O’rourke officially kicking off campaign
From his El Paso hometown, he’ll try to draw stark contrast with Trump

Beto O’rourke is officially launching his presidential campaign Saturday, heavily focusing on a Texas narrative that he’s used to rise from El Paso council member to groundbreaking Senate candidate to top contender in the Democratic race for the White House.

From his El Paso hometown, O’rourke hopes to draw a stark contrast with President Donald Trump, telling Americans that the nation can do better on many fronts, including developing a compassionate immigration system that secures the border, implementing criminal justice reform — including marijuana legalization — and paying workers a fair wage, as well as helping them access affordable health care.

Given that El Paso is a border community that O’rourke calls one of the safest cities in America, and that Texas has the most uninsured residents in the nation, he considers himself uniquely qualified to be the party’s standard bearer and warrior against the formidable Trump.

“If we’re going to meet these challenges, then we need a democracy that expects and brings out the best from all of us,” O’rourke said during a recent campaign stop in Las Vegas. “If you’re a Democrat or a Republican or an independent, the only thing that matters is that you are an American, a human being and you are here in this country.”

O’rourke will also visit Houston and Austin on Saturday. Several Democratic contenders, including fellow Texan and former Housing Secretary Julián Castro, plan to court the state, which will be a battleground in 2020.

Some Democrats say O’rourke’s Texas ties make him the ideal candidate.

“Trump’s message is, be afraid of immigrants,” said Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins, who worked with O’rourke on a voter turnout plan for North Texas last year. “In Texas, everybody sees the issue differently. People actually want to hear solutions to these issues from somebody who knows what the border is like. He’s a credible voice for the reality of what the future of America can look like.”

Rice University political scientist Mark Jones agreed that O’rourke’s Texas story is a critical component of his campaign.

“It allows him to distinguish himself from all the other candidates,” Jones said. “He has a strong level of experience on border issues and immigration issues.”
O’Rourke has spent two weeks on the campaign trail in early contest states Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada. He played to enthusiastic crowds and garnered significant media attention.

Strong out of the gate
Perhaps just as significant is his stout fundraising. On the first day of his campaign, he raised $6.1 million, more than any of the other candidates on their first days.

The combination of campaign cash, celebrity appeal and early positioning in various polls has made him a top contender for the Democratic presidential nomination.

“He’s positioned himself in the top two candidates who have announced and the top three candidates overall,” Jones said.

A recent poll by Quinnipiac University has O’Rourke trailing former Vice President Joe Biden, who hasn’t entered the race, and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. California Sen. Kamala Harris was fourth, behind O’Rourke. But an Iowa poll had him somewhat dragging, with only 5 percent of the vote.

He’s had some early stumbles. While in Iowa, he had to apologize for joking that his wife raises their three kids “sometimes with my help,” while conceding that he’s white and privileged.

Still, analysts say O’Rourke has been impressive.

“His 2018 Senate campaign and the 2018 result put him in the conservation, along with his ability to raise money,” said Nathan Gonzales, editor and publisher of the nonpartisan Inside Elections newsletter. “He’s going to be a factor.”

Finding common ground
On the campaign trail, O’Rourke has pounded issues of equality and inclusion, including jobs and immigration.

“I want to make sure we rewrite our immigration laws in our own image,” he said. “The image of El Paso, the image of the United States of America.”

O’Rourke is against building Trump’s proposed border wall and wants to provide a path to citizenship for the more than 11 million people in the county without authorization, who he said would “contribute far more than they take” from America.

“I want to make sure that we fulfill our promise, live to our potential and ensure that we bring out the very best from every single one of us.”

The former congressman has said that Americans should not have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet, calling for a minimum wage of at least $15 an hour.

O’Rourke also said he wants the school to prison pipeline in communities of color to end, adding that it’s misguided to convict residents for carrying small amounts of marijuana when states have legalized it.

At various stops, the Democrat advocated for ending gun violence by instituting mandatory background checks and outlawing weapons of war.

O’Rourke also wants the nation to effectively deal with climate change, as well as taking better care of its veterans.

“I want to make sure that at this defining moment of truth ... that we fix our democracy. That will bring a very divided, highly polarized, hyperpartisan country together, not against whom we dislike or want to be afraid of or are anxious about,” O’Rourke said in Las Vegas, “but around the big, defining ambitions that we have in common.”