

International

US Democrats head south to woo crucial demographic - black voters

More than 20 candidates flock to US southeastern state

ROCK HILL: Breaking bread, attending church services or visiting historically black universities, Democratic candidates descended on South Carolina last weekend appealing to African-American voters, a potential key to victory in their race for the White House. More than 20 candidates seeking to challenge the Republican Donald Trump flocked to the southeastern state courting a demographic that, while just 12 percent of the US population, could play an outsized role in picking the 2020 Democratic nominee.

Addressing a cheering crowd of 600 in the small city of Rock Hill on Sunday, liberal senator Bernie Sanders accused Trump of seeking to "divide us up" along ethnic lines-while his own campaign was bringing people "together." "It brings us together in the struggle for economic justice, for social justice, for racial justice and for environmental justice."

The gathering was in a gymnasium on the campus of Clinton College, founded in the late 19th century to accommodate black students, and 40-something voter Stephonia Wright appreciated Sanders's choice of location. She has yet to decide among the two dozen Democrats in the field. They include ex-vice president Joe Biden, who leads national polls and is a favorite among African-Americans; Senator Kamala Harris, who is black; and Pete Buttigieg, the young mayor of South Bend, Indiana who faces a crisis back home after the killing of a black man by a police officer.

"This is so thick," a smiling Wright told AFP of the crowded race. "So we're going to have to wait 'til we get closer to the primaries (to see) who emerges from the ashes." Until then, candidates are tripping over themselves wooing voters in a state where blacks represent a majority of the Democratic electorate. They could prove all the more decisive in choosing who faces Trump in November 2020, as South Carolina is the fourth of 50 states to vote in the nomination process, and the first with such a prominent black population.

The victor here could benefit from strong black support throughout the campaign. Hence the political passion that seized the capital Columbia last weekend, when virtually all major Democratic candidates piled in to attend multiple large-scale events and host smaller meet-and-greets to reach out to voters one on one. On Friday, Kamala Harris, the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, held court with an intimate group of women.

Senator Cory Booker, another prominent black candidate in the historically diverse field, was warmly welcomed at a Columbia parish's faith breakfast Saturday, while Sanders delighted customers with a surprise stop Sunday at a Rock Hill restaurant. But it is Biden's name that currently resonates, largely due to the 76-year-old's eight years as the right hand man to the nation's first African-American president Barack Obama, beloved among black voters. Biden "can get the country back on track," assured Eva Gordon, 75, who arrived in her Sunday finest at Zion Baptist Church, a center of Columbia's 1960s civil rights struggle.

Exaggerated controversy

And what of the firestorm touched off by his recent remarks recalling the "civility" with which he and two avowed segregationists worked together during Biden's early years in the Senate? "It seemed... blown out of proportion," said 65-year-old Ida Washington, who came to listen to Biden and several other candidates at the famous fish fry hosted by popular African-American congressman James Clyburn, who also rushed to Biden's defense last week.

The urgency confronting Buttigieg in Indiana, where a fatal shooting of a black man by a white police officer has set his city on edge, has highlighted how the thorny issue of race has crept into the 2020 campaign. The shooting forced Buttigieg to return home, missing Clyburn's event, and a prime opportunity to introduce himself to thousands



ROCK HILL: Supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders, wait for their presidential candidate inside the gymnasium at Clinton College, a historically black college in Rock Hill, South Carolina. — AFP

of black voters. "A lot of African Americans identify as moderate as opposed to liberal and that may also be helpful to Biden" at this early stage in the race, said Kyle Kondik of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics.

The African-American electorate is "not a monolith," explained Johnnie Cordero, chairman of South Carolina's Democratic Black Caucus, at a gathering for millennial black voters where candidates joined in eat-

ing from platters of spicy chicken wings. But there are a number of issues that draw attention across the black electorate, including wealth inequality, criminal justice reform, and whether the US government should pay reparations to Americans harmed by slavery and its legacy. "Those are the issues that the candidates need to be addressing if they want the support of the black community," Cordero said. — AFP

News in brief

Car rams into US embassy

SEOUL: A vehicle carrying over two dozen disposable gas canisters rammed into the US embassy in central Seoul yesterday just days before US President Donald Trump's scheduled visit, Seoul police said. The 40-year-old driver, who has not been identified, was arrested on the scene, they said. Police said the car was carrying 28 butane canisters when it ploughed into the embassy's main gate, partially damaging it. Trump travels to the South Korean capital this weekend after attending the G20 summit in Japan. Earlier this week, a Seoul official told reporters that Trump was considering a visit to the demilitarized zone that divides the two Koreas. — AFP

Drone sightings disrupt flights

SINGAPORE: Drone sightings have disrupted flights at Singapore's main airport for the second time in a week, authorities said, as the devices increasingly cause havoc for air traffic worldwide. About 18 arrivals and departures were delayed and seven flights diverted at Changi Airport late Monday "due to bad weather and unauthorized drone activities", the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore said. The disruption lasted about an hour, it said. Last week Changi, one of Asia's busiest hubs, closed one of its runways for short periods due to unauthorized drone flying, disrupting dozens of flights. It is against the law in Singapore to fly a drone within five kilometers of an airport without a permit. Drones are increasingly disrupting flights at airports around the world. London's Gatwick was paralyzed for 36 hours in December following repeated drone sightings, with tens of thousands of passengers affected. — AFP

Bulgaria busts smuggling ring

SOFIA: Bulgarian authorities have broken up a major organized crime ring thought to have smuggled thousands of migrants from Afghanistan en route to western Europe, prosecutors said yesterday. The gang smuggled the migrants - predominantly boys under the age of 16 - over the Maritsa river bordering Turkey and helped them cross illegally through the forests into Serbia, prosecutor Sijka Mileva told journalists. While authorities have not given an exact figure of how many people were smuggled, they believe the gang was active since early 2017 and Mileva said "there were transfers every week" in groups of "30-40 people at a time". In total, eight men have been indicted: an Iraqi man alleged to be the ringleader, one Syrian, four Afghans and two Bulgarians. — AFP

Sri Lanka execution fears

COLOMBO: Amnesty International raised yesterday fresh concerns that Sri Lanka may soon end a 42-year moratorium on capital punishment and hang 13 men convicted of drug offences. The London-based rights group said it was "alarmed" over media reports of preparations to resume hangings although the country still does not have a qualified hangman. "Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena must immediately halt his plans to resume executions for at least 13 prisoners convicted of drug-related crimes," Amnesty said in a statement. Sirisena in February announced he would carry out the first executions in 42 years within less than two months, but he is yet to sign any death warrant, officials said. He said this was in response to spiraling narcotics-related crime inspired by President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. The president has also appealed to human rights organizations not to pressure him on his decision. — AFP

Trump on rape accuser: 'She's not my type'

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Monday once again vigorously denied allegations by a magazine advice columnist that he sexually assaulted her in the 1990s in a New York department store dressing room, adding: "She's not my type." Trump made the comment in an interview with The Hill, a political news outlet, that touched on the allegations from E. Jean Carroll, who says in her new book that the alleged rape occurred in the mid-1990s.

"I'll say it with great respect: Number one, she's not my type. Number two, it never happened. It never happened, OK?" Trump said in the interview, which was conducted in the Oval Office. The president added that Carroll was "totally lying" when she made her claims. "I know nothing about this woman. I know nothing about

Student debt a 'life sentence' for Americans

LOS ANGELES: Haley Walters is five years away from earning her law degree. If everything goes according to plan, she will be under a mountain of \$100,000 in student debt by the time she enters the work force. Like millions of Americans, Walters is paying a steep price for an education that will likely weigh her down financially for much of her adult life. "I think the student debt crisis is truly a life sentence," the 19-year-old Californian said. With 45 million borrowers owing some \$1.6 trillion, the debt burden of American college graduates has exploded in recent years.

It has emerged as a key issue in the 2020 presidential campaign, with candidate Bernie Sanders unveiling an ambitious plan Monday to erase all student loan debt. "Somebody who graduates from a public university this year is expected to have over \$35,000 in student loan debt on average," said Cody Hounanian, program director of Student Debt Crisis, a California non-profit that assists students and fights for reforms. According to official statistics, 71 percent of US students are burdened by such debt, with minorities the hardest hit.

"Black women particularly are the most impacted group with the highest student debt total per graduate," Hounanian said. Despite scholarships and financial aid available to many, the cost of higher education is such that the majority of students are unable to repay their loans on schedule. "When borrowers leave school, they're in a program that's supposed to take 10 years... but more and more are enrolling in federal programs that are actually 20 or 25 years in length," Hounanian said.

In the long term, the loan balance for such people increases, interest accrues, and the debt burden just keeps going upwards, he added. Hounanian spoke of his own experience as an example. "I had \$30,000 in student loan debt. I pay over \$150 a month, and that's in one of these

affordable repayment programs," he said. "By doing that, my loan balance is actually increasing. I'm not covering even the entire interest that's accrued." "I'm paying every month," he added, "just to be more in debt."

'System isn't working'

Several experts interviewed said it's not unusual to have two generations in one family burdened with student debt. That's the case for Walters, who just graduated with a two-year degree in political science from Pasadena City College, near Los Angeles. While she managed to go through that school without accumulating debt, come autumn she will be entering the prestigious - and much more expensive - University of California Berkeley, with a law degree the ultimate goal.

Despite being awarded scholarships, Walters said she still has to take out loans to pay for nearly \$20,000 in annual fees. "That is basically going to turn into loan after loan after loan... each with individual interest rates and individual payments," Walters sighed. She said she grew up listening to her mother, 58, bemoan the student debt that still haunts her. "I would hear my mom talk about... how it was basically crippling our finances," she recalled. "You know, we couldn't go on vacation, sometimes I didn't get school supplies for the new school year, sometimes we got fewer birthday pres-

ents." Walters said she hopes student debt will be a key issue in the 2020 White House race. For some candidates, it is already front and center.

'The system isn't working'

Sanders's "revolutionary" bill aims to erase all student loan debt and make public colleges tuition-free - and he wants the financial industry to help pay for it. "The American people bailed out Wall Street," Sanders said, referring to lenders deemed "too big to fail" during the late 2000s recession. "Now it is time for Wall Street to come to the aid of the middle class." Democratic candidate Elizabeth Warren also has a debt cancellation and free public college plan. "My dad grew up in an extremely poor family in southern California," said Walters. "The only reason he went to university was because it was free."

Tuition, however, is not the only financial burden of students. In California, for example, housing and living expenses represent more than half of the \$35,000 needed annually on average for public university. Hounanian said it was crucial to address those issues to ensure students don't end up saddled with heavy debt before starting their professional lives. "The system isn't working for students," he said. "It's working for profiteers, for big companies and for those who are making money off of students and borrowers." — AFP



PASADENA: Haley Walters (center) marches with her class at the Pasadena City College graduation ceremony in Pasadena, California. — AFP

her," he said. Carroll's account, revealed last week in an excerpt of her new book that was published by New York magazine, makes her at least the 16th woman to have accused Trump of sexual misconduct before he became president.

She said that in a chance encounter at the Bergdorf Goodman store in Manhattan, Trump - then a real estate developer - asked her for advice on buying lingerie for an unnamed woman. Then jokingly, they each suggested that the other should try it on. "The moment the dressing-room door is closed, he lunges at me, pushes me against the wall, hitting my head quite badly, and puts his mouth against my lips," wrote Carroll, who works for Elle magazine.

Pinning her against the wall, Carroll says, Trump proceeded to pull down her tights, unzip his pants and penetrate her - all while himself fully dressed - until she finally managed to push him out and run from the dressing room. On Monday, Carroll told CNN that he "just went at it" after he cornered her. "It was a fight," she said. "With all the 15 women or 16 who have come forward, it's the same. He denies it. He turns it around. He attacks. And he threatens." Carroll never went to the police because, she said, she was afraid of repercussions. — AFP



US Journalist E Jean Carroll

Abused as 'dirty', gay newlyweds fear backlash

ZHONGGLI: Although Jovi Wu and Mindy Chiu made history last month as one of the first lesbian couples in Asia to marry legally, they are fearful that conservatives may reverse Taiwan's landmark law. The businesswomen and their six-year-old daughter, Allison, were verbally abused when they demonstrated in support of same-sex marriage last year, ahead of a referendum that came after the top court set a two-year deadline for legalization.

One woman took a leaflet from Allison, looked at it, threw it on the ground and then called their family "sickening and dirty". 36-year-old Chiu said from her home in a suburb of Zhongli district, an hour's drive from Taiwan's capital, Taipei. "(I asked her) do you have to say this in front of a child - that we are sickening, we are dirty? What we are trying to say is that we're just the same, like you," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Hundreds of same-sex couples married on May 24 after President Tsai Ing-wen signed into law a bill endorsing same-sex marriage - a controversial move which has divided the self-ruled island, seen as a beacon of liberalism in Asia.

Although two-thirds of Taiwanese voters - some 7 million people - rejected the proposed reform in the November referendum, parliament passed a law legalizing gay marriage to beat the constitutional court deadline of May 24. Far from signaling a shift towards broader acceptance of homosexuality, the couple fear the legal victory will spark a backlash from conservatives who believe marriage should remain between a man and a woman.

"It will be messy at the start," said 38-year-old Wu, who gave birth through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) in Thailand - using an egg from her former partner and a sperm donor - as Taiwan does not allow surrogacy. "Anti-homosexual groups will continue to argue how can we enjoy the same rights? How can we change Taiwan's traditions and values? They will intensify their smear campaign and continue to hurt us."

Wu's concerns highlight how socially conservative attitudes prevail across much of Asia, five decades after the Stonewall riots in the United States that are widely regarded as the birth of the LGBT+ rights movement. The Coalition for the Happiness of Our Next Generation, one group seeking to overturn Taiwan's gay marriage law, said the public will "strike back" as it mobilised support to vote against Tsai in January elections, when she seeks a second term.

"If we can out these legislators who supported same-sex marriage, there is a likelihood for change after 2020," said the group's president Tseng Hsien-ying. "The only type of marriage people in Taiwan can accept is between a man and a woman. This (same-sex union) is destroying the institution of marriage and distorting our family values." Growing up in an abusive family in Taiwan's rural west, repeatedly beaten up by her father, Wu wanted to give her own daughter the best she could. — Reuters