies say he has been consistent on health care. The “public option” in his plan, they say, would theoretically pave the way for a single-payer system in the not-too-distant future.

“There was no flip-flop,” said Rep. Anthony G. Brown of Maryland, one of Mr. Buttigieg’s supporters in Congress. “Pete’s been very clear on ‘Medicare for All Who Want It.’ He’s been very clear on that. Pete believes it is a bold step forward, and it is.”

Still, as Mr. Sanders’ supporters at the McIntyre-Shaheen dinner showed, liberals think Mr. Buttigieg’s agenda isn’t left-wing enough.

“If you are a far-right conservative voter, all of them are going to be scary,” said Neil Sroka, spokesman for the progressive advocacy group Democracy for America. “But on the issue[s] that actually differentiate the candidates, it is hard to argue that he is a progressive candidate in this race.”

He faulted Mr. Buttigieg for flip-flopping on Medicare for All and being too cozy with corporations, which puts him solidly to the right of Mr. Sanders and Ms. Warren.

“There is little doubt that he is not running for progressive support at this time. He’s in the corporate Democratic lane, and that’s why he’s eating Joe Biden’s lunch right now,” Mr. Sroka said.

In another departure from his more liberal opponents, Mr. Buttigieg has made the pitch that Democrats should embrace the issue of reining in federal deficits and has emphasized that all his expansive policy proposals would be funded through tax hikes and other revenue raisers.

“The time has come for my party to get a lot more comfortable owning this issue,” he said at a campaign event in Nashua on Sunday.

A recent nonpartisan fiscal watchdog group did find that the former mayor was the only major contender whose health care proposal wouldn’t blow a hole in the federal budget.

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said he doesn’t think Mr. Buttigieg is moderate on economic issues “at all.” He pointed out that the former mayor wants to increase the corporate tax rate, institute a carbon tax and increase the capital gains tax.

“In my view, that would devastate Silicon Valley because capital gains are the reward for all the risk-taking by angel investors, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs,” Mr. Edwards said.

Brian Riedl, a senior fellow at the free-market-oriented Manhattan Institute, said everything is relative given the center of gravity in the 2020 Democratic field.

“Biden and Buttigieg are described as moderates, yet their tax and spending plans are miles to the left of anything Barack Obama ever proposed,” Mr. Riedl said. “It’s interesting the degree to which the Democratic Party has moved left.”

He estimated that Mr. Biden is collectively proposing \$4 trillion in new taxes and \$7 trillion in new spending, while Mr. Buttigieg is proposing \$10 trillion in each column.

“Obama in 2008 basically said, ‘I’m going to do a trillion-dollar stimulus and then I’m going to pay for everything after that,’” he said. “But essentially, Obama was proposing to add about \$1 trillion in red ink off a couple trillion in new taxes and spending, and that was considered pretty far to the left at the time.”

On gun control, Mr. Buttigieg slammed former rival Beto O’Rourke in an October debate for going too far by calling for the confiscation of military-style rifles in circulation.

“We are this close to an assault weapons ban. That would be huge. And we’re going to get wrapped around the axle in a debate over whether it’s ‘Hell, yes, we’re going to take your guns?’” he told Mr. O’Rourke, who has since dropped out of the race.

Still, Mr. Buttigieg’s firearms agenda includes a ban on those so-called assault weapons and licensing for gun owners.

He promised a litany of other gun laws, including universal background checks and a repeal of the gun industry’s general immunity from liability lawsuits for gun violence.

On immigration, he has stopped short of former candidate Julian Castro's call to decriminalize border jumping. But he proposed a massive expansion of legal immigration and toed the party line by pledging a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, pushing for a restoration of protections for young illegal immigrant "Dreamers" and reversing the Trump administration's restrictions on migrants seeking asylum.