

Santorum shows the Religious Right isn't dead yet

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(RNS) Does Rick Santorum's Southern surge also herald the return of the Religious Right?

Last January, the titans of Christian conservatism were widely dismissed as irrelevant, at best, after 150 of them gathered for an evangelical "conclave" at a Texas ranch and anointed Rick Santorum as their champion -- only to see him finish third in rock-ribbed South Carolina a week later, well behind Newt Gingrich and even their least-loved candidate, Mitt Romney.

Now, however, with Santorum on an roll after big primary wins on Tuesday (March 13) in Alabama and Mississippi, those born-again bigwigs and their allies may be having the last laugh.

"People have been writing the obituary of the pro-family, evangelical movement for 25 years -- and they're always wrong," said Ralph Reed, head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition and the architect of the Christian Coalition in the 1980s.

Marjorie Dannenfelser, head of the Susan B. Anthony List, which spent \$500,000 boosting Santorum's candidacy ahead of Tuesday's primaries, said the formula is quite simple: "social issues are winning issues."

"Voters in Alabama and Mississippi reflected upon who represents and has already fought for their values. They chose Santorum," she said. "That's why he is winning."

Maggie Gallagher, an influential crusader against gay marriage, said voters "trust" Santorum's "core values." And that trust -- and enthusiasm -- is beginning to register in the form of election returns.

Reed noted that in 2008, about 44 percent of self-described evangelicals -- the core of the Christian right and the GOP base -- turned out to vote in the GOP primaries; this year that number could approach 50 percent.

Ironically, those evangelical votes -- as well as those of all Republicans who say characters and morals are important -- are going to Santorum, a Catholic, while Romney rarely wins the evangelical nod.

That difference was the reason for Santorum's surprisingly strong wins on Tuesday, giving him a total of nine victories in primaries and caucuses. That's one more than erstwhile evangelical favorite Mike Huckabee got in 2008, providing a momentum that is pushing Santorum into breakout territory.

"There has never been a conviction politician, an insurgent Christian conservative, who has won this many (primaries) since Ronald Reagan in 1976," said Reed.

"These voters have been looking for a horse to ride for more than a year. They're saddled up and ready to go."

The support of the evangelical political establishment is also important, and growing. Not only did Dannenfelser's SBA List invest big money and volunteer hours into Santorum's bid, many of the Christian leaders from last January's summit were part of another gathering last weekend in Texas with Santorum where some 200 conservatives pledged to raise at least \$1.78 million for his campaign and SuperPAC.

"There was a big push to raise funds. There was a sense of, 'Now is the time to step up'," evangelical Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council, told Politico about the closed-door meeting.

Perkins has also been involved in the next crucial step in bolstering Santorum's candidacy -- namely, nudging Gingrich out of the race and consolidating social conservatives behind Santorum as the anti-Romney.

It won't be easy, since Gingrich is nothing if not stubborn. And pushing him too far could backfire with his diehard Christian supporters.

The delegate math for Santorum is tough as well, but perceptions count as much as reality at this point. The upcoming calendar may also help Santorum

shape the narrative: Missouri, a key electoral prize whose conservative Christians helped Santorum win last month's Republican primary, holds caucuses on Saturday to apportion delegates.

In addition, Santorum appears to be surging going into Illinois's key primary on March 20 thanks to rural downstate conservatives -- many of them evangelicals. The Louisiana primary is four days later on March 24, and "could provide Santorum with another belt of Southern comfort," as Democratic strategist Ed Kilgore put it.

If Santorum finds a way to beat Romney -- not to mention beat Obama in November -- it would be an unprecedented boost for the Religious Right.

Outcomes, however, are almost as irrelevant as they are unpredictable. Even if Santorum finishes second to Romney, his successes so far have made his point, and ensured that Christian conservatives cannot be ignored -- and their leaders have to be heeded.