Sanders wins big in Nevada, stretching lead in Democratic race

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Progressive firebrand Bernie Sanders earned a decisive victory Saturday in the Nevada caucuses, solidifying his frontrunner status in the race to choose the Democratic nominee who faces President Donald Trump in November's election.

His win is a substantial accomplishment in a state seen as an important bellwether because it is the first diverse electorate to weigh in on the 2020 presidential race.

It also shows that Mr Sanders has been able to broaden a coalition beyond the narrow limits of leftist voters, refuting the argument used by several moderates in the race that he would not be able to bridge the divide between progressives and centrists.

By late Saturday, Mr Sanders was comfortably ahead with half of all precincts reporting.

The 78-year-old senator from Vermont was leading with about 46 per cent, followed by former vice president Joe Biden at 19 per cent.

South Bend, Indiana's former mayor Pete Buttigieg, who scored a shock narrow win in Iowa to start the race nearly three weeks ago, stood in third at 15 per cent.

The two female US senators in the running, progressive Elizabeth Warren and pragmatist Amy Klobuchar, were on 10 and four percent respectively.

Mr Sanders was quick to claim victory, saying his "multi-generational, multi-racial coalition" that

won Nevada was "going to sweep this country."

His progressive policies, including universal health care, higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations, and raising the minimum wage have struck a chord with millions of Americans.

"The American people are sick and tired of a government which is based on greed, corruption, and lies. They want an administration which is based on the principles of justice," he told a raucous rally, which responded with chants of "Bernie! Bernie! Bernie!"

The centrist Biden, desperate to right a listing ship after miserable showings in the first two states, told supporters he feels "really good" about his Nevada finish and shouldn't be counted out.

"We're alive and we're coming back," the onetime frontrunner insisted. "We're going on to South Carolina to win and then we're going to take this back!"

South Carolina has a majority black Democratic electorate, and Biden leads polling there, riding his popularity among African Americans due in part to his eight years as popular president Barack Obama's deputy.

"Joe to me is like a thoroughbred - a horse that's gonna come in and that's gonna overtake whoever is the favorite," Air Force retiree Wilbert Wilcox told AFP.

"He has the stamina going for him... I'm looking for him to really surprise some people."

Mr Sanders leads national polls with an average of 28 per cent support.

That is 11 points ahead of Biden and 13 points clear of billionaire media tycoon Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York who skipped campaigning in the four early states, including Nevada, in order to focus on Super Tuesday.

Mr Sanders has been largely unchecked by opponents who have focused more on blunting the advance of Bloomberg, who has poured hundreds of millions of dollars of his personal fortune into campaign advertising.

Warren, speaking late Saturday at a large rally in Washington state which votes on March 10, pledged to stay in the fight despite a third straight mediocre showing.

She repeated her attacks on Bloomberg, accusing him of seeking to "buy this election."