Early voting favors organized, moneyed campaigns, political experts say

By Melissa E. Holsman

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With early voting for the Republican presidential primary under way, GOP candidates are ramping up their Florida campaigns. But political experts say the strongest contenders are better able to launch aggressive get-out-the-vote efforts that can make or break a close race.

The Treasure Coast's eight-day early voting period influences how top-tier candidates stump for votes and spend their campaign cash ahead of the Jan. 31 primary, said Kevin Wagner, Florida Atlantic University assistant professor of political science.

"It really favors a campaign that has money and organization because if you have that, you're able to organize your voters and get them to the polls in a much earlier fashion," Wagner said. "So it changes the campaign pretty dramatically."

The region's early voting will favor GOP frontrunner Mitt Romney, who has raised millions of dollars in Florida, Wagner predicted.

"Romney has been here, he's already got people voting," Wagner noted. "It makes it hard for others to compete; so in that way, early voting sometimes locks in the leader in a way that might not happen if people could only vote on election day."

Because of changes to the election process approved by state legislators in May, the number of days for early voting has been reduced from 15 to eight, while the hours an early voting location could be open daily expanded from eight to 12.

That translates to less time candidates have to get up-close and personal with Florida residents, something voters here have been waiting for, said Daniel Smith, professor of political science at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

"Normally, we would have had candidates down here stumping this past week because early voting started 15 days before the election and ran for 14 days," Smith said. "I think it's reduced the amount of face time Floridians have with candidates."
This year’s early voting period is in effect in 62 counties, including the Treasure Coast. But there are five counties — Collier, Hardee, Hendry, Hillsborough and Monroe — where the U.S. Justice Department must first preclear the election law enacted last year due to Florida’s history of racial discrimination, Smith said. Those counties started early voting Jan. 16, except on Sunday, and will close their polls Jan. 28.


"We have different issues that are important to voters down here and many of them are waiting to hear what they have to say about Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and the environment," he said. "Issues that are much more important to many Floridians than the rest of the country."

Port St. Lucie resident Mary Ann Russell, 57, president of the St. Lucie County Lipstick Republicans, a group that advocates for conservative GOP candidates, said she's waiting to vote until after she sees who wins the South Carolina primary Saturday.

"We had a debate party Monday night and a lot of people were saying they wanted to see what was going to happen in South Carolina," Russell noted, "that people are still on the fence because they're just not sure. I think they're waiting to see between Romney or Gingrich and Santorum."

She's expecting a barrage of TV ads touting candidates and slingling some political mud.

"I think they'll be fighting each other like they have been," she said. "I think Gingrich will be after Romney, and Romney will be after Gingrich and Santorum after both of them."

Tom Lockwood, chair of the Indian River County Republican Party, said his email in-box is getting blitzed with messages from GOP contenders who are still crisscrossing South Carolina.

"Votes are so critical and these are key states," he said. "So they need to obviously do what they can to maximize exposure."

Smith also expects some voters to take their cue from the candidate who wins in South Carolina.

"With the most recent dropping-out of (Texas Gov. Rick) Perry, I'm sure Floridians are waiting to see if one of their other possible candidates is still going to be in the race," he said. "So we'll see a lot of those absentee ballots and early voting happen a lot closer to election day, I suspect."