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‘Never Trump’ Republicans will support Biden, not Sanders

Right-of-centre voters are open to voting for a moderate Democrat. They have been helping one in the primaries

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As more data emerge to explain former Vice President Joe Biden’s stunning victory on Super Tuesday, there are two clear demographics that propelled him: African-American voters and suburban voters with college degrees.

It’s a coalition that helped moderate Democrats flip seven governorships, two Senate seats and about 40 House districts (the newly Democratic suburbs alone would have secured a House majority) from red to blue in 2018. African-Americans have long made up a core of the Democratic voting base, but many of Mr. Biden’s college-educated, suburban supporters are right-leaning independents or moderate Republicans who supported candidates like John McCain and Mitt Romney. They don’t want to re-elect Donald Trump. And they’re willing to cross over to vote for a Democrat — a moderate and mainstream Democrat.

These voters might not identify with the ‘Never Trump’ group of conservatives who vociferously oppose the president. But in practice, that’s who they are. They often voted for Republicans in the past and are now firmly anti-Trump. These voters can create winning margins for Democrats in swing states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, Arizona and North Carolina in the general election.

Their numerical strength was on full display on Super Tuesday in the Virginia and Texas suburbs, which saw 74 per cent and 87 per cent higher voter turnout, respectively, than four years ago. These de facto Never Trumpers also showed up in large quantities in the suburbs of Charleston, S.C., where 58 per cent more people voted in the Democratic primary last Tuesday compared with 2016. And they pulled the lever overwhelmingly for Joe Biden. In Iowa last month, while Democratic turnout was down from 2016 throughout the rest of the

state, it spiked 38 per cent in Dallas County — the far suburbs of Des Moines that had been stalwart Republican country not long ago.

Looking for a moderate

Through our organisation Center Action Now, my colleague Tim Miller and I have engaged these voters through a phone and text get-out-the-vote operation. We don't advocate any candidate, but we do educate disaffected Republicans and right-leaning independents about their ability to vote in the Democratic primary in open-primary states like Virginia and Texas.

The data suggest that so far, they've voted in large numbers. And some of the surge in conservative/moderate votes — many from former Republican voters — wasn't captured in exit polling. Voter turnout in the Texas and Virginia primaries last Tuesday was closer to the combinedturnout from the 2016 Democratic and Republican primaries in those states than it was to the 2016 Democratic primaries alone.

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The responses to our outreach made clear that these voters are looking not for the democratic socialist revolution that Senator Bernie Sanders would offer as the nominee, but simply for a Democrat they could trust to govern responsibly and end the chaos of Mr. Trump's presidency. For many lapsed and former Republicans, voting for Mr. Biden is the least-bad option. He's considerably more moderate than Mr. Sanders and doesn't pose the threats to the rule of law and constitutional norms that Mr. Trump does. He's a backstop against the political insanity of the right and the left.

On Super Tuesday, I heard many of the same refrains that I've become accustomed to hearing in focus groups. 'I'm very worried some candidates are going to be extreme and change our democracy. ... I'm looking for a moderate.' Another voter worried that 'our Republic is at stake.' Another confessed, 'I, as a registered Republican, asked for a Democratic ballot.'

A permanent political realignment?

College-educated suburban voters often feel politically homeless, trapped between Mr. Trump's erratic and divisive nature and a fear of Democrats' leftward march. Mr. Biden may not offer these voters a galvanising vision

for the future. But to those exhausted by the past three years of political upheaval and nastiness, he offers something even better: basic human decency.

No doubt there is a constituency in America for Mr. Trump's particular brand of vulgarity. But even among many Trump voters, when asked how they feel about the direction of the country, they share a deep sense of concern for the politics of division in America. Even if they are largely satisfied with the economy, they tag Mr. Trump as the country's foremost political arsonist.

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Especially in the focus groups in which Trump voters rate his performance as 'somewhat bad' or 'very bad,' these right-of-centre voters are generally open to voting for Mr. Biden — though not for Mr. Sanders.

It has always been a possibility that Mr. Trump could drive a permanent political realignment in which college-educated suburban voters abandon the Republican Party for good. It remains an open question whether that will come to pass in 2020 and beyond, but the warning signs from Super Tuesday are clear.

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As CEO and Publisher of The Bulwark, host of the Focus Group podcast, and the strategist behind campaigns like Republican Voters Against Trump, the Republican Accountability Project and Home of the Brave, Sarah Longwell has built one of the largest ongoing bodies of qualitative research from the Trump era. Her work uses those voter conversations to understand what moves Americans, what breaks through and how to build communications campaigns strong enough to meet this political moment.