

McCain tops Romney in Florida

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Photo by Mark Garfinkel



Virginia's Center for Politics.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - Arizona Sen. John McCain scored a critical win in Florida's bellwether GOP presidential primary last night, beating back a deep-pocketed challenge from former Bay State Gov. **Mitt Romney** as the race speeds into multi-primary Super Duper Tuesday.

"It shows one thing. I'm the conservative leader who can unite the party," the Arizona senator told The Associated Press.

McCain took last night's winner-take-all contest by a comfortable margin, getting 36 percent of the votes to 31 percent for Romney. But the results landed a severe blow to former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who finished a distant third after ignoring early primaries and caucuses while seeking a Florida mandate that never came.

"This gives McCain real momentum for the biggest primary day in American history," said Larry Sabato, head of the University of

There was widespread speculation last night that Giuliani would exit the race as early as today and travel to California to stump for McCain, who notched important victories in first-in-the-nation New Hampshire and the first-in-the-South primary in South Carolina. The two camps were reportedly in talks throughout yesterday. Giuliani used the past tense to refer to his campaign in a speech last night, and McCain also hinted at Giuliani's departure, saying in his victory speech, "Thank you, Rudy, for all that you have added to this race."

"The battle may come down to a two-man race between the man with the money and the man with the momentum," said Christopher C. Hull, Georgetown University political science professor, adding, "The winner of Florida is very likely to be the nominee of the Republican Party."

Meanwhile, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton claimed victory in the Democratic race, although no delegates were at stake after the party punished the state for moving up the date of primary without permission.

A survey of voters leaving the polls showed the economy was the top issue for nearly half of Republicans, which experts say benefitted Romney because of his business background.

But the former governor could not pile up enough support for a win he had hoped would re-energize his campaign with new momentum heading into balloting in nearly two dozen states on Feb. 5 - the closest thing in American history to a national primary day.

Romney had dominated the airwaves in Florida with more ads than any of his opponents and almost 10 times McCain's. Since March, Romney aired 4,475 spots, followed by 3,067 for Giuliani and McCain with 470, according to Nielsen Monitor-Plus.

"At a time like this, America needs a president in the White House who has actually had a job in the real economy," the former businessman told supporters in St. Petersburg after last night's McCain win.

Looking ahead, McCain leads Romney in delegate-rich California by some 15 points. And while McCain also leads by wide margins in New York and possibly New Jersey, he will have trouble keeping up with Romney's deep-pocketed ad war, Sabato said.

Sabato said Romney will be "laughed out of the race" if he doesn't win Massachusetts on Feb. 5. "That would kill him," he said.