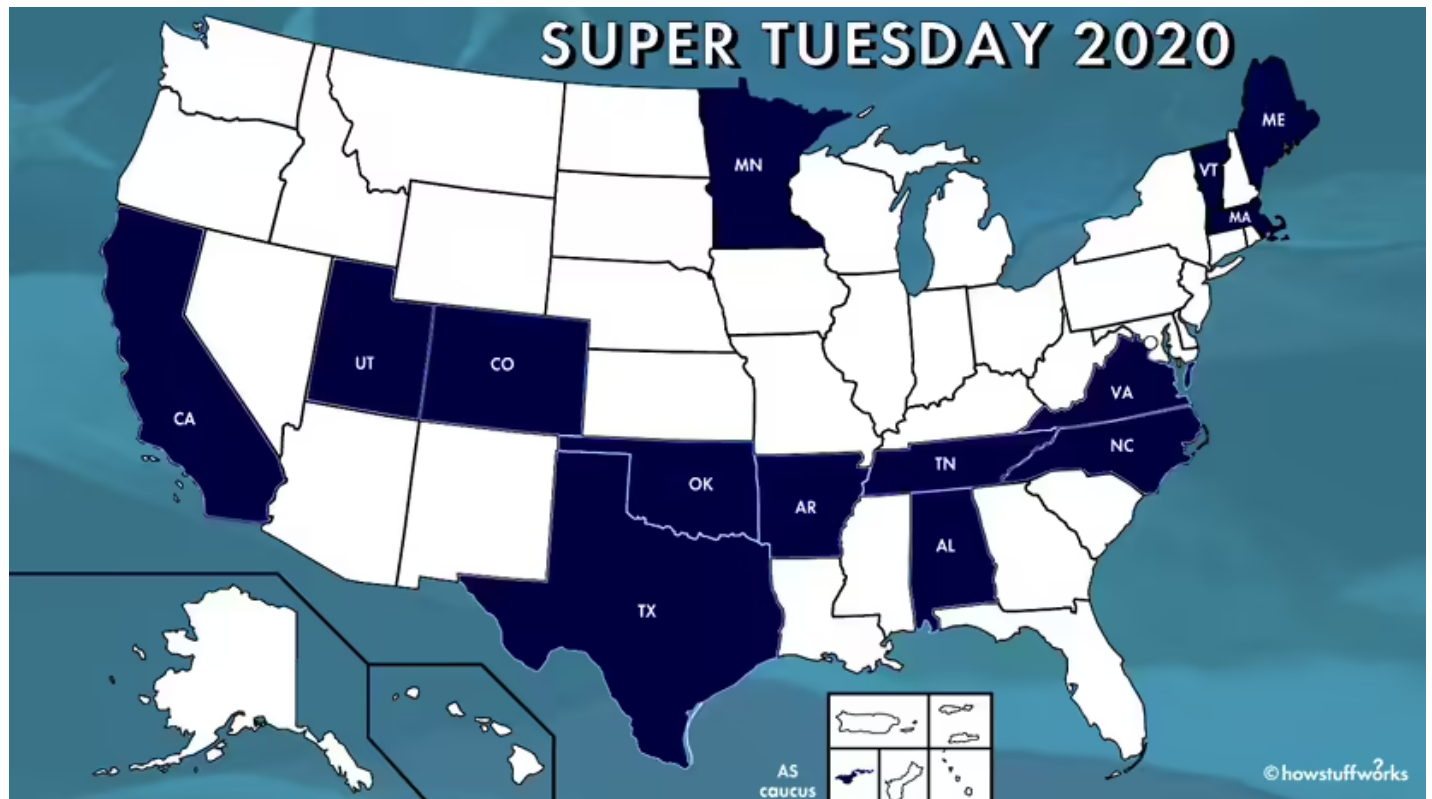


HowStuffWorks / Culture / People / Government / Elections

Why Is Super Tuesday So Super?

By: Sarah Gleim



There are 14 states plus American Samoa holding primaries on 2020 Super Tuesday. ©HOWSTUFFWORKS

It's the second-most important Tuesday in the American political process, after the general election. We're talking about Super Tuesday. And in the 2020 election, **14 states will hold primaries and American Samoa its caucus** to determine their candidate for president.

The 2020 primary is also the first time Californians will vote on Super Tuesday, which means that the two most populous states — Texas and California — are included. Together these 14 states and American Samoa will select 1,345 delegates, or 34 percent

of all Democratic convention [delegates](#). Compare that to the first four states (Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina) with a combined total of 155 delegates and you can see why Super Tuesday (March 3, 2020) is critical to the candidates.

While Super Tuesday is political tradition now, it wasn't always. So, when did it become such an important day in politics and what makes Super Tuesday, well, so super?

History of Super Tuesday

The first Super Tuesday as we know it was in 1988, when 20 states — mostly Southern — held primaries on Tuesday, March 8. Southern Democratic governors worked with the Democratic National Committee to reassert the importance of the South's role in choosing the party's nominee. They had grown discouraged that the South had become insignificant in national elections.

"The motivation was two-fold: By creating a block of Southern states, those states hoped to increase their nominating power relative to the rest of the country. But the rest of the country was also seen as more liberal, too liberal for those Southern states," [Christopher Beem](#), associate research professor and managing director at the [McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State University](#), explains via email. "By increasing their influence, and by putting that influence early in the election process, the organizers hoped to make it more likely that the Democratic Party would nominate someone who was more moderate."

Walter Mondale had already lost by a huge margin in 1984, and the Democratic Leadership Council — a moderate group within the Democratic Party — wanted to block the path of Michael Dukakis, who embraced the liberal label in 1988, Beem says.

"Many of those moderate candidates were from the South, e.g., Senator Sam Nunn from Georgia and Dick Gephardt from Missouri, and their Southern roots also made it more likely that they could win Southern states. Plus, the party was worried about losing Southern states to the Republicans (a worry that has now come to pass) and they thought that a Southern candidate would have a better chance to win those states and

thereby the election," Beem says. "It didn't work in '88. However, [Bill] Clinton won in '92 as a moderate Southerner, so it is not right to say that the strategy was a complete failure."

Because the strategy didn't quite work in 1988, many Southern states left the Super Tuesday primary, but other states have entered and exited since then. The largest Super Tuesday was in 2008, when half of the total number of Democratic delegates was up for grabs as 24 states primaried and caucused. The Republicans party had 21 states in the 2008 Super Tuesday.

Supporters hold signs at a town hall with Democratic Presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren in Los Angeles. This is the first time California will be part of Super Tuesday.

MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

Campaign Strategies on Super Tuesday

Why states join Super Tuesday is simple. "The incentive for any state to become part of Super Tuesday is the same: to have some influence in the election process by getting in early," Beem says. "Many states also look jealously at the money that Iowa and New Hampshire bring in by getting so much political and media attention, and by being part of

Super Tuesday, states hope that they are raising the prospect that their state will matter in the selection process and that they might get some revenue as a result.

"More often than not, by late April-early May, the primary election becomes more of a coronation tour, and at that point there is not a lot of media or partisan interest."

Tradition and law dictate that Iowa and New Hampshire are the first states to vote in the primaries. In 2008 the Democratic Party added Nevada and South Carolina up front, in hopes of including racially and ethnically diverse electorates. The rest of the states and territories can choose when to primary and caucus, as long as the date falls within a time frame set by the party, which varies by election year. The 2020 window runs until the [second week of June](#). But by Super Tuesday, everything about campaigning changes. The candidates spend tons of time in those first four states at campaign stops and meet-and-greets with voters talking about issues that matter to them. It's what's known as "retail" politics — touching on issues of local importance rather than the issues that might win the general election.

This style of campaigning is only possible in those first four states. That all ends at Super Tuesday because there are simply too many states. So, the strategy changes from retail politicking to delegate seeking. And that often leaves voters in states that primary *after* Super Tuesday feeling disenfranchised because Super Tuesday has the potential to determine a party's nominee early in the race. (Hence the ebb and flow of states participating in Super Tuesday.)

Despite all of this, states still choose *not* to participate in the Super Tuesday primary for various reasons, including an overcrowded field (as was the case after 2008) but also for reasons like smaller state budgets and even economic downturns. Small states with few delegates still might be ignored by the candidates, Beem says. Plus, moving the primary earlier usually is only of interest to one party each election because there is usually an incumbent on the ballot. There are also local elections to consider, as well.

But frontloading the primary vote can have its advantages, not so much for the candidates, but for their party. For instance, Beem says Super Tuesday voting can identify one nominee as having unstoppable momentum, which gives his or her party time to unite and concentrate its fundraising efforts on the general election. "The candidate and down ticket candidates have the chance to solidify and hone their messages," he says. "All of these can be very good things."

Democratic presidential candidate former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg delivered remarks during a campaign rally in Nashville, Tennessee. Bloomberg could be the Super Tuesday wildcard on March 3, 2020.

BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES

Super Tuesday 2020

With a third of the delegates up for grabs on one single day, Super Tuesday could seal the deal for a candidate who's leading the race in a tight field. Of course, the 2020 Democratic field is crowded and as of presstime there are still five or six viable candidates, so expect it to be different. "The entry of California in Super Tuesday will have a big impact," Beem says. "It is so big with so many delegates that it will take up

most of the attention and money. And now that [Sen.] Kamala Harris, [D-CA] is no longer running, that race is wide open."

With so many delegates at stake in the 2020 Super Tuesday, the remaining primaries could be seen as less important. This is especially true if a clear victor emerges and garners nearly enough delegates to carry the party's nomination. On the flipside, it could signal the end of the campaign for candidates that don't do well in the crowded 2020 Democratic primary. A candidate with a poor showing on Super Tuesday might feel pressure from the party to drop out. But Beem says he's not so sure that will be the case this year.

"If the overall numbers are close, within a single digit percentage of each other, none of them will drop out. If that happens and [Sen.] Bernie [Sanders, I-VT] continues to draw 25 percent, it will be difficult for anyone to catch him," Beem says. "Of course, it is possible that the more moderate in the party will coalesce around one or two candidates and thus there would be three or four candidates going forward. Given the diversity of states and demographics, I find it unlikely that any one candidate or even two will clean up and therefore I do not expect that Super Tuesday will effectively end [any one] campaign."

The wildcard in this year's Super Tuesday could just be Democratic candidate Michael Bloomberg. He officially skipped the primaries in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina, choosing to focus instead on the Super Tuesday states and those beyond. What his impact will be, though, is hard to know. "His entering the campaign at such a late date, and spending so much money, make it almost impossible to predict," Beem says. "Bloomberg is spending an unbelievable amount of money in those Super Tuesday states. That much money will have an impact. But it is so untraditional that I don't think anybody can be confident about how much of one."

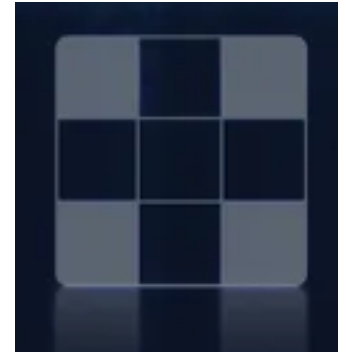
Now That's Interesting

In 2004, five states held primaries and two held caucuses on Feb. 3, to try to up their importance in the election results. The day was dubbed Mini-Tuesday, or Super Tuesday I, by political pundits because the traditional Super Tuesday was held a month later on March 2.

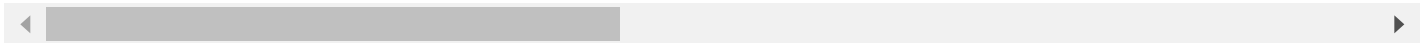
Featured



Special Offer on Antivirus Software From HowStuffWorks and TotalAV Security



Try Our Crossword



 Loading...