

WORLD

Biden, Trump move closer to 2020 rematch

Super Tuesday expected to help cement their march toward party nominations

WASHINGTON — US President Joe Biden and former president Donald Trump are poised to move much closer to winning their respective parties' nominations during the biggest day of the primary campaign on Tuesday, setting up a historic rematch that many voters would rather not endure.

Super Tuesday elections are being held in 16 states and one territory — from Alaska and California to Vermont and Virginia. Hundreds of delegates are at stake, the biggest haul for either party on any single day.

In a dramatic departure from past Super Tuesdays, both the Democratic and Republican contests are effectively sealed this year.

The two men have easily repelled challengers in the opening rounds of the campaign and are in full command of their bids, despite polls making it clear that voters do not want this year's general election to be identical to the 2020 race.

A new AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll finds the majority of people in the United States do not think either Biden or Trump has the necessary mental acuity for the job.

"Both of them failed, in my opinion, to unify this country," said Brian Hadley, 66, of Raleigh, North Carolina.

Neither Trump nor Biden will be able to formally clinch their party's nominations on Super Tuesday. The earliest Trump could clinch the nomination is March 12; for Biden, it is March 19.

The final days before Tuesday has demonstrated the unique nature of this year's campaign. Rather than barnstorming the states holding primaries, Biden and Trump held rival events last week along the US-Mexico border, each seeking to gain an advantage in the increasingly fraught immigration debate.

Favorable court ruling

After the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 on Monday to restore Trump to primary ballots following state attempts to ban him over the Capitol riot, Trump pointed to the 91 criminal counts against him to accuse Biden of weaponizing the courts.

"Fight your fight yourself," Trump said. "Don't use prosecutors and judges to go after your opponent."

The justices ruled that states cannot invoke a post-Civil War constitutional provision to keep presidential candidates from appearing on ballots. That power resides with Congress, the court wrote in an unsigned opinion.

Trump hailed the decision, declaring a "BIG WIN FOR AMERICA!!!" in a post on his Truth Social website.

The outcome ends efforts in Colorado, Illinois, Maine and elsewhere to kick Trump off the ballot because of his attempts to undo his loss in the 2020 election to Biden, culminating in the Jan 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

Biden is scheduled to deliver the State of the Union address on Thursday, and then campaign in the key swing states of Pennsylvania and Georgia.

The president will defend policies responsible for "record job creation, the strongest economy in the world, increased wages and household wealth, and lower prescription drug and energy costs," White House Communications Director Ben LaBolt said.

That is in contrast to Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement, LaBolt added, which consists of "rewarding billionaires and corporations with tax breaks, taking away rights and freedoms, and undermining our democracy".

Sole challenger

Trump has nonetheless already vanquished more than a dozen major Republican challengers and now has only one left: Nikki Haley, the former president's one-time United Nations ambassador who was also twice elected governor of her home state of South Carolina.

Haley has maintained strong fundraising and notched her first primary victory over the weekend in Washington, a Democrat-run city with few registered Republicans. Trump tried to turn that victory into a loss for the overall campaign, scoffing that she had been "crowned queen of the swamp".

Still, Haley winning any of Super Tuesday's contests would take an upset. And a Trump sweep would only intensify pressure on her to leave the race.

Biden has his own problems, including low approval ratings and polls suggesting that many US citizens, even a majority of Democrats, do not want to see the 81-year-old running again.

The president's easy Michigan primary win last week was spoiled slightly by an "uncommitted" campaign organized by activists who disapprove of the president's handling of the conflict in Gaza.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Ai Heping in New York contributed to this story.

Elusive truce



Palestinians gather at the site of an Israeli strike in Rafah, southern Gaza, on Monday. Cease-fire talks between Hamas and mediators broke up on Tuesday in Cairo with no breakthrough, while Israeli negotiators have so far stayed away from the talks. At least 30,631 Palestinians have been killed in the Israeli military offensive against Hamas to retaliate against the group's rampage on Oct 7 in which about 1,200 people were killed and more than 200 taken hostage. MOHAMMED SALEM / REUTERS

Record wildfire wreaks havoc in Texas

By MAY ZHOU in Houston
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More than 4,000 square kilometers has burned in the largest wildfire in Texas history, causing the evacuation of towns, two deaths and heavy damage to the cattle industry.

There are five active wildfires in the state, with the Smokehouse Creek Fire in Hutchinson County the largest at 4,330 sq km and only 15 percent contained, according to the latest update by the Texas A&M Forest Service on Monday. Four other fires are smaller and are between 50 and 85 percent contained.

A cluster of fires in the Texas Panhandle have burned more than 5,000 sq km since erupting last week. The Smokehouse fire spilled into neighboring Oklahoma, where more than 130 sq km has been scorched, killing livestock, destroying hundreds of structures and burning crops.

The Texas A&M Forest Service said on Monday that cooler temperatures and less wind will aid in attempts to contain the active wildfires. However, it warned that "an underlying risk for new wildfires will continue in the Texas Panhandle and South Texas until spring green-up occurs in the abundance of grass vegetation found in these regions".

More than 50 Texas National Guard members and hundreds more personnel from various state emergency response resources have been deployed to battle the wildfires.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said much of the affected areas are "completely gone", with "nothing left but ashes on the ground". Early assessments show that up to 500 structures had been destroyed as of Friday afternoon.

On Facebook, people posted photos of burned-down structures and skies covered by smoke or orange glows.

"These fires not only threaten lives and property, but will also have a substantial impact on our



Ranchers pick up donated hay to feed cattle after the Smokehouse Creek Fire in Texas burned through the area on Monday. SCOTT OLSON / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

agriculture industry," Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller said in a statement.

"Over 85 percent of the state's cattle population is located on ranches in the panhandle. There are millions of cattle out there, with some towns comprising more cattle than people. The losses could be catastrophic for those counties."

Abbott said he is going to request a federal disaster declaration to help in the recovery.

Firefighters' assistance

President Joe Biden said last week that he had directed his team to "do everything possible to help protect the people and the communities threatened by these fires".

More than 100 federal firefighters were headed to the state, he said, as well as "dozens of additional fire engines, air tankers, small planes, helicopters to help fight the flames".

The two deaths were of truck driver Cindy Owen, 44, and Joyce Blankenship, 83.

Owen was driving in Texas' Hemphill County south of Canadian on Feb 27 when she encountered fire and smoke, said Sergeant Chris Ray of the Texas Department of

Public Safety. She got out of her truck, and flames overwhelmed her.

In nearby Hutchinson County, Blankenship, 83, was found dead in her house, her family said.

"The house was gone," her grandson Nathan Blankenship said. "There was no way she could've gotten out."

While fire officials have yet to determine the causes of the Texas Panhandle wildfires, lawyers for landowners are either filing or planning to file lawsuits against some utility companies, The Texas Tribune reported.

One lawsuit, filed on behalf of homeowner Melanie McQuiddy against Xcel Energy Services and two other utilities, alleged that the blaze started "when a wooden pole defendants failed to properly inspect, maintain and replace, splintered and snapped off at its base".

She claimed the pole was in bad physical shape before it fell.

A spokesperson for Xcel said there is no official determination for the causes of any of the fires in the Texas Panhandle and that investigations are continuing.

Agencies contributed to this story.

Striking doctors in S. Korea face license suspensions

SEOUL — Thousands of striking junior doctors in South Korea faced proceedings to suspend their medical licenses on Tuesday, as authorities are pushing for police investigations targeting leaders of the walkouts that have disrupted hospital operations.

Nearly 9,000 of South Korea's 13,000 medical interns and residents have been refusing to work for the past two weeks to protest a government plan to enroll thousands more students in the country's medical schools in coming years. The government ordered them to return to work by Feb 29, citing a threat to public health. But most have defied threats of license suspensions and prosecutions.

"For those who lead the walkouts, we are thinking we'll file complaints with police," Vice-Health Minister Park Min-soo said. "But I tell you that we haven't determined exactly when we would do so and against whom."

On Monday, the Health Ministry sent officials to hospitals to confirm the absences of the striking doctors to begin administrative steps to suspend their licenses.

So far, the government has confirmed the absences of more than 7,000 strikers. And on Tuesday, officials were to continue on-site inspections of hospitals and begin sending notices to some strikers about license suspension proceedings, Park said.

The striking doctors' licenses would be suspended for at least three months, Park said, and doctors are to be given opportunities to respond before suspensions take effect.

'Defenseless' patients

"The trainee doctors have left their patients defenseless. They've even left emergency rooms and intensive care units," he said.

"We can't tolerate these irresponsible acts. They have betrayed their professional and ethical responsibilities and neglected their legal duties."

Observers said the government will likely end up punishing only strike leaders, not all of the thousands of striking doctors. They said it would take a few months to complete the administrative steps to suspend the licenses of all 9,000 striking doctors.

At the heart of the dispute is a government plan to raise the country's medical school enrollment quota by 2,000 starting next year, from the current 3,058. Officials said South Korea must add more doctors to deal with a fast-aging population. However, many doctors said universities are not ready to deal with that abrupt increase in the number of students and that the country's overall medical service would be eventually hurt.

Many senior doctors support junior doctors, but have not joined their walkouts.

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International Education Column

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