

Focus shifts to Sunshine State

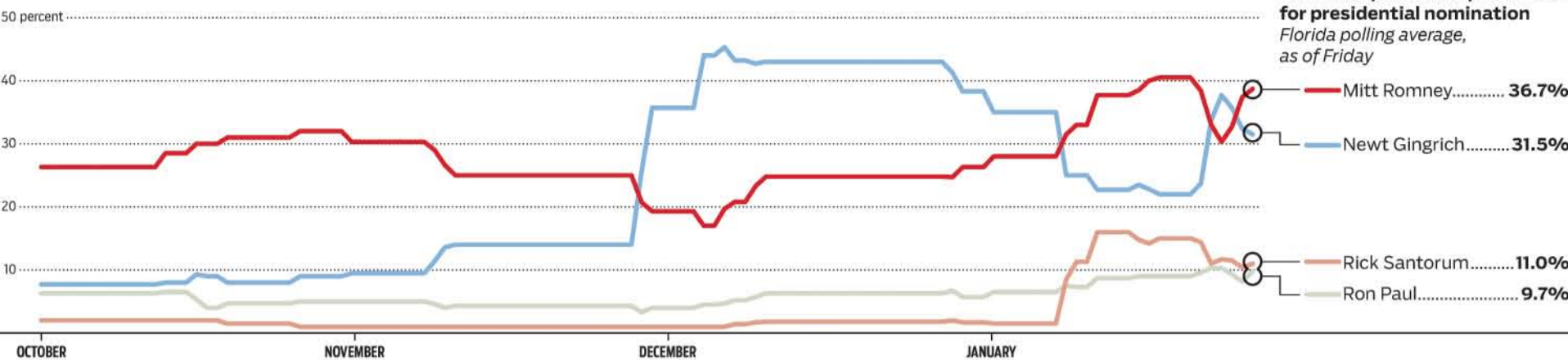
By **MAX RUST AND CHAD YODER** | Tribune Newspapers graphics

The battle for the Republican presidential nomination continues south Tuesday to delegate-rich Florida, which is expected to be an important battleground in November.

Most Republicans in the key swing state are expected to choose between front-runners Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney, who have stepped up attacks on each other as

the race has tightened in recent weeks. With Florida's large, diverse population, the results here could signal the shape of the race in the weeks ahead.

Polling in Florida



Newt Gingrich

The former House speaker has gone on the attack, jabbing at Mitt Romney's finances, his political past and ads backing the former Massachusetts governor. He portrays himself as the most likely victor in November and has been working hard to secure support from Florida's conservative Cuban-Americans.



Ron Paul

The Texas representative has vowed to press on after his fourth-place finish in the South Carolina primary, but aside from attending Florida debates, he has not expended many resources in the state. He is instead focusing on Maine.



Mitt Romney

The sometimes front-runner has been trying to re-energize his supporters while attention has been focused on his financial disclosures. He has been actively courting the state's large base of Hispanic GOP voters, securing endorsements from key political figures.



Rick Santorum

After finishing third in South Carolina, the former Pennsylvania senator opened his Florida effort by taking hard shots at Romney and Gingrich. He continues to insist the race is wide-open and to try to sell himself as the true conservative in the field.

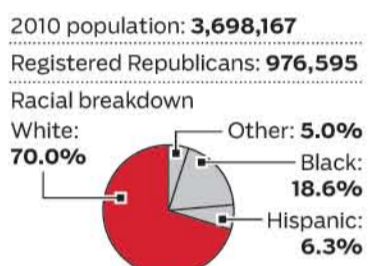


Florida's political landscape

To some degree, home-field advantage has played a role in the candidates' election victories thus far (at least for Romney in the Northeast and Gingrich in the South). But that ends Tuesday in one of the largest, most complex and most diverse states on the road to the nomination.

The North: A lot like the "Old South"

Florida's northern swath is its most traditionally American Southern region, home to a large percentage of native Floridians and to many of Florida's rural residents. It is also home to the state's most religious and conservative groups, making it fertile campaigning ground for Gingrich and Santorum. With two of the state's major colleges (Florida State in Tallahassee and the University of Florida in Gainesville), it is also one of the few places where youth-energized Paul can expect to win votes.

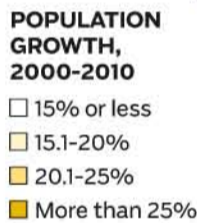
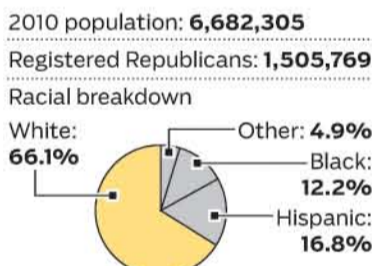


2012 Republican primary, caucus calendar

- Jan. 31:** Florida (50 delegates)
- Feb. 4:** Maine, Nevada (52)
- Feb. 7:** Colorado, Minnesota, Northern Marianas (85)
- Feb. 28:** Arizona, Michigan (59)
- March 3:** Washington (43)
- March 6 (Super Tuesday):** Alaska, Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Wyoming (466)
- March 10:** Guam, Kansas, Virgin Islands (58)
- March 13:** Alabama, American Samoa, Hawaii, Mississippi (119)
- March 17:** Missouri (52)
- March 18:** Puerto Rico* (23)
- March 20:** Illinois (69)
- March 24:** Louisiana (46)
- April 3:** District of Columbia, Maryland, Texas*, Wisconsin (253)
- April 24:** Connecticut, Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island (231)
- May 8:** Indiana, North Carolina, West Virginia (132)
- May 15:** Nebraska*, Oregon (63)
- May 22:** Arkansas, Kentucky (81)
- June 5:** California, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, South Dakota (299)
- June 26:** Utah (40)
- August 27-30:** Republican National Convention in Tampa, Fla.

Interstate 4 Corridor: A crucial battleground

The stretch from St. Petersburg-Tampa to Orlando is one of the fastest-growing areas in the U.S. and also home to Florida's most diverse voting population. With two of the state's largest media markets containing nearly half of all registered Republicans, this chunk of the Sunshine State is ground zero for political jousting between Romney and Gingrich. A large influx of Northerners in recent years has pushed Florida's midsection closer to the political left, so whoever wins here will likely face an even bigger challenge in the fall.



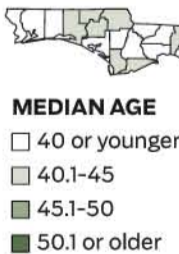
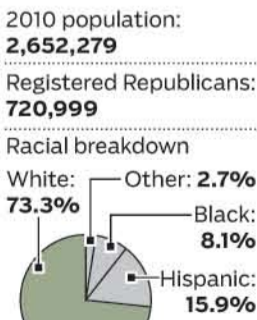
Florida GOP primary history

Florida took on increased importance when it moved its primary up to January in 2008.

Jan. 29, 2008	
John McCain	701,761
Mitt Romney	604,932
Rudy Giuliani	286,089
Mike Huckabee	262,681
Ron Paul	62,887
Fred Thompson	22,668
Other	8,480
March 14, 2000	
George W. Bush	516,161
John McCain	139,397
Alan Keyes	32,343
Steve Forbes	6,552
Other	4,864
March 12, 1996	
Bob Dole	511,108
Steve Forbes	181,708
Pat Buchanan	162,713
Alan Keyes	16,618
Lamar Alexander	14,101
Other	11,822
March 8, 1988	
George H.W. Bush	559,197
Bob Dole	191,391
Pat Robertson	95,001
Jack Kemp	41,746
Other	12,556
March 11, 1980	
Ronald Reagan	345,093
George H.W. Bush	185,527
John B. Anderson	56,447
Phil Crane	11,974
Other	14,544

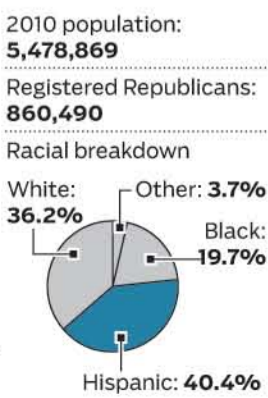
The South: Moderates on the coast

A large number of retirees from the Midwest (on the west coast), and to a lesser degree the Northeast (on the east), make this region home to one of Florida's oldest and whitest populations. Like Florida's North population, this is a traditionally GOP-voting demographic, but unlike northern Republicans, residents here are more moderate and less socially conservative. Although that trend could bode well for Romney, like the I-4 corridor to the north, votes here are also up for grabs.



Miami Metro

The most urban, densely populated corner of Florida is almost always a Democratic stronghold, but with 21 percent of all registered Republicans in the state, these three counties will play a significant role in deciding Tuesday's winner. The candidates' biggest target is the staunchly republican Cuban-American voting bloc, but a new generation of Cuban-Americans who are not as concerned with the Castro regime is changing the group's political profile. Romney should fare well here among the large number of retirees from the New York and Boston areas who are familiar with him and more socially moderate.



KEY BLOCS
Their high percentages make Cubans and Jews two highly sought-after voting groups in the region.

Percentage of population

Jews (2000)
Miami Metro: **10.1%**
U.S. total: **2.2%**

Cubans (2010)
Miami Metro: **16.9%**
U.S. total: **0.56%**

SOURCES: William Frey, The Brookings Institution; Susan MacManus, University of South Florida; Carol Weissert, Florida State University; Joseph Uscinski, University of Miami; U.S. Census Bureau; Glenmary Research Center; RealClearPolitics; National Association of Secretaries of State; The Green Papers

NOTE: Registered Republican figures are the number registered for Tuesday's primary.