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THE CURRENT: What drove Biden's big wins on Super Tuesday?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

The 14 primaries of Super Tuesday have made a dramatic difference in the state of the field of Democratic candidates for president. With us to discuss outcomes is John Hudak, senior fellow and deputy director of the Center for Effective Public Management here at Brookings. John, thanks for being here.

HUDAK: Thanks for having me.

PITA: So Biden's big comeback was story of the night. I think I hadn't even left work here last night and they were already calling Virginia for him. He won 10 states to Bernie Sanders' four. Does this really emphasize role of momentum in these sorts of contests, or what were some of the other factors that fed into his big wins?

HUDAK: I think this was probably the biggest story of political momentum in presidential primaries we've seen in quite some time. To go from having a campaign that was on life support before South Carolina, to having an overwhelming win in South Carolina, and then just a few days later powering that into what could only be described as the dream scenario for Vice President Biden on Super Tuesday, was quite tremendous. There was overperformance by Biden across the board, and even in states where he had no staff, did no TV or radio advertising, and in some cases, didn't even make a single visit.

PITA: For Bernie Sanders, of course, younger voters tend to overwhelmingly poll in favor of him, but the turnout amongst that population doesn't seem to be there. Do you think this is a case of this being a self-fulfilling prophecy of, a lot of his followers to tend to believe this factor of the system is rigged against him, or that the establishment is so far against him, and so they don't bother turning out, or what are some of the other things going on there?

HUDAK: There's a few factors that go into the youth vote as it relates to Bernie Sanders. As you said, younger voters, particularly voters under the age of 30 overwhelmingly like Bernie Sanders. When they come to the polls, they are overwhelmingly going to vote for him relative to any of the other candidates who are or were in the field. But, as you mentioned, youth turnout hasn't increased in this primary, and I think it makes it hard for Senator Sanders to make the argument that he's building this revolution that will bring new voters to the polls to change the system, because new voters are not coming to the polls – at least so far. But it's important too to remember that there are, in some states, real barriers to voting for young people, whether they are restrictions on whether they can vote on their college campuses, whether they are restrictions on the number of voting precincts on a college campus, of the number of voting machines. We saw on Super Tuesday in places like Texas, both HBCUs and whiter universities having to wait hours to vote. That's really hard on a college student. And I think that is

something that needs to be considered not just in terms of Sanders' performance but also how those barriers could affect Sanders' performance if he's the standard-bearer in November.

PITA: Texas had some massive lines for polling all across the board, didn't they? What can you tell us about some of the closures that were going on there?

HUDAK: Yeah, Texas has a notorious history for having long lines for voting, and I think there are a few reactions to that initially by the public. You know, when you're watching on TV, you're looking at those long lines, and you're saying, "wow, look, all of these people are so enthusiastic about voting; turnout's going to be really high today." But you can have long lines and not big turnout. You can have just a slow voting process. I think there are going to be a lot of people: young, old, working, unemployed, etc., who are going to drive up to a polling place in places like Texas and elsewhere, and look at that line and say, "y'know, I'm not doing it today." And so those lines in themselves can be disenfranchising for voters. And Texas, as I said, has tried to enact policies at the state level that target certain areas and try to make it harder for certain people to vote.

PITA: Looking at the populations that both Vice President Biden and Bernie Sanders did win, what can you tell us about any demographic differences amongst those voters?

HUDAK: From state to state there are some differences in terms of demographics. Young people and Latinos certainly helped Sen. Sanders out in California; they were a big part of his win. Pretty much across the board, people who identify as very liberal broke toward Sanders, which is not a surprise. I think the gap there between Biden and Sanders was a little surprising; I would have expected Sanders to just be destroying Biden on that figure, y'know, getting 60-70% of those voters, and he wasn't. For Vice President Biden, older voters, mainly voters over the age of 35 and Black voters were a tremendous part of his ability to win. When you look at states across the South on Super Tuesday, Black voters were the ones who were the real force behind Joe Biden's performance, but he also won in states that were not particularly heavy with Black populations. Massachusetts, him winning Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren's home state, Bernie Sanders' neighboring state, was due in large part because he had broad appeal. Joe Biden is actually the one who's building a diverse coalition of voters, despite what other campaigns are saying.

PITA: Then if we look at Mike Bloomberg, who spent something on the order of half a billion dollars, not just on political advertising but on a pretty broad staff ground game. While I think we're all pretty relieved that it turns out you can't, in fact, just outright buy your candidacy, is there a lesson here about what money can and can't buy? Or is Mike Bloomberg just not that popular a candidate?

HUDAK: I think there's a lot to both. Mike Bloomberg was just not a very good candidate. I actually think if he'd performed quite well in the debate in Vegas, right before the caucuses there, he probably would have caught fire and really caught traction, and had a really good night on Super Tuesday. I don't think that Mike Bloomberg's candidacy tells us that money can't buy you elections. I think what it tells us is that money can't buy elections if you're a really bad politician. And in terms of what a candidate needs to do to be effective at the presidential level, Mike Bloomberg either doesn't have those talents or didn't bring those talents to the debates, and that was damning for him. What it does show, however, is how quickly an elaborate political operation can be built and staffed and productive with essentially an unlimited budget. I think we're going to see Mike Bloomberg pour hundreds of billions of dollars more into his own political advocacy on behalf of candidates and on behalf of issues. And some people are going to like that, some people are going to hold their nose and tolerate it, and some people are going to scream that it's terrible, but Mike Bloomberg and his money are here to stay in politics.

PITA: Looking lastly at Elizabeth Warren, I think a lot of people were disappointed that she didn't make a better showing. It was surprisingly weak, coming in third even in her home state of Massachusetts. A lot of articles written ahead of Super Tuesday were talking a lot about the factor of

every voter trying to game out who they think everyone else is trying to vote for, and so that was factoring in to why more people weren't voting for her. What's your read on that situation?

HUDAK: It's hard to game out the Elizabeth Warren voters and Elizabeth Warren's strategy. I think if she wants to help keep Bernie Sanders away from the White House, staying in the race is her best strategy. For me, I would assume that Warren believes that Bernie Sanders won't be a terribly effective president, and she probably believes Joe Biden won't be a terribly effective president. So for her, she needs to think about which ones of those two is better, for her, for her ideas, for her personal political future, and if she thinks it's Joe Biden, she stays in the race. If she thinks it's Bernie Sanders, she probably leaves the race in the coming week and endorses Bernie Sanders. But right now I think the question about where her voters go is a real open one. Ideologically, those voters are probably closer to Bernie than they are to Joe Biden, but if those voters really wanted Bernie Sanders, they'd be a Bernie Sanders voter. And so, I think there's not going to be a smooth, 95% of the Warren vote shifting over to Biden; I think it's probably in the 55-65% range. But it means that some of those voters are going to go to Joe Biden. So her exit from the race would help Bernie overall, but I think that it's not a death knell for Biden.

PITA: Turnout does seem to be pretty high, up from previous years across the board; I think Oklahoma was the one exception to that. Does high primary turnout necessarily mean that we're also going to see higher turnout during the general election, or was that more excitement about the broad slate of candidates that there were for lots of different people to come out for?

HUDAK: Certainly having higher turnout in a primary is a good thing in general. It would suggest that there is an energized set of voters who, if you're going to vote in a presidential primary, you're almost certainly going to vote in a presidential general election. The question is how disaffected will voters be when their candidate doesn't turn out to be the nominee? That's the real open question. I think there's reason to think there are a lot of Biden voters who really don't want to vote for someone as liberal as Bernie Sanders, and I think there's a lot of Bernie Sanders supporters who don't want to see another moderate be the Democratic nominee. Now whether they go to the voting booth and pull the lever for a Democrat, who knows? But, I think any day we see an energized electorate – for a Republican candidate, for a Democratic candidate, for president, governor, senator, dog catcher, whatever – it's a good day for democracy. And it also means that despite barriers to vote in some places, especially the South, people are overcoming those barriers, or at least some set of people are still overcoming those barriers and being able to exercise their right.

PITA: While Super Tuesday did knock 14 states out of the way, there are still 32 states left to cast their vote for a primary. What are some of the next big contests? And what are you expecting to see in the coming month or so?

HUDAK: You know, if we look at some of the big states that are left to vote, places like Michigan, Ohio, Florida, there's a lot of delegates in those states. The ability of Biden and Sanders to go head-to-head for those voters and really start to have a conversation about ideas, it'll give us a pretty clear idea of where the Democratic Party is headed and what type of a base of support that each candidate is able to build. I think with Bloomberg exiting the race, things probably look up a bit for Biden in Florida. In Michigan and Ohio, though, this is a real true test. Both Biden and Sanders fashion themselves as the working man's Democrat, or the working woman's Democrat. They both can be, and they both have records that suggest they have been able to do that effectively politically in the past, but they can't both be to the same voter. So in states with a lot of working-class individuals who call themselves Democrats in the Rust Belt, that fight between Biden and Sanders is going to be a key one and I think it's going to tell us a lot about what the ticket might look like moving forward, but it will also show us their ability to perform among those voters come November.

PITA: All right. John, thanks very much for being here today.

HUDAK: Thank you.