

Democrats debate as primary nears



MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — Five Democratic presidential candidates met in courteous campaign debate Sunday night, replaying the themes of their New Hampshire primary campaigns, slapping at President Bush but seldom at each other.

Timing made it crucial — the polls were opening in little more than 30 hours for Tuesday's leadoff presidential primary — but the tone was low key, the exchanges generally cautious.

For Paul Tsongas, leading the public opinion polls in the final phase of the campaign, a debate standoff was a plus; he'd been prepared to face the challenges that typically confront the front-runner, but few came his way.

Nor did Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton encounter any new questions about the controversies over his draft status or personal life.

Sens. Tom Harkin of Iowa and Bob Kerrey of Nebraska did challenge Tsongas for advocating some use of nuclear power. "We're not trying to gang up on you, we're not saying that you're wrong all the time, but I think you are on this particular issue," Kerrey said.

Tsongas told them all that he's no newcomer to energy policy. "I was doing this in the '70s, so don't come at me saying I'm not for conservation and renewables," he said.

At another point, Tsongas bristled that the others were characterizing his positions,

and said he'd prefer to describe them himself.

"I would say pick Mr. Tsongas if you want the more conservative, business-oriented view," said former California Gov. Jerry Brown, talking about tax policy and later joining the critics on nuclear power.

As the evening wound up, Brown managed to work in his toll-free campaign fund-raising number, as he had in a previous debate. He said he's the only candidate out to change a stuck, stagnant political system. "May God bless our undertakings," he said.

When the candidates discussed big city problems, Harkin at one point mentioned New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, who announced in December he wouldn't run but said Sunday he still wished he could have. A draft-Cuomo committee is staging a write-in campaign in New Hampshire.

"Did you have to mention Gov. Cuomo's name?" Kerrey lamented wryly. "Now more people will write his name in."

When the candidates were asked to choose what each would do as president if there were \$10 billion available for retraining U.S. workers or to help the states of the former Soviet Union, four said they would use the money at home.

"In a heartbeat, I'd spend the money on American workers," said Clinton.

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