

Republican primary campaign grows more frenzied as it heads for decisive contests

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With 13 contests over the next ten days, the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination has effectively narrowed to two candidates, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum. The two were neck-and-neck in polling in Arizona and Michigan, where the next two primaries will be held February 28.

These will be followed by caucuses in Washington state March 3, and then 10 state contests on March 6, including primaries in Georgia, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Vermont and Virginia, and caucuses in Alaska, Idaho and North Dakota. Some 539 delegates are stake, nearly half the total of 1,144 required for the nomination.

Romney is still the favorite, with by far the biggest fundraising and largest organization. He also has the open backing of Wall Street and the bulk of the congressional Republican leadership. Santorum has emerged as the ultra-right alternative, with the backing of many of the Tea Party groups, Christian fundamentalists and other so-called “social” conservatives—those fixated on abortion and anti-gay bigotry.

Since Santorum’s victories February 7 in caucuses in Colorado and Minnesota and a non-binding primary in Missouri, he has risen sharply in polls of likely Republican primary voters and caucus-goers, eclipsing former House Speaker Newt Gingrich as the “non-Romney” candidate. Texas congressman Ron Paul places fourth in the polling.

The Republican contests have been decided by tiny groups of voters, as few as one percent of those eligible in some states. As *New York Times* columnist Tim Egan pointed out last week, “the small fraction of Americans who are trying to pick the Republican nominee are old, white, uniformly Christian and

unrepresentative of the nation at large ... when you look at the numbers, it’s stunning how little this Republican primary electorate resembles the rest of the United States.”

The Republican primary process presents a spectacle of ultra-right candidates seeking to distinguish their brand of political and social reaction from the right-wing, pro-corporate and militarist policies of Obama.

While comparatively few voters are involved, huge sums of money have been expended—more than \$60 million just by Romney and his supporting super PAC—and the corporate-controlled media has given the process saturation coverage, including 20 debates televised over cable or network television, the most recent one held Wednesday night in Arizona.

The four Republican candidates are all vying to present themselves as the most right-wing alternative, assailing each other for any deviation on a series of litmus tests: tax cuts for the wealthy, budget cuts in social services, cuts or privatization of entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare, and the entire wish list of the Tea Party and religious right, from banning abortion and gay marriage to restrictions on contraception and witch-hunting immigrant workers.

In the Arizona debate, for instance, all four candidates hailed efforts to militarize the US-Mexican border and the racist legislation adopted by the state of Arizona that authorizes state and local police to stop any person “appearing” foreign to check their papers and immigration status.

The candidates agreed on destroying Medicaid and food stamps by turning them into time-limited programs that would be transferred to state governments as block grants, rather than entitlements. They also agreed on the shutdown of federal agencies like the Department of Education and the

Environmental Protection Agency. They pledged support for expanded offshore oil drilling.

This was combined with fervid militarism, including demands for greatly increased defense spending and military intervention in Syria and Iran. They all criticized the Obama administration, which has escalated the war in Afghanistan and murdered thousands in drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere, for being insufficiently bloodthirsty.

Santorum's rise is based on an appeal to the most deranged elements of the religious right, of which he has long been a spokesman. In the course of the past two weeks he has voiced positions that would—even in the Republican Party of George W. Bush—have been regarded as extreme, if not bizarre.

He condemned public education as a system of “factory schools” and urged the spread of home-schooling. He denounced contraception as immoral and (improbably) the cause of unwed pregnancies. He reiterated a past claim that “Satan” was targeting the United States, while warning that Obama was “systematically trying to crush the traditional Judeo-Christian values of America.” A Santorum campaign spokeswoman referred to the “extreme Islamic” values of the president, then claimed she had misspoken.

Romney has responded to his own drop in the polls—particularly in Michigan, where he was born and his father was a moderate Republican governor in the 1960s—not by distancing himself from Santorum's fundamentalist tub-thumping, but by shifting even further to the right on social issues and making an increasingly desperate appeal to his financial industry peers.

This culminated in an op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal* Thursday where he laid out a plan for a further sharp cut in taxes on the wealthy and corporations. The *Journal* responded with an approving editorial. “Now that he has the right policy,” the editors advised, “Mr. Romney's main challenge will be selling it without apology. He has resisted tax cuts for individuals lest he be criticized for helping the rich, and he sometimes sounds guilty about his own wealth.”

The only significant differences in the Republican field have been voiced by Ron Paul, who adopts the most right-wing positions on economic and social policy, calling for the virtual dismantling of federal government functions outside of the military, while

declaring his opposition to US military intervention in the Middle East on the basis of isolationism.

Paul's function in the campaign—besides attracting an extremely ill-informed layer of college youth who take his “antiwar” posture for good coin—seems now to serve as a Romney surrogate. He has invariably focused his attacks not on the hedge fund multi-millionaire and his Wall Street connections, but on whichever of the remaining candidates seemed likely to emerge as a potential alternative to Romney.

During January, this meant launching an advertising barrage against Gingrich, charging him with being insufficiently right-wing during his years in the House of Representatives. In February, the Paul campaign shifted its focus to Santorum, echoing the attacks of Romney on Santorum's votes on spending bills while in the Senate.

This reached the point of an alliance during the debate Wednesday night in Arizona that was so obvious that both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* used identical language, describing the combination of Paul and Romney against Santorum as a “tag team.”



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