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Early 2020 Democratic field puts diversity in spotlight

By Juana Summers and Elana Schor
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) - The early days of the Democratic primary campaign are highlighting the party's diversity as it seeks a nominee who can build a coalition to take on President Donald Trump.

Of the more than half dozen Democrats who have either moved toward a campaign or declared their candidacy, four are women: Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Kamala Harris of California and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii. Harris is also African-American. Former Obama Cabinet member Julian Castro, who is Latino, has also joined the race.

And on Jan. 23, Democrat Pete Buttigieg, the 37-year-old mayor of South Bend, Indiana, jumped into the campaign. If he wins the Democratic nomination, he would be the first openly gay presidential nominee from a major political party. He would also be the youngest person ever to become president if he wins the general election.

The diversity is likely to expand in the coming weeks as other Democrats enter the race. The field that's taking shape follows a successful midterm election in which Democrats elected a historically diverse class of politicians to Congress, a pattern they'd like to repeat on the presidential scale. Neera Tanden, president of the liberal Center for American Progress Action Fund, hailed the Democrats' multiple trailblazing candidates for reflecting that "the central opposition to Trump is around a vision of the country that's inclusive of all Americans."

"A lot of different people are going to see that they can be part of the Democratic Party" thanks to a field that showcases women, candidates of color, and the first potential LGBT nominee, Tanden said. The primary "hopefully will bring a lot of people into the process," she added, recalling the high number of voters who engaged in a 2008 Democratic primary that featured a possible female nominee, Hillary Clinton, and the man who would become the first black president, Barack Obama.

The array of backgrounds was on display Jan. 23 when Buttigieg spoke in personal terms about his marriage.

"The most important thing in my life - my marriage to Chasten - is something that exists by the grace of a single vote on the U.S. Supreme Court," Buttigieg told reporters. "So I'm somebody who understands - whether it's through that or whether it's through the fact that I was sent to war on the orders of the president - I understand politics not in terms of who's up and who's down or some of the other things that command the most attention on the news but in terms of everyday impacts on our lives."

Gillibrand has put her identity as a mother at the core of her campaign, and Harris launched her campaign on this week's Martin Luther King holiday, a nod to her historic bid to become the first black woman elected president.

A number of high-profile candidates remain on the sidelines, including two who would further bolster the diversity of the 2020 field: Sens. Cory Booker of New Jersey, who is black, and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. Booker, who's widely expected to join the presidential fray in the coming days, visited the pivotal early-voting state of South Carolina this week for public events honoring King and private meetings with local activists.

Klobuchar recently told MSNBC that her family "is on board" if she opts to run in 2020, though she's offered little clarity about her timetable to announce a decision.

Though Klobuchar would be the fifth major female candidate in the Democratic primary, female candidates shouldn't be shoehorned into a "narrative" dominated by their identity that excludes the policies they're championing, said Virginia Kase, CEO of the League of Women Voters.

Kase pushed back at one popular 2018 narrative in a recent interview, noting that that "every year is the year of the woman - the reality is that we've always been major contributors" in the electoral process.

Rashad Robinson, executive director of the civil rights-focused nonprofit Color of Change, said in an interview that the diversity of the Democratic field is "a great thing and we should celebrate it," adding, "Our work is always about changing the rules - changing the rules of who can run and who can rule and who can lead is incredibly important."

But in addition to those "unwritten rules," Robinson pointed to the urgency of changing the "written rules" of American life, adding that "diversity alone does not mean structures and policies and practices that have held so many back will change" overnight.

Meanwhile, three white male candidates who could scramble the race - former Vice President Joe Biden, Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, and former Texas Rep. Beto O'Rourke - are still weighing their own presidential plans. Biden addressed a key vulnerability in his potential candidacy this week by publicly airing regret about his support for a 1994 crime bill that's had particularly negative effects on African-American communities, while Sanders built his own new connections to black voters during a trip to South Carolina.

As Biden mulls a run for president, his allies have been sending supporters a memo that could serve as a rationale for a campaign. The memo hails Biden's long track record in politics and argues that at a time of "unprecedented political chaos" during Trump's administration, Biden would offer "trustworthy, compassionate leadership."

O'Rourke, for his part, continues to gauge his future amid pundits' criticism about blog posts he published during a recent road trip through multiple states. The 46-year-old Texan acknowledged that he's been "in and out of a funk" following his departure from Congress after losing a high-profile Senate race in November, sparking questions about the luxury of his indecision given the family wealth and network of passionate backers he can lean on.

As the Democratic field is poised to become more diverse, Republicans say Trump will run for re-election based on his record.

"The American people are better off now than they were two years ago because of President Trump's policies," said Republican National Committee spokeswoman Blair Ellis. "GDP and wages are up, unemployment has hit record lows, and industries across this country are thriving. These are the credentials the American voters want from their president and President Trump is the only person who can run on these results."



"Justice. Decency. Equality. Freedom. Democracy. These aren't just words. They're the values we as Americans cherish. And they're all on the line now," Harris said in the video, teasing her official kickoff in her birthplace of Oakland next Sunday.

COMMENTARY: Kamala Harris is Right Choice to 'Save our Country'

By Stacy M. Brown, NNPA Newswire Correspondent
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That Democratic California Sen. Kamala Harris announced her candidate for president on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day is no coincidence.

For her supporters and those who know her well, Harris has long been a fighter for freedom, justice and equality and she's often invoked the spirit of Dr. King in talking about the America's needs today.

"I think we all know when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. talked about the Dream, it wasn't about being asleep," Harris said during the recent Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Annual Legislative Conference. "It was about being awake."

On a day to honor King, and in a brief video from her campaign that was released on social media Monday morning at the same time that she appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America," Harris called on her supporters to join with her to "claim our future."

"Justice. Decency. Equality. Freedom. Democracy. These aren't just words. They're the values we as Americans cherish. And they're all on the line now," Harris said in the video, teasing her official kickoff in her birthplace of Oakland next Sunday.

"The future of our country depends on you and millions of others lifting our voices to fight for our American values," said Harris, the first African-American woman, and the third woman overall, to announce her candidacy for the 2020 election.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) have also announced that they will run. Harris said she's running to "lift those voices, to bring our voices together."

"On Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) salutes the outstanding courage and leadership of Sen. Kamala Harris as she upholds and embodies the spirit and courage of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by announcing her candidacy for President of the United States," said NNPA president and CEO Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

NNPA Chair, and the editor and publisher of the Crusader newspapers in Chicago and Gary, Indiana, Dorothy R. Leavell, also applauded Harris' announcement. "I am excited that Kamala Harris has entered the presidential race for 2020 and look forward to her mounting a vigorous campaign," Leavell said.

"She is imminently qualified, having come through the ranks of politics in the Bay area and has served admirably in the United States Senate these last two years. Just last March (2018), under the leadership of Amelia Ward, who serves as Chairman of the National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation and is the publisher of the San Francisco Sun Reporter, Harris was honored as our 'Newsmaker of the Year,'" Leavell said.

She continued: "She has a close relationship with the Black Press and respects its commitment as an institution of the Black community. She is energetic, smart and works hard to be prepared for the duties she undertakes. We are certain that she will be a formidable candidate and wish her the best in the campaign."

"It is quite appropriate that on the day that the nation honors Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a fresh and vibrant new face announces her run for the Presidency," said Rosetta Miller Perry, Publisher of the Tennessee Tribune Newspaper.

"California Senator Kamala Harris is everything the current holder of the office isn't," Perry continued. "She is honest, a champion of equality and opportunity, and someone who will stand up and fight against the forces of hatred and bigotry. Her candidacy is a breath of fresh air in an environment spoiled by the toxic and incompetent individual whose administration is running the country."

According to CNN, Harris' campaign will be headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland - giving aides an East Coast hub in a racially diverse city that has struggled with wide income disparities - and Oakland, where Harris was born to immigrant parents who came to the US to advance their academic careers.

Harris chose to announce on Monday to honor the legacies of two of her heroes. Forty-seven years ago this week, Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to ever run for president, launched her campaign. And Dr. King has been a role model for Harris throughout her life as a result of what she views as his "aspirational fight for progress."

Harris chose yellow and red for her campaign logo in a nod to Chisholm's bid for president with its red and yellow campaign buttons, CNN reported.

Her signs will carry her campaign theme "Kamala Harris for the people," the words that she spoke each time she rose in the courtroom as a prosecutor. Meanwhile, Amelia Ward the NNPA Foundation Chair, who also counts as a personal friend of Harris, said her fellow Bay Area resident is a great choice to put the country back on solid footing.

"Senator Kamala Harris has long been a Champion for the people of the San Francisco Bay Area and the state of California. The Sun-Reporter has supported her since her successful run for San Francisco District Attorney in 2003, and also her campaigns for California Attorney General and U.S. Senator," Ward said.

"As a junior Senator, Harris hit the ground running in Washington D.C. becoming an instant force and outspoken critic of President Trump and his regime. The NNPA - the Black Press of America - honored her last March when the organization's Foundation awarded her our prestigious Newsmaker of the Year award," she said.

Ward continued:

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