In rebuke to Rick Perry, Herman Cain wins Florida Republican straw poll

By GEORGE BENNETT AND JOHN KENNEDY

Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

Updated: 1:03 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 25, 2011

Florida Republican activists shook up the 2012 presidential race today by rebuking frontrunner Rick Perry and giving longshot Herman Cain a resounding victory in a nationally watched presidential straw poll.

Former Godfathers Pizza CEO Cain, who is popular with the tea party movement but gets less than 10 percent in most Republican polls, won 37.1 percent of the 2,657 delegates who voted in the Republican Party of Florida's "Presidency 5" conference.

Texas Gov. Perry, who tops most national and Florida polls but stumbled in a Thursday night debate, finished a distant second in the nonbinding vote with 15.4 percent. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney was third with 14 percent.

While the mock election results carry no official weight, they highlight the volatility of the Republican nominating contest, which was dominated by Romney for most of the year before Perry entered the race six weeks ago and rocketed to the top.

"The Republican Party is a long way from having a consensus candidate for 2012," Palm Beach County GOP Chairman Sid Dinerstein declared after the vote.

Cain, widely seen as a second-tier candidate, delivered a rousing speech before today's vote in which he urged delegates to ignore "the nasty rumor that Herman Cain can't win" and instead "send Washington a message."

The straw poll voters certainly sent Perry a message.

Perry was the slam-dunk favorite to win the "Presidency 5" vote until Thursday night's debate in Orlando. His faltering answers disappointed many of his supporters and his support for in-state college tuition benefits for the children of illegal immigrants in Texas drew fire from rivals.

Today's result was particularly embarrassing for Perry because, while Romney and others downplayed the straw poll's significance, Perry pointedly played it up.

At a breakfast this morning that his campaign provided for about 1,000 delegates, Perry recalled being lieutenant governor of Texas in 2000 while the world waited for the Florida recount to determine whether then-Gov. George W. Bush would become president.
"For about a month and a half, my hopes of being the governor of the state of Texas were hanging in the balance. And here we are 11 years later and I’ve got all my hopes on Florida again," Perry said.

"There are a number of folks whose campaigns have spurned this tradition of the Florida straw poll, and I think that's a big mistake. I think the Florida straw poll is very important," Perry said.

Perry then left Orlando to campaign in Michigan. But his campaign team remained at the Orange County Convention Center all day to try to secure support from delegates.

Inside the cavernous convention hall, Cain got the strongest audience reaction when he spoke in the afternoon.

Cain, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum were the only candidates to speak to the delegates this afternoon. Perry, former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman and Texas Rep. Ron Paul sent surrogates.

Romney and Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann did not appear today or send surrogates after announcing beforehand they would not actively participate in the straw poll. But all the candidates appeared in Thursday’s debate and at a Friday Conservative Political Action Conference at the convention center.

"This is a sign of our growing momentum and my candidacy that cannot be ignored," Cain said of the straw poll. "I will continue to share my message of ‘common sense solutions’ across this country and look forward to spending more time in Florida, a critical state for both the nomination and the general election."

Rep. Scott Plakon, R-Longwood, was the first state legislator to endorse Cain and Saturday hailed the straw poll victory as an "uprising."

"Herman Cain connected with the people and he made them feel good," Plakon said. "He was like Ronald Reagan in that. The other guys just didn't make the connection."

Plakon said he expected the Florida results to power Cain's longshot candidacy into legitimacy.

For months, Florida GOP officials have pointed out that the party's only other straw polls - in 1979, 1987 and 1995 - were won by eventual Republican nominees Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bob Dole.

"I think the winner is going to be our nominee," Florida Gov. Rick Scott said before today's voting.

But many outside observers had a different take.

"With all due respect, Herman Cain is not going to be the nominee of the Republican Party," said University of Virginia politics guru Larry Sabato. "Therefore, this hurts Perry and helps Romney - and maybe helps (New Jersey Gov.) Chris Christie if he gets in."

Republican consultant and CNN contributor Alex Castellanos agreed that Romney benefitted despite finishing third.

"Perry's run as the great Texas hope is coming to an end. Soon he will pivot and try to rip Romney's lungs out. Prediction: it won't work. It will make Romney the nominee instead," Castellanos said.
Veteran Republican operative Roger Stone, who has advised billionaire Donald Trump's presidential flirtations, said Cain's victory "demonstrated the meaninglessness of the straw poll. Herman Cain is a nice fellow -- who will not win any early contest or the nomination."

Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner said the straw poll shows the wild-card influence of the tea party movement on the Republican Party. He likened the Florida result to Bachmann's tea-fueled victory in August's Iowa straw poll – a "snapshot in time, and that's all it is."

Bachmann, whose poll numbers began dropping after Perry's Aug. 13 entry, finished dead last in the Florida straw poll with 1.5 percent.

Wagner said the Florida straw poll result "goes to who attends these type of Republican events. The party is heavily weighted toward the tea party. For a while, it looked like Rick Perry was going to be their guy."