

Romney tightening grip on Republican presidential nomination

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The campaign for the Republican presidential nomination ends its third month of primaries and caucuses with no change in the relative standing of the four remaining candidates: former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney with a sizable lead, former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum a distant second, and former House speaker Newt Gingrich and Texas congressman Ron Paul trailing badly.

Romney won the Illinois primary March 20 and Santorum the Louisiana primary March 24, with the winner in each case taking just under 50 percent of the vote. Santorum won 35 percent of the vote in finishing second in Illinois and carried most of the rural counties, but could not overcome the large lead piled up by Romney in the Chicago suburbs. Romney was a poor second in Louisiana, winning only one county, Orleans Parish, which includes the city of New Orleans.

There was a slight increase in the number of votes cast in both states compared to the same contests in 2008, but percentage turnout continued at the low levels that have prevailed throughout the Republican primary campaign, demonstrating the deep alienation of the vast majority of the American people from both big business parties. In most populous county in Louisiana, East Baton Rouge Parish, just over 19,000 voted in the Republican primary, compared to 95,000 who voted for Republican candidate John McCain in November 2008.

As has been the case throughout the contest, Romney did far better than Santorum in last week's delegate count, not merely because Illinois is a larger state, but because of superior financial and organizational resources. Illinois split its delegates 41-10 in favor of Romney, while Santorum won a bare 10-5 margin among Louisiana delegates, with the rest either uncommitted or remaining to be selected at a state convention. Gingrich and Paul failed to win a single

delegate in either Illinois or Louisiana.

The financial and organizational disparity was particularly noticeable in Illinois, where the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "Money didn't just talk, it shouted from Chicago's highest rooftops. Romney outspent Santorum 7 to 1 statewide, and more than 21 to 1 in the metropolitan area, airing an endless barrage of negative advertising that the former senator could not overcome."

Of the 17 primaries or caucuses in the month of March, Romney won nine compared to eight for Santorum, but Romney gained the lion's share of the delegates selected and is now estimated to be far ahead in the contest to gain the 1,144 delegates required for the nomination.

The first three months of primaries and caucuses have laid bare a regional split in the Republican Party, with Santorum or Gingrich carrying every contest in the South, except Virginia, where neither was on the ballot, and Florida. Meanwhile, Romney has won every contest in the Northeast and Great Lakes states, heading into the Wisconsin primary April 3.

Romney's delegate lead has been accompanied by a trickle of endorsements for the former Massachusetts governor, albeit with little display of enthusiasm. Former Florida governor Jeb Bush, brother of the former president, announced his endorsement of Romney the day after his victory in Illinois, but it was made over Twitter with a brief accompanying statement, and no joint appearance.

Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy of California, the third-ranking Republican in the House of Representatives, issued an endorsement March 26. Other Republican officials said that the contest was effectively over and hailed Romney as the likely nominee, including ultra-right senator Jim DeMint of

South Carolina and former Mississippi governor and Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour.

FreedomWorks, a major sponsor of the ultra-right Tea Party groups, backed financially by the billionaire Koch brothers, indicated that it would no longer oppose Romney's nomination. Another ultra-right billionaire, construction mogul Bob Perry, who financed the "Swift boat" smear campaign against Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004, made his first large donation to Romney, pumping \$3 million into the Restore Our Future super-PAC.

The political trajectory of the Republican nomination contest continues further and further to the right, with Santorum and Gingrich, in particular, making increasingly strident appeals to primary voters drawn almost entirely from the most bigoted and reactionary social layers.

According to an analysis of exit poll data published by author Thomas Edsall Tuesday in the online edition of the *New York Times*, more than half of all Republican primary voters, 4.29 million out of 8.49 million, were evangelical Christians, up from 44 percent in 2008. Primary voters were almost exclusively white, largely middle-aged or elderly, and a majority identified themselves as very conservative.

Santorum held a series of weekend rallies in Wisconsin, site of the next Midwestern primary on April 3, and vowed to use his campaign to build support for Republican Governor Scott Walker, who faces a recall election in June because of his attacks on state and local government workers, whose benefits and pensions he slashed last year.

On Monday Santorum travelled to Washington DC to join right-wing groups demonstrating outside the Supreme Court against the Obama health care program. He declared that the reelection of Obama and the full implementation of his health care program would mean "the end of freedom as we know it."

This hysterical language is not directed at Obama's actual attacks on democratic rights, such as the proclamation of a presidential "right" to assassinate any individual he designates as a "terrorist" suspect, or his buildup of the spy powers of the federal government. Santorum and Romney pledge to do even more in this sphere.

Rather, Santorum is appealing to fascistic elements

who regard even Obama's empty promise of expanding access to medical care—in a program whose real purpose is to slash government and corporate spending on health services—as a step towards "socialized medicine."

The ultra-right takes advantage of the steady shift to the right on the part of Obama and the Democrats, which has taken the form of one concession after another on social policy: a health care "reform" program based on slashing spending, embrace of the goal of deficit reduction through cuts in vital social programs, and most recently, the cave-in to the campaign by the Catholic Church for its "right" to veto contraception benefits for employees of church-run hospitals and colleges.

At every step, the Democrat in the White House legitimizes the ultra-right nostrums of the Republican right and seeks to confine official politics to the narrow differences that separate his policies from those of his semi-fascist opponents, excluding any consideration of alternatives based on the interests of working people.

Longstanding democratic principles are under attack, like the separation of church and state, but there is no significant constituency for the defense of these principles in any section of the bourgeois political establishment. On the contrary, Obama is running for reelection citing the killing of Osama bin Laden and similar assassinations as his highest achievement, along with "saving" General Motors through massive cuts in the jobs, wages and benefits of auto workers.



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