

How Bernie Sanders dominated in Nevada

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LAS VEGAS — They showed up to Desert Pines High School in Tío Bernie T-shirts to caucus on Saturday morning, motivated by the idea of free college tuition, “Medicare for all” and the man making those promises: a 78-year-old white senator from Vermont. To dozens of mostly working-class Latinos, Bernie Sanders seemed like one of their own, a child of immigrants who understands what it means to be seen as a perpetual outsider.

For at least one day, in one state, the long-promised political revolution of Mr. Sanders came to vivid life, a multiracial coalition of immigrants, college students, Latina mothers, younger black voters, white liberals and even some moderates who embraced his idea of radical change and lifted him to victory in the Nevada caucuses on Saturday.

By harnessing such a broad cross-section of voters, Mr. Sanders offered a preview of the path that he hopes to take to the Democratic presidential nomination: uniting an array of voting blocs in racially diverse states in the West and the South and in economically strapped parts of the Midwest and the Southwest, all behind the message of social and economic justice that he has preached for years.

His advisers argue that he has a singular ability to energize voters who have felt secondary in the Democratic Party, like Latinos and younger people, and that Nevada proved as much — and could set the stage for strong performances in the Super Tuesday contests on March 3. The Sanders campaign is looking in particular to the delegate-rich states of California and Texas, whose diverse Democratic electorates include a high percentage of voters from immigrant backgrounds.

Mr. Sanders’s chances also depend in part on the field of moderate candidates remaining crowded and divided, which is not a guarantee, especially if voters seeking an alternative to the right of Mr. Sanders align behind one candidate. To earn enough delegates to be the Democratic nominee, Mr. Sanders will also have to win big in other large states, including California and Texas, where his coalition remains untested. And his brand of democratic socialism could prove to be a hard sell, including among Latinos elsewhere in the country.

Mr. Sanders delivered his victory speech Saturday evening not in Nevada, but in Texas, one of the diverse powerhouses on the Super Tuesday calendar. “They think they are going to win this election by dividing our people up based on the color of their skin or where they were born or their religion or their sexual orientation,” he said in San Antonio, speaking of President Trump and his allies. “We are going to win because we are doing exactly the opposite, we’re bringing our people together.”

In the entrance polls on Saturday, Mr. Sanders led the field across many demographic groups: men and women, whites and Latinos, union and non-union households, and across education

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The breadth of his appeal amounts to a warning shot at those in the moderate Democratic establishment he often rails against, many of whom have staked their hopes for a "Stop Sanders" effort on the idea that he has a political ceiling within the party and could not grow his base of supporters. Instead, as the primary shifted to Nevada from the racially homogeneous electorates of Iowa and New Hampshire, it was Mr. Sanders who grew more formidable, while other candidates have struggled.

Strong showings in the first two states have not significantly helped former Mayor Pete Buttigieg and Senator Amy Klobuchar break through with nonwhite voters. Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. has called himself the one candidate who can build a diverse coalition, but he finished in second place in Nevada, the most diverse nominating contest so far. Only Mr. Sanders, with his uncompromising message that working-class Americans affected by injustice can unite across ethnic identity, has shown traction in both predominantly white Iowa and New Hampshire and the more black and brown Nevada.

"He's been saying the same thing for 40 years — I trust him," said Cristhian Ramirez, a 31-year-old technology support specialist who began volunteering for the Sanders campaign in November. Mr. Ramirez brought several friends with him Saturday and scoffed at the idea that Mr. Sanders would face challenges in the general election. Like many supporters, Mr. Ramirez was first drawn to Mr. Sanders during the senator's 2016 presidential bid. "Why should we vote for a moderate? We already tried that last time and we lost."

The strong showing in the first-in-the-West caucus state seemed to be a payoff for Mr. Sanders's unique political philosophy and his campaign team's electoral strategy, which bet big on grass-roots outreach to Latinos and immigrant populations. It's a model the campaign is looking to take across the country, working to reach people across racial and ethnic groups who have traditionally been less likely to vote.

"We've been saying for a while, candidates and the Democratic Party need to engage Latino communities sooner and substantively," said Marisa Franco, the executive director of Mijente, a community organization that has backed Mr. Sanders. "If you do that, they respond accordingly."

While ideologically liberal voters and young people powered Mr. Sanders toward popular vote victories in Iowa and New Hampshire, Nevada showed the candidate's brand of authenticity could have cross-cultural appeal, even as the campaign sparred over "Medicare for all" with the culinary workers' union, the state's largest union and one of the most powerful organizations in Nevada Democratic politics.

Activists and leaders who have endorsed Mr. Sanders, particularly people who work with immigrant populations, argue that a focus on "Bernie Bros" — a caricature of his supporters as predominantly white and male — misses the scope of the campaign's outreach to historically marginalized groups. They praised Mr. Sanders for articulating a global frame of injustice that has led him to uncharted places among the Democratic field: He was the first to support a

moratorium on deportations, has consistently spoken of the plight of the Palestinian people during debates, and has talked about his own family's immigrant experience as a way to connect with voters, something he rarely did during his 2016 run.

No demographic is a monolith, of course, and Mr. Sanders's support comes with fissures along fault lines of age and educational attainment. But, if Nevada is any measure, he is well positioned to galvanize a cross-section of Latino voters in a way that earlier candidates have done with black voters in the Democratic Party, amassing an advantage that could help create a path to the nomination.

"If you have focused intention and ongoing support for Latinos and other voters of color you can win," said Sonja Diaz, the executive director of the Latino Policy & Politics Initiative at the University of California, Los Angeles. "They did not take the Latino vote for granted."

When early voting began last week, the Sanders campaign sent a neon truck blasting local Spanish radio out onto the Las Vegas streets, urging people to show up at dozens of early caucus sites. They attracted hundreds of people to a soccer tournament, then offered rides to caucus sites to anyone who showed up.

After months of knocking on doors in largely Latino neighborhoods in Las Vegas, on Saturday morning, the Sanders campaign said it sent text messages and phone calls to every Latino registered as a Democrat or independent in the state.

For months, the Sanders campaign has boasted that it was the first to organize and advertise in largely Latino neighborhoods, not just in Las Vegas, but in Des Moines and east Los Angeles. Many people who showed up at the caucuses wearing Sanders buttons and stickers said his campaign was the only one they ever heard from. Latino political activists — including those backing other candidates — routinely applaud the Sanders campaign for doing the kind of expensive, labor intensive outreach they have been trying to convince other candidates to do for years.

Former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who has virtually unlimited resources, is also investing in Latino outreach and competing aggressively in Super Tuesday states, which could cut into support for Mr. Sanders. He has already spent more than \$10 million on Spanish-language advertising.

Mr. Sanders's appeal seems particularly strong in the West, where his ability to harness not just Latinos, but also liberal black and Asian-American voters could portend a strong showing in California, which will award more delegates than the four early voting states combined.

The Sanders team has long said that California, where early voting is already underway, is a cornerstone of its campaign. It has invested roughly \$6.5 million in advertising there so far, including more than \$1 million for Spanish language advertising. A poll from the Public Policy Institute of California released last week showed Mr. Sanders with 30 percent of the vote, and Mr. Biden in second, trailing by nearly 20 percentage points.

The support for Mr. Sanders in Nevada was particularly notable given the intense fight with the Culinary Union, which represents 60,000 housekeepers, bartenders, cooks and others who work

in casinos here. Leadership for the union, whose membership is more than 50 percent Latino, declined to back any one candidate, but spent the weeks leading up to the caucus criticizing Mr. Sanders's "Medicare for all" plan, because it would effectively eliminate the union's prized private health insurance.

But in interviews in recent days, many rank-and-file union members said they supported Mr. Sanders precisely because of his health care proposal, explaining that they wanted their friends and relatives to have the same kind of access to care that they have. On Saturday, Mr. Sanders won at five of the seven caucus sites on the Strip, losing one to Mr. Biden and tying with him at another — a clear sign that the messages from union leadership had largely been ignored.

Ana Maria Archila, co-executive director of Center for Popular Democracy, a national collective of progressive groups, said she heard all day about people voting for the first time. She also said that she expected states like California and Texas could turn out even better.

At a recent event in Las Vegas geared toward Latino voters, Ms. Archila said she asked the audience to "close your eyes and imagine a country where we are not a target," citing Mr. Sanders's support for a moratorium on deportations. "People started to cry," she said. "We have never known what it feels like to be in this country and not be under threat."