

## Dem visits confirm Michigan's re-emergence as presidential battleground

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Auburn Hills — Democratic presidential hopefuls Kirsten Gillibrand and Beto O'Rourke made multiple Monday stops in Metro Detroit, confirming Michigan's re-emergence as a key battleground for the 2020 primary and general elections.

Fresh off announcing a \$6.1 million fundraising haul last week during his first 24 hours as a candidate, O'Rourke wooed blue-collar voters at a union training center in Ferndale in between morning stops in Center Line and Detroit. He extolled "employment with dignity" and overcoming political polarization by "pursuing the same common cause for this great country."

Gillibrand touted liberal plans to expand health care access and fight climate change during an MSNBC town hall meeting in Auburn Hills while accusing Republican President Donald Trump of "spewing hate and racism" that has cost the United States its moral standing in the world.

The president "did not create hate and racism and anti-Semitism, but what he has done is pour fuel on a fire that is raging more than I've ever seen in my lifetime," the New York U.S. senator said during the televised town hall at the Rochester Mills Production Brewery and Taproom. "We are at our best when we love one another."

Trump topped 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton by 10,704 votes in Michigan and was the first Republican to win the state since 1988. He is again prioritizing Michigan in his re-election bid and is scheduled to hold a rally next week in Grand Rapids.

Michigan is important to Democrats, who see an opportunity to retake the state in 2020, while it is part of Trump's coalition of states with his key constituencies, including rural voters and "Reagan Democrats" in blue-collar communities like Macomb County, said David Dulio, head of the political science department at Oakland University.

"I would expect a parade of candidates to come through Michigan for the next year and a half," Dulio said.

Oakland County, which both Democratic candidates visited Monday, is a former GOP stronghold that has turned blue over the past decade.

"As we saw in 2018, Oakland County — particularly Oakland County women — will be a critical base of support for any Democratic nominee," said Richard Czuba, pollster for Lansing-based Glengariff Group. "But the question is will the eventual Democratic nominee also be able to build margins in northwestern Wayne County in areas like Plymouth, Northville and Livonia, and will they be able to win urban counties like Kent and Kalamazoo on the west side of the state."

O'Rourke called Michigan an "important" state and said he wanted to visit as soon as he could after announcing his candidacy last week.

"Whether it's a rural or urban county, we've got to show up," he said. "We have no hope of being able to serve those in this country unless we first show up to listen to them, to learn from them — as I just did here today in Ferndale — to be able to see things from their perspective."

#### Blue-collar voters targeted

Trump targeted blue-collar workers in Michigan and blasted unfair trade deals three years ago, but O'Rourke and Gillibrand both stressed the importance of unions as Democrats seek to avoid further defections from what had been a reliable voting bloc.

The United States should make labor standards — and the ability to organize — part of any trade agreements with other countries, O'Rourke told union workers at the Ferndale facility.

"Let's trade with the rest of the world," O'Rourke said. "Let's just make sure we're trading on a level playing field and that those workers in those other countries also have the right to organize so they're paid a higher wage, with better working conditions and doesn't make us compete on an unfair playing field."

O'Rourke said requiring countries like Mexico allow workers to unionize as part of trade deals with the United States would not only be good for laborers there, "it's great for the workers in America."

"In Mexico, workers cannot organize," O'Rourke said. "They produce tremendous value, in some cases in jobs that used to be here in the United States of America, and they're paid \$40 or \$50 bucks a week."

Gillibrand joined a "Fems for Dems" event in Clawson later Monday with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who has encouraged all candidates to visit the state and predicted that "all roads to the White House lead through Michigan."

"The first one who called was Kirsten Gillibrand," Whitmer said of her open invitation to the 2020 field. "A woman who is raising kids and leading at the same time — who knows it's not one or the other."

Asked about health care by a Michigan physician during the town hall, Gillibrand touted her plans for a Medicare for All system, proposing a buy-in option for all residents who could still have the choice to purchase private insurance, a choice she thinks few would ultimately make.

"I want to get to a single-payer system," she told reporters after the event. "I think the quickest way to do that is create competition."

#### Green New Deal stand

Gillibrand also promoted a Democratic plan to fight climate change known as the Green New Deal, arguing tax incentives could ultimately help Michigan automakers who are already wary of increasing fuel economy mandates and would be required to move toward a zero-emissions standard.

“Michigan has a history of building things, creating things, manufacturing things and innovating,” she told reporters. “If you say to every manufacturer, when you create energy efficiency, when you create an energy-efficient engine, you are going to get a massive tax benefit, that’s how you compete with China.”

Gillibrand said she would pay for Green New Deal implementation by creating a “modest” new transaction tax on stock trades.

Michigan Republican Party chair Laura Cox cited the Green New Deal as she criticized the visits by Gillibrand and O’Rourke, calling them two of the “biggest clowns” in the “Democratic presidential circus.”

“This \$93 trillion disaster would deal a fatal blow to Michigan’s manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and destroy Michigan’s middle class,” Cox said in a statement.

Experts including a libertarian Cato Institute researcher have said the Green New Deal is too “broad brush and vague” to yield a precise cost estimate, according to FactCheck.org.

Calling clean water a “human right,” Gillibrand said her pending Promoting Infrastructure and Protecting the Economy Act” would help communities like Flint upgrade infrastructure and fight water contamination.

“Polluters” should pay the cost to clean up PFAS chemicals that threaten drinking water supplies, she said, suggesting the need for alternative funding sources at legacy pollution sites where the former owner is unknown or no longer exists.

Oakland County focus

The O’Rourke and Gillibrand stops in vote-rich region show the continued importance of Oakland County.

Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton won the county in 2016, but by smaller margins than former President Barack Obama enjoyed in 2008 and 2012. National Democrats likely see Michigan's second largest county of voters as a place to make gains over Clinton's performance, Dulio said.

Trump won Michigan by less than a percentage point in 2016, but a strong performance in Oakland County helped Whitmer and other Democrats sweep the top of the ticket in 2018 while flipping seats in Congress and the state Legislature.

U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Holly, defeated incumbent Republican Mike Bishop in the 8th Congressional District and U.S. Rep. Haley Stevens, D-Rochester Hills, picked up an open 11th District seat that had been held by a Republican.

Experts attributed the Oakland County gains to a strong surge by female voters who mobilized and marched in the wake of Trump’s 2016 election despite a 2005 recording in which he made lewd comments about women and sexual assault.

Michigan Republican Party spokesman Tony Zammit said he expect a fierce competition for Michigan next year.

“I think that the road to the presidency, as always, is going to run through the Midwest,” he said. “And I think that Michigan is going to be a key, especially for the Democrats, so it’s going to be one of those states we’re going to fight tooth and nail to hold.”

Trump is visiting Grand Rapids next week because it is "a reliably Republican area where he can play to his base," Dulio said. It is also where the president ended his 2016 campaign and predicted a victory that was confirmed 26 hours later.

Republicans are already laying the groundwork for that effort, Zammit said, suggesting that Trump’s sluggish approval ratings are starting to climb and will continue to do so as voters get to know the Democratic candidates.

“While Republicans can win the White House without Michigan, I don’t think a Democrat can. And so I think if we take Michigan from the Democrats, I think that pretty much shuts them out of the White House.”