

The Democrats
The Politics of Fish
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April 26 marked the first of many showdowns between the rivals vying for the Democratic nomination for the presidency next year. For 90 minutes, the candidates patiently answered predictable questions, and at the end of the debate, held at South Carolina State University, most people reckoned that Hillary Clinton had had the best of it. But the debate was just a precursor to an even more important ritual – Representative James Clyburn’s famous annual “fish fry” the following night.

Mr. Clyburn is the first black to serve South Carolina in Congress for almost a century, and is now the Democratic majority whip there. His fish fry, held in a parking garage in Columbia and attended by more than 1,000 enthusiastic Democratic activists, was unmissable. All six of the top-tier presidential candidates happily took the bait.

That’s because at least half of the voters in South Carolina’s first-in-the-South Democratic primary election on January 29 are expected to be black. Mr. Clyburn’s endorsement would be a big plus for anyone lucky enough to receive it. Not that Mr. Clyburn will necessarily give his blessing to anyone. “I don’t have any intention of doing that,” he said. “I’m not saying that I won’t, but that’s not my intention.”

He was gracious to all the candidates at the fish fry. The candidates themselves were busy shaking hands and chatting up the partygoers, who munched on fried whiting with mustard sauce on spongy white bread. Mr. Clyburn introduced John Edwards – a former senator from North Carolina, born in South Carolina and the winner of the 2004 primary in the state – as “our homeboy”; Mr. Edwards, to look the part, shed the suit he had worn at an earlier fancy dinner and put on blue jeans.

As they were introduced, each of the candidates – particularly Mrs. Clinton, Barack Obama, and Mr. Edwards – was welcomed ardently by the raucous crowd that stood packed like sardines. Mr. Obama, especially, was accorded movie star status. “He touched my hand, he touched my hand,” exclaimed one middle-aged black woman as the smiling Illinois senator wove his way through the crowd.

Mr. Clyburn argues that South Carolina is a microcosm of the country, with a large black population (29% of the total), growing numbers of Hispanics, and four distinct geographical sections, each with different political priorities. He thinks his state is a much better gauge of the views of the American electorate than 93% white Iowa and 95% white New Hampshire, whose caucuses and primary, respectively, will precede South Carolina’s. Which makes it well worth a plate of fish.