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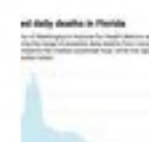
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# Florida voters could deliver final verdict in Joe Biden vs. Bernie Sanders presidential primary race



By ANTHONY MAN

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The final two Democratic candidates for president, Bernie Sanders, left, and Joe Biden talk before a Democratic presidential primary debate on Feb. 25 in Charleston, S.C. They are competing in Florida's presidential primary on Tuesday. Biden is far ahead of Sanders in Florida polls.(Matt Rourke / AP)

They've put [ads on TV](#) and on radio in English and Spanish. They've deployed staffers and surrogate speaker to Florida. And — until [novel coronavirus](#) upended campaign plans — sent volunteers out for face-to-face conversations with voters.

Now, after a campaign that's been devoid of actual candidates campaigning in person in Florida, the state's Democratic voters are about to deliver their verdict in a primary that could crown Joe Biden as their party's nominee to take on President Donald Trump and eliminate any last ember of hope for Bernie Sanders and his supporters.

Independent analysts and Democratic insiders say Florida — which holds the largest of four major primaries on Tuesday — is a state that is practically tailor-made for a strong showing by Biden and disappointing results for Sanders.

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"Florida was always a state that has much more favorable demographics for Joe Biden, and I don't think there's anything that Bernie Sanders has done in the last couple of weeks that has helped him change the dynamic," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University.

"If anything, it's gotten worse," he said.

Stephen Gaskill, a political communications strategist and president of the Florida GLBTQ+ Democratic Caucus, predicted a delegate haul that will give Biden a major advantage.

Clay Miller, president of the Broward Young Democrats, was even more direct: "It's the worst possible state for Bernie." Miller hasn't said who he favors for the nomination; early on he liked Elizabeth Warren, who has dropped out.

## Florida factors

Florida is well known for its large share of seniors, who provide Biden's largest base of support. And older voters show up to participate. Florida, despite its progressive enclaves, is more moderate politically than many other places.

"I think the Sanders brand of politics, it's a little bit of a tough sell. I think because of his self-described 'democratic socialist' label," Gaskill said.

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Sanders' biggest base of support comes from younger voters, who tend not to turn out the way older voters do. And Sanders alienated many Florida Hispanics — and alarmed candidates and strategists — with a Feb. 23 "60 Minutes" interview in which he said it was "unfair to simply say everything is bad" about the Cuban revolution led and presided over by the late dictator Fidel Castro.

Sanders' praise for Castro's literacy program, and refusal to back down from his comments, led some state Democrats to predict he'd hurt the party in Florida if he became the party's nominee.

And even though Sanders would be the first Jewish president, he isn't especially popular among Jewish voters, who are an important Democratic constituency in Florida. A poll last month for [Jewish Electorate Institute](#) found Sanders was viewed less favorably than Biden by Jewish voters.

## Lite campaign

The 2020 Democratic primary was front-loaded, not just with the usual four attention-grabbing states — Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina — voting in February, but with a primary packed Super Tuesday that featured mega-states like California and Texas.

[RELATED: Bernie Sanders ads running in Florida aim directly at heart of Joe Biden's support »](#)

As a result of the calendar, the Biden and Sanders campaigns had relatively little presence in the state until recently. After the Nevada caucuses and South Carolina primary last month, staffers who had worked in those places were redeployed to Florida.

As for in-person campaigning, forget it. The candidates spent much of 2019 and 2020 concentrating on earlier states, and neither one has campaigned in Florida this year.

Biden had [planned to campaign](#) in Tampa on Thursday and Miami on Monday, the eve of the primary. Those events were canceled because of concerns about spread of novel coronavirus. Instead, there will be a still-undefined "virtual event" to replace the Monday rally in Miami.

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Sanders didn't campaign much in Florida in 2016 either, largely ceding the state to Hillary Clinton, who won the Florida primary 64% to 33%. He did visit Florida in 2018 to campaign for Andrew Gillum, who was running for governor.

[Polls suggest](#) a similar outcome for Sanders in 2020.

The [RealClearPolitics.com](#) average of five Florida polls conducted this month has Biden at 65% to 23% for Sanders — an overwhelming 42-point difference.

The forecast model from [FiveThirtyEight.com](#) suggests Biden winning 69% of the vote. In 80% of the simulations run for the model, Biden won between 64% and 75% of the vote.

## Supporters

Sanders supporters say they haven't given up.

"I feel we'll have a good showing," said Michaelangelo Hamilton, 20, who became a fan during Sanders' 2016 campaign. he said. "I'm optimistic."

Mitchell Stollberg, 66, a longtime activist in the party's progressive wing, said he's hoping Sanders is "going to knock it out of the park. He's been looking really good."

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While the paid Sanders staff was in other states, Stollberg said volunteers have been phone banking and doing door-to-door canvassing for months. He said 200 people showed up for a "Barnstorm for Bernie Sanders" event at the Pride Center at Equality Park in Wilton Manors late last month.

"We've just been spreading the word every place that we go," Stollberg said.

Elvis Guzman of Cooper City is just as committed to Biden.

"Even before he started running, I was hoping he would," Guzman said. Once Biden got in the race, "My feeling was 'thank God. We're going to be saved.'"

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The Biden campaign doesn't want its supporters to think the win is a sure thing, which could lead some people to conclude it isn't important to vote. A strong win in a big, important state like Florida helps the victor by contributing to a sense of strength and momentum.

Also, each candidate's share of the vote is important, because that determines how the state's 219 delegates to the nominating convention are allocated. And it's the total delegate count that determines who ultimately wins the party's nomination.

"We can have a decisive — and that's the key word, decisive — primary victory for Joe," said field organizer Kera Package, at a gathering of about 150 supporters at a Fort Lauderdale campaign office on Monday. "We're going to win Florida and we're going to win it big for Joe."

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That office is now closed, along with others, because of coronavirus. Staffers and volunteers are working virtually, and much in-person campaigning is off.



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Steve Geller, a Broward County Commissioner and former Democratic leader in the Florida Senate, had recruited volunteers to hand out Biden literature at 20 polling places on Tuesday. He canceled those plans on Thursday because of novel coronavirus.

"I simply can't ask you in good faith to go out and work the polls on Election Day," Geller wrote in an email canceling the activities. "You're all my friends and I love you all too much to risk your health by asking you to stand and hand pieces of literature to strangers that you'd have to come into close contact with."

Nothing, of course is guaranteed.

Biden is ahead, but fewer than half the 1,991 delegates have been allocated and the two candidates have a debate on Sunday.

"You've got to spring to the finish line," said Tom Perez, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, in a brief interview at an [Oakland Park campaign office](#) this week. "Every week is a new week, and so I think it's critically important for people to get out there and vote."

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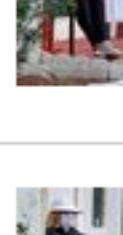
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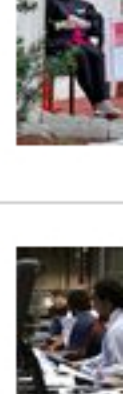
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