

GOP Race Comes Down to Battle in Florida

Donald Trump has a super night against divided opposition.



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🕒 March 1, 2016, 10:19 p.m.

For Republican leaders still dead-set on preventing Donald Trump from winning their party's presidential nomination, it has come down to Florida.

With 99 delegates all awarded to the winner, the state's primary in two weeks is almost certainly the last chance to slow the victory roll of the developer-turned-reality-TV-star.

"He will utterly destroy the conservative movement and the Republican Party," warned Rick Wilson, a Florida Republican strategist and ad-maker who supports Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida in the race and has

long sounded the alarm about Trump. He advocated an all-out advert-

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florida
donald trump
Candidate
Super Tuesday
rick wilson
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ising blitz to damage Trump's standing over the next two weeks, something that would cost at least \$20 million.

"Marco can still be the nominee, but it's not going to be easy," Wilson said. "Our donor world has to wake up today."

Of course, Ohio Gov. John Kasich can argue that his home state also has a winner-take-all primary on March 15 and he is well positioned to win its 66 delegates, while Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas can point to states where he's recorded actual victories: his home state, plus Oklahoma on Tuesday night, and first-in-the-nation Iowa last month.

But, even after a disappointing Super Tuesday, Rubio remained the party establishment's darling as the last, best hope for stopping Trump and beating likely Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton this November. It's a theme Rubio himself picked up in an Election Night speech from Miami.

"Two weeks from tonight, right here, we are going to send a message loud and clear," he said.

Of course, a Rubio win in his home state may not be enough. Four other states vote that day, awarding another 250 delegates—meaning that even if Rubio wins Florida and Kasich wins Ohio, Trump could still add a substantial number of delegates to his lead.

And between now and March 15 are nearly a dozen other contests that among them will award 356 delegates. Only Puerto Rico's March 6 primary, with its 23 delegates, appears favorable to Rubio.

Democratic consultant Steve Schale, who engineered Barack Obama's general-election victory in Florida in 2008, said that while he personally hopes somebody can defeat Trump—"I think I'd rather lose to Marco Rubio [in the general election] than have the possibility that Trump could be president"—he is not optimistic that Rubio can win the Florida primary, given its history through the years.

"The national front-runner has always won Florida. And the person who's won the most states has always won Florida," Schale said. "Florida has very much been a validation state in the primary."

The focus on Florida and Rubio comes after his failure to win Virginia Tuesday night, even after spending considerable time and energy there in recent days. Rubio finished second or close to second in three of the four early-state contests, and even strong supporters have grown nervous about his ability to actually win primaries and gather enough delegates to block Trump from amassing the 1,237 needed to clinch the nomination.

Rubio's weak performance in other Super Tuesday states—his numbers in Texas, for example, were close to the minimum threshold required to

win any of the 47 statewide delegates—will further complicate party leaders’ efforts to defeat Trump. Their thinking has long been that a single non-Trump candidate stood a much better chance of stopping him than did several candidates splitting the vote and enabling Trump to dominate.

The various “establishment” candidates largely accepted this theory, but each believed that he was best suited for this single-combat role and that the others should drop out. That thinking continued into Tuesday, with Rubio, Cruz, and Kasich all believing the other two should drop out.

Rick Wilson, meanwhile, also blamed deep-pocketed donors who failed to take down Trump when it would have been much easier. He said he told this to all who would listen last summer: “We can spend tens of millions of dollars now to stop Donald Trump, or we can spend hundreds of millions of dollars in the spring, or we can spend tens of billions of dollars when Hillary is president,” Wilson said. “It was the complacency and inertia of our donor class—after being told for eight straight months how dangerous this guy was, that if they didn’t nuke this guy, the media would pick this guy as our nominee.”

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Hillary Clinton leads Bernie Sanders 55%-42% in a new Monmouth poll out today. Again, minority voters appear to make the difference. The two are virtually tied among white voters, but Clinton leads 68%-27% among non-whites, who make up one-quarter of the Democratic electorate. The most recent poll in Mississippi, the other state where Democrats will vote tomorrow, has Clinton up by a