FLORIDA IS KEY TO CAMPAIGNS

2012: GOP presidential candidates can't afford to ignore us, and they aren't

By JEREMY WALLACE H-T Political Writer
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When Florida will vote in the 2012 GOP presidential primary remains anyone's guess, but the state is already having a dramatic and early impact in determining who will challenge President Barack Obama.

For most of the next four weeks Florida will have a unprecedented starring role in the run-up to the primary, hosting two national debates within 10 days and attracting all of the candidates to a pair of influential conferences in Orlando.

That has the major Republican candidates setting a course for the Sunshine State this month and promising to campaign in Florida in a manner usually reserved for Iowa or New Hampshire -- the more traditional early voting states.

While Florida got a taste of such attention four years ago, when it first fought to advance its primary date, political experts say the unsettled GOP field is intensifying it now.

The front-stage role is a shock for Florida voters who have been an afterthought on the presidential primary calendar for most of the last 40 years, typically voting after races had already been decided.

"I can't remember a time where presidential candidates were campaigning in Florida like this a year before the election," said Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University.

Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota recently concluded a four-day, six-city romp through the state that included a rally in Sarasota.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney was close behind, hitting Tampa on Friday to open a state campaign headquarters along Florida's all-important Interstate 4 corridor.

All eight contenders, including Texas Gov. Rick Perry, are expected to be in Tampa on Sept. 12 for a CNN-sponsored debate.

And all eight will be together for a three-day GOP rally in Orlando starting Sept. 22, which includes another debate and individual speeches from each of the candidates.
The attention makes sense to national political experts.

"Florida is the single most important state in the GOP, not just in the general election but also for the primary," said Ford O'Connell, a former presidential campaign adviser and Republican political consultant.

What Florida's Republican primary has that many states can't replicate is its voter mix. Florida's hodgepodge of establishment Republicans, Tea Party conservatives and Republican-leaning independents, combined with a large Hispanic population and enormous number of older voters, make it a national testing ground, O'Connell said.

"The Florida voter is the battleground," O'Connell said.

It's why Republicans decided to hold the Republican National Convention in Tampa in 2012. O'Connell said Republicans know the route to the White House goes through Florida.

If candidates cannot connect with the Florida voters in the primary, there is little chance they can do it in November 2012 against Obama, who won Florida by 2 percentage points over John McCain in 2008.

But another factor is driving the intense courtship of Florida voters: Political pros have a sense of who is favored in other early primary states, while Florida is harder to decipher.

In Iowa, the dynamics of the first-in-the-nation caucuses favor a Tea Party-backed candidate such as Bachmann or Perry. In independent-minded New Hampshire and Nevada, Romney is considered the favorite, with Jon Huntsman needing to finish strongly for a realistic shot. And South Carolina is seen as a strong Perry state, with Bachmann a potential threat to his hopes.

But in Florida -- which could vote as early as January -- no one is viewed as having a clear advantage, O'Connell said.

Romney has been considered a leader by virtue of his showing in early public opinion polls in Florida. But more recent surveys show more Florida voters open to Perry, even though he is a relative unknown to many.

Wagner said Florida could represent a firewall for Romney if Perry wins South Carolina but fails in Florida. But winning Florida after South Carolina could power Perry to the nomination.

For Bachmann, a strong showing in Florida would cement her status a real contender.

And for candidates including former ambassador Huntsman, who opened his campaign headquarters in Orlando this summer, and pizza chain CEO Herman Cain, who is scheduled to visit Sarasota in three weeks, Florida could be a last stand, as it turned out to be for former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani in 2008.
The attention peaks Sept. 22, when the Republican Party of Florida opens its Presidency 5 event -- which promises to attract 3,500 Republican activists. The three-day conference includes a nationally televised debate and a series of private receptions giving candidates a chance to show off for Florida’s Republican activists, with hopes of building a sustainable base of support.

The same weekend, the influential American Conservative Union has planned a conference featuring speeches by each of the contenders.

The weekend was supposed to include a straw poll, like the influential Iowa straw poll last month. But that event is quickly fizzling as top candidates including Romney and Bachmann announce they will not participate. Perry is undecided.

So far only Texas Congressman Ron Paul, Cain and Huntsman have agreed to the straw poll.

For the leading candidates, a straw poll can be a costly way to court votes from the most hard-core GOP activists. And if a candidate does not finish well, as former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty found out in Iowa, it will dominate the media cycle.

Pawlenty dropped out of the race after his disappointing straw poll finish in the Iowa.

Florida has not set its primary date. The Legislature created a panel that is scheduled to set a date by Oct. 1.

The strategy was to set its date so late that others could not leapfrog ahead.

"Florida is trying to transform itself into an early primary state," Wagner said.