

An impressive showing by Rick Santorum?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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It's rare for me to disagree with Mark Silk and rarer still for me to agree with Erick Erickson. But that's where I'm at when it comes to the politics of Rick Santorum's strong showing in Iowa on Tuesday.

Santorum won the support of 32 percent of evangelical caucus goers. "For a conservative Catholic running against two strenuous evangelical candidates (Bachmann and Perry) and an idiosyncratic one (Paul)," [says Silk](#), "that's an impressive performance--really, an historic one." Silk predicts that Santorum, who also won among Tea Partiers, could give Romney some real trouble on his right flank.

Except that there's little reason to believe that Santorum's newfound success is based on much more than a brief flash of luck. He's the latest in a succession of candidates to emerge as the solidly conservative, non-Mormon alternative to Romney, and his moment happened to arrive just in time for Iowa. In the media-driven narrative of primary season, Bachmann and Perry are long since has-beens--a fact that accounts for Santorum's success, among evangelicals and otherwise, far more than his own skills and efforts do.

And as Erickson [points out](#), Santorum's efforts in Iowa were tireless. He visited every county, some more than once. For this he did well, but not *that* well. In a midwestern state stacked with conservative evangelicals, he finished between the east-coast Mormon patrician and the antiwar guy who wants to let drug users out of jail.

Yes, Romney only beat Santorum by eight votes, and yes, they won the same number of delegates. But the Iowa circus is almost entirely about momentum, and second by a hair is at some level still just second. And what about all the close scrutiny that Santorum will no longer be able to evade?

New Hampshire, unlike Iowa, is great territory for Romney. So it's difficult at this point to imagine anyone else getting the nomination. If Santorum can hang onto the anti-Romney baton longer than the others have--and it's not at all clear that he can--there may be a running-mate slot in it for him. If so, it will demonstrate that he's a less implausible candidate than Bachmann and Perry were, for whatever that's worth.

It will also show yet again that, contrary to persistent rumors of its demise, the religious right remains a political force. Of course, it might be less of one--at least in presidential elections--were it not for the absurdity of the process. Iowa goes first--giving the state staggering influence over the national race--so everyone makes a play for conservative evangelicals. The media narrative is all about frontrunners and surging challengers, and tough luck if your moment comes and goes too soon. And a candidate can surge quickly from a nonfactor to nearly winning in Iowa based on little more than the fact that, as Erickson puts it, "all the others sucked so bad."

And just like that, Rick Santorum's on TV all week.

It's going to be a long year.