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Crucial tests for candidates today: Nevada, South Carolina

By Seattle Times news services

Stakes are high for the presidential candidates today in South Carolina and Nevada.

It's the preacher vs. the patriot in the crucial South Carolina Republican primary: Ever since Ronald Reagan in 1980, the winner of this contest has gone on to win the party's presidential nomination, and often the presidency.



TIM DOMINICK / MCCLATCHY
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A crowd at Carolinas Hospital System in Florence, S.C., cheers Sen. John McCain on Friday ahead of today's primary.

Meanwhile, in Nevada, two leading Democratic candidates used Reagan as a tool to bash another front-runner.

The absence of a unifying consensus Republican candidate is one reason there have been separate winners in the three major primary and caucus contests this month. 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 today's vote, polls showed a tight competition between Sen. John McCain, the former Vietnam War POW who won in New Hampshire, and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who rode a blend of populism and evangelism to victory in Iowa.

Fred Thompson, the actor and former 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," said Oran Smith, executive director and president of the Palmetto Family Council, a nonprofit advocacy group that promotes family issues. "No one is going to be able to capture the Reagan magic."

Alone among the Republicans, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney campaigned in Nevada on Friday in an effort to sweep the state's neglected GOP presidential caucuses, also being held today.

Romney's strategists hope a Nevada victory would add to the perception of momentum from his decisive victory in Michigan on Tuesday.

The three leading Democratic contenders in Nevada, meanwhile, had some of their sharpest exchanges of the campaign Friday as they made their final pitches before their party's caucuses today. Nevada is playing a prominent early role in the party's nomination process for the first time.

New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards jumped on Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, who was quoted telling the Reno Gazette-Journal editorial board that Republican President Reagan "changed the trajectory of America in a way that Bill Clinton did not" and that the GOP had been the "party of ideas" for the past 15 years.

"That's not the way I remember the last 10 to 15 years," Clinton said in Las Vegas, adding that the GOP had driven the nation into debt and proposed privatizing Social Security, among other ideas she considers bad.

"Ronald Reagan is not an example of change for a presidential candidate running in the Democratic Party," Edwards said in Las Vegas. He called the late president "the man who busted unions, the man who did everything in his power to destroy the organized-labor movement, the man who created a tax structure that favored the richest Americans."

Obama, meanwhile, questioned whether Clinton was being straightforward with voters. He cited her economic-stimulus plan, which he suggested she had copied from him by adding a tax rebate he had proposed.

"The American people don't want a president whose plans change with the politics of the moment," Obama said.

Nevada is a vital, if not essential, prize for Obama and Clinton. A victory for Obama would blunt Clinton's upset in New Hampshire and help erode her leads in big Feb. 5 states, especially neighboring California.

For Clinton, a victory would salve the pain of a possible loss next week in South Carolina, where Obama enjoys a double-digit lead buoyed by overwhelming support among black voters.

Both campaigns are fighting hard in Nevada, but neither has invested the tens of millions they poured into the first two contests, according to sources in both camps.

The Republican winner in South Carolina (Democrats will hold their primary Jan. 26), meanwhile, could lay claim to the election's son-of-the-South status and 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 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 is banking on social conservatives and the economically disaffected to win the state. But he has been attacked for his tax policies while he was governor of Arkansas.

McCain stumped in 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.

In Nevada, Republicans will caucus at 100 sites scattered throughout the state, about one-third in metropolitan Las

Vegas.

Party officials expect 30,000 to 40,000 participants to show up at the caucuses, which have not been held on the GOP side for 20 years.

Democrats, meanwhile, will caucus at 520 sites across the state, mostly schools, churches and community centers near where voters live, though there will be nine "at-large" caucus sites in casinos for shift workers.

Material from Newsday, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Associated Press and the Chicago Tribune is included in this report.

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