

www.chicagotribune.com/news/politics/chi-repubs\_webjan19,1,2753972.story

# chicagotribune.com

CAMPAIGN 2008

## GOP ready for S.C. test

By Tim Jones

Tribune correspondent

9:08 AM CST, January 19, 2008

COLUMBIA, S.C

The first voice of presidential preference from the South will be heard Saturday, and whatever voters in South Carolina's Republican primary say, most of them will have Ronald Reagan in mind when they select among the hybrid conservative candidates claiming to be rightful heir of the Reagan legacy.

The absence of a Reagan-like consensus candidate is one reason why there have been three separate winners in the three major primary and caucus contests this month. And the outcome in culturally conservative and military-minded South Carolina could say a lot about where the solid Republican South is headed in this uncharacteristically jumbled early primary season.

On the eve of Saturday's vote, polls indicated a tight competition between Sen. John McCain, the former Vietnam War POW who won in New Hampshire, and ex-Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, the upstart who rode a blend of populism and evangelism to victory in Iowa.

Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor and Michigan winner who invested heavily in South Carolina starting in 2006, effectively gave up Thursday and took his campaign to Nevada, which is holding caucuses on Saturday.

And Fred Thompson, the actor and ex-U.S. senator from Tennessee, has yet to justify the advance billing that suggested he is the second coming of Reagan.

"I think it's really irrelevant," argued Oran Smith, executive director and president of the Palmetto Family Council, a non-profit advocacy group that promotes family issues. "No one is going to be able to capture the Reagan magic. It was a one-time thing."

But that does not deter the candidates, who differ little on the major issues, from invoking Reagan's name—and even his favorite mannerisms— at campaign stops. Romney, who speaks with almost impeccable diction, makes a point of saying "gubment" instead of government.



The Republican winner in South Carolina (Democrats will hold their primary Jan. 26) could lay claim to this election's son-of-the-South status, as well as gain some momentum heading into Florida's primary, Jan. 29.

"If a candidate doesn't do well in South Carolina, it's going to be held against him," said Susan McManus, a political scientist at the University of South Florida. "That puts a lot of the onus on Huckabee."

Campaigning at Spartanburg's Wofford College on Friday, Huckabee said he needs a win in South Carolina, "but I don't think there's anybody running for president who can better understand what it's like to live in a southern state like South Carolina."

Huckabee, with political traits of William Jennings Bryan and Huey Long, is banking on social conservatives and the economically disaffected to win the state. But Huckabee, who served 10 years as Arkansas' governor, has been attacked for his tax policies.

McCain stumped the eastern half of the state and said he is confident of victory. Aboard the USS York in Charleston, the Arizona senator described himself as "a foot soldier in the Reagan revolution." McCain is popular among South Carolina veterans, but he is viewed with some suspicion by evangelicals and some conservatives who see him as too much of a maverick.

Thompson was in Spartanburg, telling a restaurant crowd that he is a champion of states' rights, lower taxes, cutting the deficit and a "100 percent pro-life agenda." But polls show Thompson's leisurely campaign has not ignited much interest.

Tribune correspondents Jill Zuckman in Charleston, and Lisa Anderson and Jason George in Spartanburg, contributed to this report.

[tmjones@tribune.com](mailto:tmjones@tribune.com)

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](http://chicagotribune.com)