WASHINGTON Can anyone stop Mitt Romney's well-funded drive for the Republican presidential nomination?

Conservative leaders scrambled on Wednesday to try to slow Romney's momentum before he effectively seals the nomination in South Carolina's Jan. 21 balloting or Florida's potentially decisive primary on Jan. 31.

After cruising to victory in New Hampshire on Tuesday with 38 percent of the vote, Romney turns south with a commanding lead in both voter polls and campaign cash, reporting that he raised $24 million in the last three months of 2011.

Romney's campaign and his super-PAC are pouring millions into TV advertising in South Carolina and Florida, while the candidate heads for a voter rally at noon today at the Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach.

None of his rivals so far appears to have the money, campaign organization or clear voter support to overcome the front-runner.

"I expect the other candidates to go after Romney pretty hard, because if he wins South Carolina, [the primary race] might all be over," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. "It's not just that he won in New Hampshire, it's the total disarray of the opposition."

"As long as they split the vote, Romney is going to cruise right through."

But these Southern states, especially Florida, will bring a somewhat different set of voters and issues to the fore. Both have more diverse populations and much more economic distress than the sites of the first two nomination contests in Iowa and New Hampshire.

"You know politics. The race could change any time," said Bonnie Re, of Boca Raton, co-chairwoman of the Romney campaign in South Palm Beach County. "But we have the momentum coming into Florida. If [Romney] is the nominee, don't you think the others will fall in line?"

Many conservative Christian and tea party activists in South and Central Florida — who remain suspicious of Romney's shifting positions on health care, abortion and other issues — are not ready to fall in line.
"If conservatives can form a consensus [around one candidate], we can control the process," said John Stemberger, president of the Florida Family Policy Council, a conservative Christian group based in Orlando. "Otherwise, Romney will be the nominee."

Stemberger will join other conservative leaders from across the country at a meeting in Texas this weekend to try to coalesce around one candidate. And many conservatives hope a strong rival will emerge from the South Carolina primary to present an alternative for Florida voters.

Some support Rick Perry but think the Texas governor, who flopped in the candidate debates, is no longer viable. That leaves former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who briefly led Florida polls, and Rick Santorum, the former U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, who each finished with a distant 10 percent of the vote in New Hampshire.


"Unless Gingrich or Perry rises up in South Carolina, I don't see how anyone has the resources to mount a challenge to Romney in Florida," said Scott Spages, a Republican activist in Davie who organizes "Faith Forum" events to rally conservative Christian voters. "South Carolina will be the tell-tale event. That's going to be our only shot."

Romney has surged to a double-digit lead in Florida with 36 percent, according to a Quinnipiac University poll on Jan. 4-8 of 560 likely GOP voters. Gingrich got 24 percent, followed by Santorum with 16 percent, Paul with 10 percent, Perry 5 percent and Huntsman 2 percent.

Another Quinnipiac Poll released on Wednesday indicated that Romney has a slight lead — 46 percent to 43 percent — in a hypothetical general-election matchup with President Barack Obama.

Sensing victory, the Romney campaign launched a Spanish-language TV ad in Florida on Wednesday, including words of support from Cuban-American U.S. Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Diaz-Balart, of Miami. Restore Our Future, the super PAC that supports Romney, has increased its ad buy in Florida by a whopping $3.6 million, The Washington Post reported.