Recent polls of the Democratic Presidential Primary have shown a race in flux, with Senator Elizabeth Warren briefly seizing the frontrunner status from former Vice President Joe Biden. Warren showed particular strength in the first two states to cast ballots, Iowa and New Hampshire. But Biden is counting on the third, South Carolina, as a firewall against a Warren or Sanders surge.

South Carolina has been touted as a better test for the Democratic nominee than the other two states. It has a more racially diverse populace than the lily white voters in Iowa and New Hampshire, one that more closely mimics the average Democratic primary voter. But in another way, South Carolina is a very odd state to serve a decisive battleground. Unlike Iowa and New Hampshire (or the fourth state, Nevada) there is almost no chance that Biden or any other Democrat will triumph in South Carolina in the general election.

Biden’s nomination race may be predicated on such an anomaly — racking up victories in states that the nominee has practically zero chance of giving the Democrats an electoral vote in come November. This may sound like a desperate play, but it is actually a tried and true strategy that traces back to the first modern popular nomination fight in 1912 and was relied upon by both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in their successful nomination battles.

In the 1912 fight, William Howard Taft used the Southern states to ward off Theodore Roosevelt’s insurgent campaign. Prior to 1912, the primaries were not a real part of the presidential selection process. Only a handful of states had the primaries, but facing the opposition of party leaders’ due to his progressive political positions, Roosevelt decided to bank on gaining delegates through popular selection. The plan started poorly — he lost two primaries to Senator Robert LaFollette, and then Taft won the critical New York primary. But Roosevelt went on to take nine of the next 10 races.

Taft fell back on a Southern base, mainly officials he appointed to jobs in the area, to even the odds. The South didn’t hold primaries — not much of a surprise as there were few Republicans in the area at the time. In fact, none of the 11 former Confederate states would vote for a Republican from the end of Reconstruction till 1920. But the delegates counted just the same — and with the notable exception of North Carolina, Taft had those votes sewn up. Taft was able to easily beat back Roosevelt and recapture the nomination — though fatally damaging himself in November to such a degree that he finished third.

It took until the aftermath of the disastrous 1968 Democratic convention for the primaries and caucus system to become the dominant method of choosing nominees. While most nomination
fights peter out well before the vast majority of states can vote, the recent races show that Taft’s method of relying on states that won’t vote for you in November still works well.

In 2008, Hillary Clinton won majorities in five of the top six biggest Democratic states – Obama only won his home state of Illinois. He did better among the 28 states that ended up voting Democratic November, thought it was close — he won 16 of them to Clinton’s 12. But what pushed him over was cleaning up in the states that would end up voting Republican in the general election, winning 14 of those states to Clinton 7. By the time the convention came around, these delegates provided an insurmountable obstacle for success.

In 2016, when facing the insurgent campaign of Bernie Sanders, Clinton learned her lesson. Among the 20 states that voted for her in November she won a bare majority, 11 to nine (though she did rack up most of the big states). Sanders also managed to win Wisconsin and Michigan, two of the three normally Democratic states that flipped to Trump in November. But Clinton won the string of Southern States like Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and South Carolina, that helped push Obama over the edge in 2008 – among the Republican voting states, Clinton won an 17-13 majority. These numbers proved to be extremely helpful in Clinton over the edge.

As the latest polls seem to suggest a two or three candidate race, Biden and Warren both need to look at the whole map to plan a path to victory. Because of its diverse demographics, South Carolina is viewed as key test. But it may not just be the demographics that prove decisive. It may be that a need to triumph in the Republican states is of critical importance to win the Democratic nomination.

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