

Bern-ing Sacramento

Bernie Sanders courts California voters, who may actually decide who faces Donald Trump

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Vendors sold Bernie Sanders merchandise from the sidewalk bordering Cesar Chavez Plaza during the candidate's Aug. 22 rally.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders' visit to Sacramento last week confirmed one thing about the 2020 presidential race—California will likely play a decisive role in determining who challenges President Donald Trump for the future of this country.

"I need your help to win in California because the candidate who wins here in the largest state in the country will in all likelihood win the nomination," Sanders told a crowd of more than 4,000 during an Aug. 22 campaign rally in Cesar Chavez Plaza.

That hasn't always been the case. In the last two decades, with Iowa and New Hampshire monopolizing early-bird primaries, California's role has often been to ratify a choice that was all but already made.

Over the last four presidential primaries in which the incumbent participated, California voters backed the candidate who would be his (yes, his) opponent each time. In 1992, voters in the state favored Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, the eventual Democratic nominee, over their own governor, Jerry Brown, by 7 percentage points, which should be a lesson to California Sen. Kamala Harris that the home crowd can be fickle.

In 1996, California voters overwhelmingly supported Kansas Republican Sen. Bob Dole over right-wing firebrand Pat Buchanan to challenge President Clinton. In 2004, it was Democratic Sen. John Kerry who dominated his rivals here before facing President George W. Bush. And in 2012, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney steamrolled Kentucky Sen. Ron Paul by nearly 70 points in California to win the GOP nomination.

After running away with results at the California polls, these three challengers ultimately lost their contests.

Giving California voters more say in the primaries doesn't necessarily spell victory for a more progressive candidate. In 2008, most voters picked New York Sen. Hillary Clinton

over Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, who ultimately won the nomination and become America's first African-American president.

That primary was also California's earliest since at least 1992, occurring in February 2008, Black History Month.

After the state's last two presidential primaries in June, California moved up the 2020 primary to March 3, when it'll be one of 15 states participating in the *super* Super Tuesday. Only four states—Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina—will hold earlier nominating contests.

According to FiveThirtyEight's tracking, recent polling shows California voters are still considering their options when it comes to the Democratic field, with former Vice President Joe Biden, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Harris and Sanders trading first and second place.

Four years ago, Sanders dueled Hillary Clinton to a close second in California, about 400,000 votes and 8 percentage points behind. In Sacramento County, Clinton beat Sanders by 10 points.

On Aug. 22, the indefatigable Sanders stumped for a full 30 minutes under a steamy Sacramento sun, just hours after he toured wildfire-devastated Paradise and held court during a town hall in nearby Chico. To the Sacramento audience, he hit upon his major theme of calling for a political and economic revolution that wrests the levers of power from the wealthy and hands them to working-class Americans.

"We understand that to transform this country, it is not just good enough to defeat Trump," he bellowed. "We have to take on the whole damn one percent!"

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WEB EXTRA

For additional moments and photos from Bernie Sanders' rally in Sacramento, visit sacblog.newsreview.com for an expanded version.

