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Pennsylvania doesn't hold its primary for three more months. But amid a fluid Democratic presidential race that might not be settled until well after Iowa begins early-state preference voting next week, billionaire Michael Bloomberg is blanketing the airwaves from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh with an unprecedented advertising blitz.

In the two months since he entered the race, the former New York City mayor has already spent \$10.6 million on television and radio advertising across Pennsylvania's six media markets, according to data compiled by the ad-tracking firm Advertising Analytics — an average of more than \$1 million a week.

That's 68% more than all the candidates in the 2016 Democratic and Republican primaries in Pennsylvania spent on television and radio advertising combined (about \$6.3 million in today's dollars). And it's 20% of the roughly \$50 million Hillary Clinton, then-candidate Donald Trump, and outside groups spent on the airwaves in Pennsylvania in the general election.

If Bloomberg keeps airing ads at this pace, as expected, his campaign would be on track to spend about \$25 million in Pennsylvania alone.

"I can't think of this ever happening before, even in a presidential campaign," J.J. Balaban, a Philadelphia-based Democratic media consultant, said of the Bloomberg ad binge.

For good measure, Bloomberg, who is funding his campaign entirely with his own fortune, has spent \$317,000 on Facebook ads in the state, too. He's also building a formidable ground game in Pennsylvania, with 35 staffers in the state already and plans to bring on more than 90. Few of his Democratic rivals are on the air in Pennsylvania, enabling him to pitch his candidacy here without having to compete for voters' attention amid the cacophony of political ads they see on TV in a campaign's final stretch.

The Bloomberg ads highlight his success as a businessman, and promote his plans to expand access to health care, combat climate change, and reduce gun violence. Trump features prominently.

The ad the Bloomberg campaign has run most frequently in the last week — 837 spots over five days — is titled "Defeat Donald Trump." The top programs where the commercial ran were Judge Judy, Good Morning America, and Today, according to Advertising Analytics.

When Bloomberg jumped into the race in November, he made clear that he would not compete in early nominating states like Iowa, which

holds its caucus on Feb. 3 and where his rivals have been campaigning for more than a year.

Instead, he's betting that top-polling candidates like former Vice President Joe Biden, Sens. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, and former South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg will split the early states, giving Bloomberg an opportunity to make a splash in the March 3 "Super Tuesday" primaries. About 40% of the delegates in the Democratic nominating contest will be allocated in the states that vote that day.

Altogether, the Republican-turned-independent-turned-Democrat has spent more than \$250 million to date. He now stands fourth in the average of national polls compiled by RealClearPolitics, with the support of 7.7% of primary voters.

If the race is still up for grabs after Super Tuesday, Pennsylvania and its 186 pledged delegates are likely to loom as a big prize on April 28.

In addition, his ad buys in the Philadelphia market also boost his exposure to voters in Delaware and South Jersey. Delaware votes the same day as Pennsylvania, while the New Jersey primary is June 2.

"It's hard to imagine he won't get a significant percentage of the vote in Pennsylvania," Balaban said. That doesn't mean Bloomberg will win the state, Balaban said, but he'll likely be in a position to pick up some delegates and stay competitive.

The candidates know the Keystone State could end up being decisive in the primary, so Bloomberg likely won't have the airwaves to himself much longer, said John Brabender, a GOP ad maker and veteran of Pennsylvania elections.

"There's going to be a huge reset after Iowa," Brabender said, "and then you might start seeing a lot more advertising in Pennsylvania."

Trump's reelection campaign spent about \$400,000 on broadcast ads in Pennsylvania in the fall but hasn't bought advertising here since then. Other Democratic candidates, like the billionaire hedge-fund manager Tom Steyer, have bought national ads that have appeared in Pennsylvania media markets.

Bloomberg's most expensive ad buy, a minute-long spot that aired for 11 days in January, contrasted Bloomberg's record on health care with Trump's attacks on the Affordable Care Act. "He did it as mayor, he'll get it done as president," a nurse says to the camera. The campaign spent more than \$2 million airing the ad.

"Mayor Bloomberg has committed to the process and to spend whatever resources are necessary to win Pennsylvania and to defeat Donald Trump in November," said Mustafa Rashed, a spokesperson for the campaign in Pennsylvania.

There are limitations to the advertising strategy.

Bloomberg will face any number of hurdles winning the nomination of a party that he only recently joined and that has moved sharply to the left in recent years. Progressives have long criticized his record as mayor on race relations and policing. Days before Bloomberg announced his candidacy, he apologized for the controversial “stop and frisk” policing strategy he championed in New York.

Some self-funding candidates in lower-profile races have found success spending millions on television ads before other campaigns get on the air. In 2014, for example, Gov. Tom Wolf, then a relatively unknown businessman from York County, rocketed to the top of the polls in the Democratic gubernatorial primary by advertising for weeks before his rivals.

But presidential campaigns are different.

“A presidential race is unlike any other race in the sense that the candidates are so often in the news, so often front and center, that ads become a bit less effective,” Brabender said.

In 2016, Trump showed the value of so-called earned media — which refers to news media coverage — generating so much publicity that he didn’t need to spend as much on advertising.

The leading candidates are well-known among Democratic primary voters and have plenty of opportunities to attract voters’ attention — including the debate stage. Bloomberg isn’t accepting campaign contributions and has therefore failed to meet a fund-raising threshold set by the Democratic National Committee required to qualify for the debates.

“Democratic primary voters, just like Republican primary voters, are very large news-watchers, whether it be cable news or in the digital space,” Brabender said. “As much as it seems Bloomberg has the airwaves to himself, he doesn’t.”

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly said Buttigieg is still the South Bend mayor. — ***Philadelphia Inquirer***

