

Opinion | Mary Ellen Klas, Columnist

Haley Still Has an Important Role to Play

She won't win the nomination but there's still important work for her to do.

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By Mary Ellen Klas



She's not done yet. *Photographer: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images North America*

Nikki Haley didn't narrow the margin with Donald Trump in her home state's primary Saturday. But in her losing bid to win South Carolina, she finally drew blood against the presumptive Republican nominee.

Haley spent the last month doing what her supporters have been waiting for – sharpening her attacks on the former president. She's questioned his mental acuity and his bromance

with Russia's Vladimir Putin, condemned his comments on NATO and his position on Ukraine, and criticized his interference in the failed congressional border deal. Many of her attacks were made on conservative media which more often serves as Trump's personal PR machine.

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In a shrewd bit of media management, Haley gave a "State of the Race" speech on Tuesday that attracted 30 minutes of live coverage from Fox News and she used the moment to say that regardless of Saturday's results and pressure from Trump: "I refuse to kiss the ring... I'm not going anywhere."

She shouldn't. She should stay in the race as long as she can to accumulate delegates, then use them as leverage to become leader of the anti-Trump faction and exert some influence over the party and Trump's sycophants. She should never endorse him, but give homeless Republicans some hope.

By inviting fence-sitters and independents to vote for her in a way that's never been done before in the first-in-the-South primary, Haley exposed an uncomfortable truth for her party: There are still a lot of Republican-leaning Americans who are voting against Trump and he likely needs them to win in November.

Many South Carolina Haley voters told me that they formerly supported Trump, but don't want to see him return to office. They echoed Haley's description that he brings "chaos," is "unhinged" and unpredictable. They longed for change.

Saturday's exit poll results echoed these sentiments. One-third of the South Carolina voters said they would be dissatisfied if Trump were elected and 96% of those voters cast their ballot for Haley. One-third said they did not consider Trump mentally or physically fit to serve in office and of those, 97% voted for Haley. Only 15% of those interviewed were first-

time voters in South Carolina, which means that the universe of those who reject Trump also were traditionally reliable Republican-leaning voters.

Voters rejecting their party's frontrunner in a deep red state gives Democrats an opening.

The challenge, of course, is for President Joe Biden, with all his communication flaws and physical deficits, to persuade those Republican and independent voters who have an intense distaste for Trump to show up and vote for him in November.

Preliminary election results show Haley won just three delegates, all from counties with mostly college-educated, urban populations – Charleston, Beaufort and Richland.

"I don't believe Donald Trump can beat Joe Biden," Haley told supporters Saturday night. "Nearly every day, Trump drives people away – including with his comments just yesterday," she said, a reference to his racist remarks to a group of Black conservatives Friday, saying his indictments and mug shot make him popular with Black voters.

For a race that seemed predetermined, enthusiasm for the primary was immense. More than 205,000 people voted early, about 90,000 more than all the votes cast in the Feb. 3 Democratic primary. According to exit poll results, 21% of the nearly 700,000 votes cast in the Republican primary were from independents and 4% were from Democrats.

PrimaryPivot, a Democratic group determined to get voters who consider Trump a threat to democracy out to vote, raised close to \$1 million for their efforts that began in New Hampshire, said co-founder Robert Schwartz. In South Carolina, they targeted Democrats who didn't vote in their party's primary with radio ads and text messages that reminded them "the best way to damage Donald Trump is to vote against him."

Trump's win was called by news organizations just two minutes after polls closed and his sweeping victory reinforced his chokehold on the party. His populist appeal, focused more on identity politics than policy, brought more White working-class voters to the GOP.

He consolidates his strength by bullying and threatening to withhold his endorsement from GOP candidates in primaries. It's a powerful tool and we'll be seeing more to come. South Carolina Senators Tim Scott and Lindsay Graham – who had condemned Trump after the Jan. 6 insurrection – stood by him during his victory speech Saturday, demonstrating their word means less than the opportunity to be vice president or a cabinet official.

Haley heads to Michigan for rallies in Detroit and Grand Rapids ahead of that state's Feb. 27 GOP primary and then will focus on Super Tuesday, March 5. If she doesn't do well then, it's hard to see how she'll make the delegate math work. Eleven of the 15 Super Tuesday states and American Samoa have open primaries and represent a combined 874 Republican delegates, nearly three-fourths of the total needed to win the nomination. By March 12, in Georgia, Trump may have reached the 1,215 delegates needed for the nomination.

Haley has the resources to stay in the race through then. But campaigns don't end because candidates lose elections. They end because they run out of money and Haley's donors, which include the Koch-supported Americans for Prosperity, may soon decide it's time to turn off the spigot.

Haley and affiliated political committees spent \$11.3 million blanketing her home state on broadcast television alone – about 13 times what the Trump campaign spent. They have vowed to spend several million more in the run-up to Super Tuesday.

All that money won't bring her victory, but it will bring her recognition and attention. If Trump loses in November, as Haley predicts, she will have secured her place as the "I told you so" candidate. And if Trump wins, let's hope she will have helped build the faction within the party that wants to hold him accountable.

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