

POLITICS

Anti-Trump group urging Democrats to crossover for Haley in S.C., Michigan primaries

Juliann Ventura Special to The Detroit News

Published 10:56 p.m. ET Feb. 13, 2024 | Updated 9:34 a.m. ET Feb. 14, 2024

Charleston, S.C. — When Jazz Canzater saw a post on social media that left-leaning and moderate voters should consider voting for Nikki Haley in the Republican primary to keep Donald Trump out of the White House, she was intrigued.

It might sound like a crazy idea to some fellow Democratic voters, but it made sense to Canzater.

“I don’t feel like (voting for Haley is) saying that ‘Oh, I 100% support Haley or I’m a Haley fan,’ but more so, if that’s going to keep him (Donald Trump) from being in office, then I’m willing to do that,” said Canzater, 34, a South Carolina voter who previously only voted in Democratic primaries.

In an attempt to influence the Republican Party’s presidential nomination, some Trump critics have been trying to convince left-leaning and moderate voters to cross over and vote for Haley, the former South Carolina governor and United Nations ambassador, in states with open primaries like New Hampshire on Jan. 23, South Carolina on Feb. 24 and Michigan on Feb. 27.

One anti-Trump effort is PrimaryPivot, a national super political action committee that has been targeting potential crossover voters in states with open primaries, including Michigan. Open primaries allow for crossover voting where registered voters who typically align with one political party can vote in the opposite party’s primary without having to register beforehand. Michigan does not have political party registration.

“Our purpose is to get voters across the political spectrum to vote against Donald Trump in the Republican primary because we view him as a unique threat to our democracy,” said

Robert Schwartz, a co-founder of PrimaryPivot, citing Trump's documented efforts to overturn his 2020 presidential election loss and stay in power.

Michigan's presidential primary this year comes three days after South Carolina's Republican primary, where Haley is trying to win her home state that she governed from 2011 to 2017.

PrimaryPivot has already started to target potential crossover voters in Michigan, hiring Detroit native Tashawna Gill earlier this month to lead a Michigan-based effort to draw Democrats and independents into the Republican primary to vote for Haley, Schwartz said.

"We view Michigan as extremely important not only for the primary but to mobilize independents to support democracy in the general election," Schwartz said in an interview.

Gill was previously a political adviser for Democratic Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in 2020, a field organizer for Hillary Clinton's Michigan presidential campaign in 2016 and worked on Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II's unsuccessful campaign for Detroit city clerk in 2017. Gill confirmed her work for PrimaryPivot but was not available for an interview.

Trump's campaign slammed efforts by Democrats to cross over into the South Carolina and Michigan's Republican primaries, suggesting Haley's campaign was encouraging it. Haley's campaign did not respond to a message seeking comment.

"Nikki Haley is using Democrat money to turn out Democrat voters because she's a liberal globalist RINO who Republican voters overwhelmingly reject," said Jason Miller, a senior advisor to Trump's campaign, calling Haley a Republican in name only (RINO). "Her career in Republican politics is over."

Giving Haley a chance

PrimaryPivot is planning to hire staffers in Virginia, Massachusetts, Colorado and Minnesota, each with Super Tuesday primaries on March 5, and Georgia for its March 12 primary, Schwartz said.

"Many people who typically would have voted for or voted in the Democratic primary are considering voting in the Republican primary for Nikki Haley in an attempt to hopefully slow down, or maybe even defeat Donald Trump," said Matthew Malone, a political science professor at Lander University in Greenwood, S.C. "Anecdotally, I know numerous people who are going that route."

PrimaryPivot's primary objective is to keep Haley in the Republican presidential race beyond South Carolina and Michigan, Schwartz said, improving her chances to make inroads in later states on the presidential primary calendar.

“We are very realistic that in South Carolina, Trump is very well-liked by a large number of Republicans there, so we believe that it is extremely unlikely that Nikki Haley will actually win there, but we just want her to survive so that she can move on to other states where she has better opportunities to win,” Schwartz said.

Some political strategists and scientists are skeptical that the late bid to boost Haley will stop Trump from capturing the GOP nomination.

Fred Wszolek, a Republican political consultant who lives in South Carolina and works in Michigan politics, said he doesn't see these efforts to get Democrats and independents to vote in the GOP primary having a significant impact. But if the efforts are going to have an effect, Wszolek said, it would be Haley's home state.

However, the group would have to spend more than a couple hundred thousand dollars and Haley would have needed more momentum from the primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire for the strategy to help her defeat Trump, he said.

“Getting people to do what they want to do is really hard and expensive, so getting people to do something that comes unnatural, which is voting in a primary for a party they dislike, is really, really hard and enormously expensive,” Wszolek said.

“This is a game of momentum — it always is. These primaries sort of build off of themselves, and if Haley doesn't win in South Carolina, in the home state..., it's hard to see how she then breaks through in Michigan in a place where she's largely unknown.”

The Michigan Democratic Party is trying to help turn out Democratic voters for Biden amid a movement by some Arab and Muslim voters to cast ballots as "uncommitted" in protest of Biden's support of Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza.

“Michigan Democrats' sole focus is on turning out voters to show their support for President Biden and Vice President Harris in the upcoming Democratic primary,” Michigan Democratic Party spokesperson Tommy Kubitschek said in a statement. “We are proud and deeply committed to working to reelect President Biden and Vice President Harris so they can continue delivering for Michiganders.”

Messaging to Democrats

The strategy to recruit Democrats and independent voters to cross over for Haley is partly driven by her performance in exit polls in New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation Jan. 23 primary, when she won 43% of the vote compared with Trump's 54%.

Notably, while the majority of people who voted in the Republican primary identified as conservative in New Hampshire, 74% of voters who identified as moderate or liberal voted for Haley compared with the 22% of that same group that supported Trump, according to CNN exit polling. Most conservatives, 71%, voted for Trump compared with the 27% who voted for Haley, according to the same exit polling.

Jordan Ragusa, a political science professor at the College of Charleston, said he could not predict whether a significant number of Democrats would vote in the Republican primary on Feb. 24, based on divisions within both parties.

"Now, we are in a very unprecedented political era," Ragusa said. "Donald Trump is, I think, objectively a very polarizing figure. Is that enough to persuade a lot of Democrats to cross the aisle? I don't know. We will see."

"There have been some very subtle efforts to encourage Democrats to vote in South Carolina's Republican primary," he added.

Ragusa received two text messages that suggested he become a crossover voter. One said it was from Haley. The other did not say who sent it, but PrimaryPivot's Schwartz said his group sent the message.

The message indicated that Biden is a shoo-in for the Democratic nomination with his "pro-democracy" message, but there's an opportunity to vote for Haley and prevent Trump, "a proud election denier," from becoming the Republican nominee.

"So it didn't say directly 'skip the Democratic primary and vote in the Republican primary,'" Ragusa said. "But it hinted at that being not such a bad thing."

'Putting country over political party'

In the weeks leading up to New Hampshire's primary, PrimaryPivot said it spent more than \$500,000 on sending three rounds of anti-Trump mailers to about 150,000 left-leaning,

centrist voters who participated in the 2020 Democratic primary and six rounds of text messages to the same people.

With South Carolina's primaries underway, Schwartz said the group has been focusing on potential crossover voters in the state. On Feb. 2, the night before the Democratic primary, the group sent a text message to 200,000 people who voted in the state's Democratic primary in 2020.

"We encouraged (voters) to think about where their vote will mean the most, where their vote will count ... because Joe Biden was going to win by a huge margin, and the real contest is on the Republican side," Schwartz said.

In South Carolina's Democratic primary Feb. 3, Biden won with 96% of the vote.

Schwartz said the group hired two staff members in mid-January, Tiffany James and Chris Richardson, to be on the ground in South Carolina, knocking on voters' doors asking them to consider voting for Haley.

James said she and Richardson are talking particularly to progressives — "people who are willing to do something different, not Democratic loyalists or party loyalists."

These voters "understand the importance of having our democracy intact and knowing that sometimes it takes doing something different," James said. "That 'something different' is putting our country over (political) party."

PrimaryPivot plans to send out a couple of additional rounds of text messages in South Carolina, Schwartz said. While the group has been realistic about the strong support for Trump in South Carolina, its main goal is to keep Haley in the running for future primaries.

In South Carolina alone, PrimaryPivot will probably have spent about \$100,000 by the time its anti-Trump outreach efforts in the state are completed, Schwartz said.

PrimaryPivot's Federal Election Commission report from July to December 2023 showed that it received almost \$50,000 in contributions and spent more than \$9,500 in independent expenditures. Finance Director Brandon Dahl said he expects to report about \$186,500 in contributions and \$170,300 in independent and operating expenditures for January 2024.

In total, Schwartz said PrimaryPivot and its parallel nonprofit focused on voter empowerment, PrimaryPower, raised almost \$1 million and spent more than \$500,000, with most of the funding and expenditures incurred in January.

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