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**‘Reverse-coattail effect’ could boost Biden in Wisconsin**

*By WisPolitics.com*

An unusual “reverse-coattail effect” could play out in Wisconsin’s April 7 elections, with hotly contested down-ballot races drawing voters to an increasingly uninteresting Democratic presidential primary, instead of the other way around, observers say.

If that happens, a strong African-American turnout in Milwaukee might help former Vice President Joe Biden in a state where Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders was starting to pull ahead, the observers say.

Ordinarily, the contests at the top of the ticket — president, governor or U.S. senator — draw the most media attention and voter interest, while candidates for lower offices try to leverage that interest to attract voters to their own campaigns. And the black vote, concentrated in Milwaukee, isn’t always a major factor in predominantly white Wisconsin.

However, the once-huge Democratic presidential field has narrowed to three, with Biden steadily building his delegate lead, Sanders struggling to catch up and Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard persisting in her now-hopeless quest.

February polls by the Marquette University Law School and the UW-Madison Election Research Center showed Sanders with a double-digit lead over Biden, reversing the results of the previous few Marquette polls. But that was before Biden’s comeback victory in South Carolina and multiple wins on Super Tuesday and in subsequent weeks.

Biden’s momentum raises the prospect that Sanders’ chances may dwindle further by the time Wisconsin votes, says Paru Shah, associate professor of political science at UW-Milwaukee, adding: “The political psychology is that people like to back a winner.”

That could shift the focus to the state Supreme Court race, an officially nonpartisan contest that has triggered big get-out-the-vote drives by both Democrats and Republicans; the Milwaukee area’s marquee local races; and the $87 million Milwaukee Public Schools tax referendum.

For the first time, African-American candidates are simultaneously competing on general-election ballots for Milwaukee County executive, Milwaukee mayor and three other citywide offices. State Rep. David Crowley is facing state Sen. Chris Larson to replace outgoing County Exec Chris Abele, while state Sen. Lena Taylor is challenging Mayor Tom Barrett in his bid for a fifth term. Also on the ballot: state Rep. Jason Fields is vying with Deputy City Comptroller Aycha Sawa to succeed outgoing Comptroller Marty Matson; lawyer Tearman Spencer is challenging nine-term City Attorney Grant Langley; and two-term City Treasurer Spencer Coggs is facing token opposition from affordable housing developer Brandon Methu.

Crowley, Taylor, Fields and Spencer are all African-American, while the treasurer’s race between Coggs and Methu is the first-ever general-election matchup between two African-Americans for that office.

Milwaukee County Democratic Party Chairman Chris Walton, who is African-American, says he expects an “Obama effect,” as black voters turn out to support black candidates, the way they did for former President Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

“Historically, African-Americans do turn out at higher rates when there are African-Americans on the ballot,” Shah agrees.

That would be good news for Biden, whose campaign was reinvigorated by powerful support from black voters in South Carolina and other Southern and Midwestern states.

In Wisconsin, 37% of African-Americans support Biden, compared with 25% backing Sanders, based on composite results of Marquette polls from August through February, says Charles Franklin, the poll’s director. Those polls were taken before most other Democratic contenders dropped out, and it’s not yet certain who their supporters will back, Franklin cautions.

If black voters continue to gravitate toward Obama’s former second-in-command, “it really could happen that we get a reverse-coattail effect … that could boost Biden’s chances at the top of the ticket,” says Barry Burden, UW-Madison professor of political science and poll director.

That effect would vary, Burden says, with less-exciting local races in some parts of the state overshadowed by the high court battle between conservative Justice Daniel Kelly and his progressive challenger, Dane County Circuit Judge Jill Karofsky.

Angela Lang, executive director of Milwaukee’s Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, a progressive grassroots political organization, also sees the Milwaukee races driving turnout, because “people of color want their voices heard.”

However, Lang and Walton warn against viewing African-American voters as monolithic. Both say they see younger black voters leaning toward Sanders, drawn by his positions on free college and free health care, reflecting the same generational split as the overall Democratic electorate.

By contrast, Walton says, older black voters prefer “a strong, stable leader” like Biden, who “knows how to be president.” Many Democratic voters also “really want to get rid of the current president” and to pick the candidate best suited to defeat President Trump, Lang says.

While the sample size is too small to be precise, Marquette’s results suggest Lang and Walton are correct about the age divide, Franklin says.

The flip side of Biden’s African-American support “is that Sanders is doing substantially better with Hispanic voters,” who helped him win important victories in Nevada, California and Colorado, Franklin says. Combining the August-through-February Marquette poll results, Sanders is drawing 50% of Wisconsin’s Hispanic vote, compared with 15% for Biden.

Although this state’s Hispanic population is slightly larger than its black population — 6.9% of the total, compared with 6.7%, according to the latest Census Bureau estimates — Hispanic turnout is historically lower, says Ricardo Diaz, executive director of the United Community Center, which serves Milwaukee’s Hispanic neighborhoods.

Diaz is skeptical of Sanders’ poll numbers, based on his perception that Wisconsin’s Hispanic community is more conservative than its Nevada and California counterparts, who are “feeling kind of out” of the political process and “see Bernie as sort of the savior” from low wages and unfavorable immigration policies.

By contrast, Voces de la Frontera Action is polling its members on whether to endorse Sanders, based on his immigration and health care positions, executive director Christine Neumann-Ortiz says. That would be the first presidential primary endorsement for the Milwaukee immigrant rights group’s political wing, which supported Obama in both of his general elections, she says.

Neumann-Ortiz says she also sees Sanders drawing more support from younger Hispanic voters.

However people of color vote, Walton and the three political scientists say they don’t expect a repeat of the 2016 geographic split, when former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton carried Milwaukee County while Sanders took the rest of the state.

Marquette poll results show fairly consistent levels of support for Biden and Sanders across all regions, Franklin says.

“Sanders is a strong candidate in this state, but he’s not the overwhelming candidate who carried 71 of 72 counties in 2016,” Franklin says.

Burden agrees, saying, “Sanders is in real trouble this time. … He’s likely to lose a lot of counties.”

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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