

[WASHINGTON]

Revenge of the Moderates

The first two March Super Tuesdays coupled with the emergence of the Covid-19 virus and its negative global impact on economies and markets changed the political dynamic in the U.S. The Super Tuesdays made former Vice President Joe Biden the clear front runner and favorite in the contest to become the Democratic nominee. It is now his to lose. Biden won ten of fifteen states in play on March 3rd and five of six, including Michigan and Washington state on March 10th. Biden now has 887 delegates, 156 more than Sanders. To win the Democratic nomination he must have 1990.

Biden's unexpected showing on March 3rd prompted his most dangerous moderate rival, former New York mayor and billionaire, Michael Bloomberg, to end his bid.

The two Super Tuesdays sharply narrowed Sanders path to the nomination, the more so as recent polls indicate Biden has very substantial leads in the four states voting on March 24, Ohio, Illinois, Florida and Arizona. Because of the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Louisiana and Georgia have postponed their primaries to June. The impact of the virus on the remaining primaries is unpredictable but an epidemic could conceivably delay the July convention.

A high turnout, and Biden's unexpectedly strong showing, reflected the strength of anti-Trump sentiment among Democrats of all stripes and ages and their desire to choose, and rally around one centrist capable of building a coalition that included all the party's major constituencies.

Super Tuesday also confirmed that the party's core is made up of pragmatic moderates who value compromise and who consider Sanders' call for revolutionary change as both too radical and politically impossible. They want to send Trump home in November but they don't want a revolution.

The Super Tuesdays also suggest the slowing economy and Donald J. Trump's mismanagement of the Covid-19 epidemic, now spreading rapidly in the U.S., is dimming his re-election prospects, especially with a very formidable and popular Democratic opponent likely to face him.



South Carolina and the Biden Super Tuesday Surprise

The results of the two March primaries surprised the pundits and perhaps even Biden himself. He unexpectedly surged ahead of his progressive rival Sanders. Only a month ago, Sanders appeared likely to win the nomination.

Despite winning the South Carolina primary decisively on February 29th, polls suggested Biden would be fortunate to win half the states voting on March 3rd. He won ten of the fifteen. And he won nearly 900,000 more votes than Sanders overall.

Biden surprised everywhere. In Virginia, which the polls on the eve of the voting predicted would be close, Biden won by nearly thirty points. He won by even more in Alabama and easily took North Carolina, which was considered a toss-up.

But there were even bigger surprises: Biden won Texas handily, a big state with many delegates that was considered a toss-up. And he won very liberal Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren's home and next door to Sander's home, Vermont. Biden also narrowly took Maine, where the polls indicated Warren and Sanders were the most competitive.

While Sanders won as expected the biggest prize, California, his margin over Biden was slimmer than expected. And in Vermont, favorite son Sanders took only 50% of the vote, far less than he did in 2016 against Hillary Clinton.

To understand the reversal of Biden's and Sanders' fortunes, you have to look to South Carolina. It put to rest questions about whether blacks — the strongest and most cohesive of the Democratic Party's core constituencies — would support Biden after his middling debate performances dating back to last summer, and his poor showings in the Iowa primary in January, and in New Hampshire and Nevada in February.

On the very eve of the South Carolina primary, Jim Clyburn, the state's iconic black Congressman, endorsed Biden in an elegant and emotional speech. That endorsement delivered South Carolina, and an emphatic victory over Sanders and Biden's moderate rivals. It added needed momentum to Biden's lagging campaign, produced a burst of donations, and prompted three moderate rivals — South Bend, Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg, Senator Amy Klobuchar and wealthy businessman Tom Steyer — to end their campaigns before the important Super Tuesday primaries. To make matters worse for Sanders, Buttigieg and Klobuchar both endorsed Biden.

South Carolina also induced a significant behind-the-scenes move.

Former President Barack Obama was widely assumed to favor Biden but remained steadfastly neutral, keeping to himself his personal preference. And that remains the case.

However, according to private sources, Obama quietly engaged on Biden's behalf after the South Carolina primary. Obama called Buttigieg, who did so poorly with blacks there that his bid for the nomination was in jeopardy.

Without mentioning Biden's name, Obama reportedly pointed out Buttigieg's failure to gain black support augured poorly for the remaining primaries. Obama counseled him to use his still ample political capital to end his campaign before Super Tuesday and, by implication, endorse the new frontrunner, Joe Biden.

Buttigieg did so and Biden responded quickly, declaring that Buttigieg would have a role in Biden's administration.

After Buttigieg ended his campaign, Senator Klobuchar did likewise. And she also gave a ringing endorsement of Biden. Klobuchar had waited to see if Buttigieg would remain in the race until after Super Tuesday to decide whether to quit. That both did so before Super Tuesday gave Biden an enormous psychological and political boost and virtually insured Biden would surge on March 3rd. That, coupled with Congressman Clyburn's resounding endorsement, persuaded undecided moderate Democrats and, in particular, blacks to cast their ballot for Biden on March 3rd.

Shortly thereafter, former NYC mayor and billionaire Bloomberg ended his candidacy, endorsed Biden and pledged his full political and financial support to Biden. That left Biden facing only one serious rival, Sanders.



March 10th: More Surprises

Entering the March 10th primaries, Biden had 90 more delegates than Sanders. Delegate rich Michigan was the big prize that day. Sanders won it in 2016. However, polls indicated that Biden was surging there. Some pundits saw the big industrial state as Sanders' "last stand" against Biden's surge.

Biden performed even better that day, winning five of the six primaries. And he won the two most important ones, Michigan and progressive Washington state. Sanders had been favored in both before March 3rd, indeed polls showed him with a substantial lead in Washington state a week before.

Sanders had revived his 2016 campaign by upsetting Clinton in Michigan but failed to repeat that this year. And the turnout in Michigan undercut Sanders' claim that his message and energy would bring out more voters. More did come out. Indeed, participation in Michigan increased by 31%, but exit polls indicated that most of those votes went to Biden.

Biden also easily won Mississippi, where he took more than 80 percent of the primarily black vote, Idaho and Missouri, where blacks came out in large numbers for him. Sanders managed only one

victory, in North Dakota with a scant 14 delegates.

(In the Democratic primaries, delegates are awarded on a proportional basis to candidates who cross a 15 percent threshold. In addition, the winning candidate in every electoral district also receives one delegate. The Republicans use first past the post to award delegates. That helps explain why Donald Trump became the Republican nominee in 2016 despite winning slightly over one third of the votes cast in the GOP primaries.)



The Takeaways

The Super Tuesdays demonstrated the depth and breadth of anti-Trump sentiment among Democrats. Exit polls suggested many voters cast their ballot primarily against Trump, not for either Biden or Sanders. Sanders suffered because many progressive and liberal voters choose who to vote for ultimately on the basis of electability. That favored Biden.

Turnout was up all over the map and Biden did well in almost all ethnic and demographic groups. In Virginia, for example, 50 percent more Democrats turned out than in 2008. Turnout in Texas was up 49 percent. And everywhere there were huge surges of middle class voters in the suburbs.

And that turnout primarily benefited Biden. And contradicted Sanders' claims that he would bring more young and minority voters out to vote. That has not happened: the turnout of young voters was less than in 2016 almost everywhere, including Vermont, Sanders' home. Youth vote was down 18 percent in New Hampshire, nine percent in North Carolina, and 20 percent in Texas. But Biden swamped Sanders among voters over 45 by 36 points, easily overcoming Sanders' advantage among voters under 29, whose participation made up only 16 percent of those who turned out.

Black voters flocked to Biden as did women. Only Hispanics tilted toward Sanders. Super Tuesday also dispelled claims that the Democratic party's center of gravity had shifted far to the left. While it had moved left, as manifested by the embrace of the public option for health care even by moderates like Biden, Buttigieg and Klobuchar, it had not gone so far as to support Sanders' call for the elimination of private health insurance, the creation of national health care for all, free college and open borders.

Surveys of Democrats had repeatedly shown that some 70 percent favored moderate positions on key issues such as health care and immigration reform, gun control and abortion. Despite his energetic campaign and consistent approach, Sanders failed to shift the needle far enough to the left among moderates to gain their support.

The March primary results were not good news for Trump. Since 2018, Trump has considered Biden as the biggest threat to his re-election. Biden's March wins will only raise that concern, which last year had prompted Trump's ill-fated effort to compel Ukrainian President Zelensky to open an investigation into the alleged corrupt activities of Biden's son in Ukraine when Biden was vice president. We can now expect Republicans in the Senate to investigate Biden's son, Hunter. Biden's experience, especially in the foreign policy arena; his reputation as a unifier who in his four decades in national politics has worked effectively to forge compromises with the Republicans, and his closeness to former President Barack Obama make Biden a formidable foe. But his greatest appeal probably derives from his values — his simple campaign message is a call for the return of “decency.”

Those qualities stand out in stark contrast to Trump's brutish behavior and his daily flirtation with the truth. After three years of this most Americans crave a return to normalcy, the truth, and decency. Trump's display of ignorance, hubris, and incompetence, his lack of empathy coupled with his utter failure to lead as the Covid-19 crisis grew more and more threatening has boosted further most Americans' desire for change, and a return to normalcy.



What Does Super Tuesday Mean?

Biden is no Democrat's perfect candidate. Democrats, from Establishment figures to ordinary voters, worry about his age (77), his mental sharpness and his health. Will he be able to understand the rigors of a long campaign, and Trump's brutish personal assaults?

But Biden, with his personal decency, lack of pretension, experience, respect for the facts and the rule of law is more than just a Democratic politician. Biden as an individual is the anti-Trump, and that is all that matters for those who voted on March 3rd and 10th for him. By voting for Biden, and not Sanders, Democrats were voting primarily against Trump. As Congressman Clyburn declared, we want a return to values.