

Romney builds lead in Republican presidential contest

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With most votes counted from the seven primaries and three caucuses held March 6, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney has widened his lead in the contest for the Republican Party presidential nomination.

Romney won a majority of the delegates awarded on “Super Tuesday,” and has accumulated more than double the total of his nearest competitor, former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum.

Going into the voting Tuesday, Romney led with 203 delegates to 92 for Santorum, 33 for Gingrich and 25 for Paul. The results of Tuesday’s contests increased each candidate’s total but did not change their relative order. CNN projected the delegate counts as Romney 404, Santorum 165, Gingrich 106 and Paul 66.

Three of the four Republican presidential candidates won at least one primary on Tuesday, with Romney winning narrowly in Ohio, and by wide margins in Massachusetts, his home state, in neighboring Vermont, and in Virginia, where Santorum and former House speaker Newt Gingrich failed to get on the ballot.

Santorum won in Tennessee and Oklahoma, where Christian fundamentalists make up the bulk of the Republican primary electorate. Gingrich won only his home state of Georgia, which had the largest delegate total of the ten states, 76.

Among the caucus states, Santorum won in North Dakota, while Romney won easily in Idaho, with its large Mormon population, and in Alaska. Santorum finished second in Idaho and Alaska, despite the efforts of Texas congressman Ron Paul, who focused his campaign on efforts to mobilize supporters for the lightly attended events in rural states.

While Romney and Santorum won comparable vote totals in the six primary states where they were both on the ballot, Romney’s huge financial advantage gave

him a significant share of the delegates even in states where he trailed, because he had the paid staff and organization to make up for the lack of popular enthusiasm for his campaign.

Voter turnout in Virginia was barely half that of 2008, while in Vermont and Massachusetts there was also a falloff from four years ago, but of a lesser amount. Turnout in Georgia and Tennessee was virtually the same as in 2008, while turnout in Ohio and Oklahoma rose slightly.

The overall decline in voter participation in the Republican nomination process compared to 2008, with nearly half the primaries and caucuses completed, is an indication of the deep alienation of the American population from both big business parties, the Democrats as well as the Republicans. President Obama has an approval rating as low as 43 percent in recent polls, while all of his prospective Republican opponents have negative approval/disapproval ratings overall.

The week leading up to Super Tuesday, following Romney’s victories in Arizona and Michigan February 28, continued the trend of the Republican campaign so far. Each of the candidates criticized the others from the right and sought to stake out more reactionary positions on domestic social policy and more militaristic positions of foreign policy, except for Ron Paul, the most right-wing on economic issues, whose foreign policy is isolationist.

Romney continued his effort to ingratiate himself with ultra-right Christian fundamentalists, many of whom regard his Mormon religion with suspicion and prejudice. He has repeatedly declined to criticize Santorum for his open rejection of the separation of church and state.

At the same time, the hedge fund multi-millionaire

has presented himself as the savior of the US economy, despite the preeminent role that speculators and financial operators like himself played in the 2008 Wall Street crash that triggered the global economic slump.

Santorum has likewise postured as the friend of the jobless industrial worker, citing his coal-miner grandfather, his only connection to the working class. The former senator became a wealthy Washington influence peddler after losing his Senate seat in 2006, and racked up a million-dollar annual income lobbying for health care and mining companies, among others.

Gingrich, after largely disappearing from contests in February, apparently aims to use the Georgia victory to become a southern-based regional candidate, focusing on primaries in Alabama and Mississippi March 13, and later in Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas. His speeches in Georgia and Tennessee raised repeatedly the call for “state’s rights,” the watchword of the segregationist south in the 1960s, and a slogan still associated with the extreme right.

Romney, Santorum and Gingrich all made video appearances before the conference of the America Israel Political Action Committee in Washington Tuesday, as voters were going to the polls elsewhere, and each denounced the Obama administration for being insufficiently warlike against Iran. This came only two days after Obama’s own speech to AIPAC, in which the president pledged to “use all elements of American power to pressure Iran and prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapons.”

The past week saw a handful of new endorsements of Romney by key figures in the Republican political establishment, including Congressman Eric Cantor of Virginia, the House Majority Leader, and Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, as well as former Bush attorney general John Ashcroft.

None of these endorsements had much impact, as Romney trailed badly in Oklahoma and won Virginia by default. The most critical advantage for the former Massachusetts governor is his \$100 million war chest, if one counts both the funds raised directly by Romney’s campaign and the funds collected by the super-PAC devoted to promoting his candidacy. Romney is also holding in reserve his own personal fortune, estimated at \$250 million, giving him financial resources that dwarf those of all his rivals combined.

Ron Paul and his super PAC had raised \$34.3 million,

Gingrich and his super PAC \$31.2 million, and Santorum and his super PAC only \$9.5 million through January 31. Santorum raised an additional \$9 million in February, his aides claimed, capitalizing on his victories February 7 in Minnesota, Colorado and Missouri and subsequent rise in the polls.



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