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Democratic presidential candidate U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., speaks during a campaign rally at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Mich., Sunday, March 8, 2020. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya) - Paul Sancya

By Wendy Rhodes

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Posted Mar 14, 2020 at 11:41 AM

Progressive leaders who have endorsed Bernie Sanders tend to be liberal, diverse and passionate. But lately, in Florida, they are also something else — silent.

Weeks before the 2018 gubernatorial Democratic primary, Andrew Gillum was trailing at the back of the field. Then the progressive muscle showed up.

Gillum got a critical endorsement from Bernie Sanders, the standard bearer for American progressives, who then campaigned with the relatively unknown mayor of Tallahassee in Florida. Gillum also reaped donations from another progressive leader, billionaire Tom Steyer, known for his TV commercials calling for President Trump's impeachment.

Florida primary: Coronavirus alters campaigning ahead of vote

The progressive titans' support catapulted Gillum to a surprise primary victory in which he captured the nomination and came within 30,000 votes of becoming Florida's first African-American governor. It also marked a watershed in Florida politics — a moment in which Democratic progressives flexed their might and elbowed centrists to the sidelines.

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Or so it seemed.

Two years later, Sanders is staring at a lopsided defeat in Tuesday' Florida presidential primary. A pair of polls conducted by Florida universities this week have former Vice President Joe Biden trouncing Sanders by significant double-digit margins. Other voter surveys point to the same.

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Keith Donner, a Democratic political and public affairs consultant based in Miami, said Sanders is simply out-of-step with Florida Democrats.

"His views on Israel are incompatible with many Democratic Jews and pretty much all Republican Jews," Donner said. "And his recent comments about Cuba and Castro pretty much erased any doubt in a lot of Democrats' minds that he's unsuitable to win Florida."

The end result, Donner said, is that Sanders has failed to win significant backing.

"Bernie's support is kiddie-pool shallow in Florida compared to other contenders," he said. "A lot of activists feel he's a lost cause in South Florida."

Florida's Democratic electoral demographics also decisively tilt toward Biden. The state has a large share of older voters, significant numbers of African-Americans, more centrist Hispanics and a smaller share of younger voters.

"Florida is just a better state for Joe Biden," said Kevin Wagner, a pollster and political science professor at Florida Atlantic University.

But what makes Sanders precarious position in Florida all the more stark is that he is standing at the brink of defeat virtually alone.

Despite announcing his commitment to turn Florida blue in 2020, Gillum, now himself a high-profile nationwide progressive figure, has not endorsed the Vermont U.S. senator.

Florida primary: Poll shows Biden leads Sanders, except with young

Instead, Gillum appeared to jab at his fellow progressive in a Feb. 24 tweet after Sanders made controversial comments about Fidel Castro during a 60 Minutes interview days before.

Less than two weeks later, Gillum told political commentator David Axelrod that Sanders' comments on Castro were like "listening to Trump after Charlottesville say there were good people on both sides."

Ouch.

Kevin Cate, a Gillum advisor who also produced television commercials for Steyer's 2020 presidential bid, said there are different priorities in this election.

"Voter registration is a million times more important than anything else right now," Cate said. "We know that if we register and engage Democrats, we will win and beat Donald Trump, and that's the most important thing that can happen in November 2020."

Others also seemed to have snubbed the Sanders campaign. Steyer did not back Sanders after suspending his own White House campaign last month. Neither did another progressive, Massachusetts U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren.

Sanders was endorsed by erstwhile presidential rival and self-help author Marianne Williamson, who has no discernible organizational infrastructure in Florida. He also got backing from New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio, but DeBlasio had also angered Cuban-American Democrats by repeating a Che Guevara slogan at a labor rally in Miami last June.

In Palm Beach County, U.S. Reps. Lois Frankel, D-West Palm Beach, and Alcee Hastings, D-Delray Beach, have endorsed Biden. So has Boca Raton Democratic U.S. Rep. Ted Deutch, who at first backed Mike Bloomberg.

Sanders supporters say the lack of broader support from Sunshine State Democrats signals a desire by the establishment to thwart the "revolution."

"It is kind of disappointing that there haven't been a lot of endorsements in Florida," said Theodore Matz, a West Palm Beach resident who has been canvassing door-to-door for Sanders. "It's not some big conspiracy, but, honestly, there probably is some top-end strategy of how to get Bernie out of the race."

Matz said there is a sort of "unspoken" pressure on Sanders supporters to instead back the Democratic National Committee's favored candidate.

"As a Democrat and a progressive, you are less likely to step out of line and support Bernie if you think it's going to ruin the rest of your career," Matz said.

"When Ted Deutch came out ahead of the primary to endorse Michael Bloomberg, and Ted Deutch is supposed to be a progressive, I was so disappointed in him," said Mikki Royce, treasurer of Democratic Progressive Caucus Palm Beach County.

The national progressive group MoveOn, which in 2016 voted to endorse Sanders by 78.6% — the widest margin in its history — also failed to issue an endorsement this time around.

"MoveOn has not endorsed thus far in the Democratic primary," MoveOn spokesperson Brett Abrams said in a written statement to the Palm Beach Post. "MoveOn has always had a strong commitment to listening to and respecting the views of its members and will consider an endorsement during the primaries if and when MoveOn members coalesce around a candidate, which has not yet happened."

So where do these non-existent endorsements leave Sanders? And where do they leave Sanders' die-hard supporters, who, through mostly grassroots efforts, have elevated the democratic socialist to a level few might have believed possible?

"We are still backing Bernie," said Michael Calderin, President of the Democratic Progressive Caucus of Florida, which has endorsed Sanders "My message to Biden and his campaign is if they feel that this race is in the bag, and they want to promote a message of party unity, it's time to stop talking about how we get candidates to endorse us and talk about how Biden, as president, is going to advance the progressive agenda that we've been fighting for."

Of the 1,991 delegates required to secure the party's nomination, Biden currently leads Sanders 627 to 551. Of the 577 delegates up for grabs Tuesday in Florida, Arizona, Ohio and Illinois, the Sunshine State offers the most with 219.

But with few high-profile endorsements and no Florida campaign offices, a big loss here would seemingly put the White House out of reach for Sanders.

A loss would be a hard pill to swallow for die-hard Sanders supporters and volunteers like Matz.

"I don't think the fight is over, and I'm not going to stop fighting," Matz said.

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