By a huge margin Tuesday, Florida voters selected Mitt Romney as their choice for the presidential nomination. He also was the overwhelming favorite with Treasure Coast voters.

In Martin and Indian River counties, Romney pulled in 51 percent and 54 percent respectively. St. Lucie County voters gave Romney 46 percent. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich placed second, former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum took third, and Texas Rep. Ron Paul placed fourth in all three counties and the state.

For weeks, pollsters and political experts predicted Romney would win in Florida, amid a GOP contest characterized by negative ads and personal attacks.

And they were right.

Robert Watson, professor of American Studies at Lynn University, said all signs pointed to a Romney victory, even though Gingrich surged in the polls following his South Carolina primary win.

“Newt pummeled Romney in the debates; Romney’s tax questions came out … Newt surged ahead in the polls here in Florida, and Newt’s debate audiences were going wild,” Watson said. “So about two weeks ago, after two years of Romney being comfortably in the front, it started to change. But sure enough Romney’s advantage ended up far too much for Gingrich.

“Romney had more money,” added Watson, “and he had better organization.”

Romney also had more super political action committees spending on his behalf, and he had key endorsements here, including Attorney General Pam Bondi, and U.S. Rep. Connie Mack, R-Fort Myers, Watson said.

“So everything you look at to try and predict elections,” he said, “ultimately every single thing fell in line with arrows pointing toward Mitt Romney.”

“It’s not a big shock ... it’s a little bit wider margin statewide than I had anticipated,” he said. “I thought it would be a little closer.”

With the Space Coast in Posey’s district, he said he was especially tuned into what the candidates were saying about space and he wasn’t thrilled by what he heard.

“I was a little bit disappointed that none of them talked about the national security implications of space,” Posey said. “This was the ideal format for the rest of the world to stop and take a moment to realize or maybe think about what life would be like if we didn’t dominate space: you don’t have a cellphone, you don’t get a weather report, you can’t use a credit card.

“So I was hoping it would be a bigger part of the debates. Instead it ended up talking about Romney making fun of Gingrich talking about exploration of the moon, and it just got off topic and I’m real disappointed in that part.”

Stuart resident Derick Jochem, chair of the Martin County Mitt Romney campaign, said despite moving up the primary date, volunteers were prepared with “groundwork” throughout the county.

“They did a lot of work on short notice,” he said, “and I’m happy with the results.”

And it’s not necessarily a bad thing if the race goes long, he said, even if the candidates “are a little hostile toward each other.

“Whoever gets the nomination,” Jochem said, “had better be tough-skinned.”

South Hutchinson Island resident Richard Evans, chair of the Martin County Newt Gingrich campaign, said Tuesday’s results were disappointing but were clearly “a function of being outspent three or four-to-one.”

Kevin Wagner, Florida Atlantic University assistant professor of political science, said Florida was a “money game,” that Romney won.

Money will remain a major consideration, Wagner said, and Gingrich will not be able to rely on contributions to his Super PAC for day-to-day campaign expenses, such as flying from place to place.

“It’s hard to see how (Gingrich) stays in long term,” he said.

The overwhelming image from the Florida campaign for Wagner, he said, will be “the tone and that sort of droning negative” voice of commercial narrators talking about Bain Capital or ethics violations. Wagner said he read that 92 percent of the recent ads have been negative.
“That’s remarkable but it’s not a great long-term strategy,” he said.

Evans said “both sides” were responsible for the negative tone of the race in Florida but predicted that, “regardless of who wins, Republicans will rally to get rid of President Obama.”

Wagner also said Gingrich could be aided as the only viable anti-Romney candidate in the race, if Santorum is swept to the sidelines and Romney should be hoping the former Pennsylvania senator can stay in.

That would please Treasure Coast Tea Party member Bryan Longworth, pastor at the Covenant Tabernacle World Outreach Center in Fort Pierce, who backed Santorum, and insisted his third-place showing in Florida doesn’t mean he’s out of the competition.

“We’re obviously disappointed that Rick Santorum didn’t do better in Florida; however, he’s surging in the Midwest and he’s leading in some of the polls,” Longworth said. “So we’re expecting him to do better in some of the other states.”

Santorum suffered, he said, because too many people believed political experts who predicted the former senator couldn’t win in Florida.

“I talked to many people who said, ‘I believe he’s the best candidate and he’s the most conservative, but I don’t believe he can win so I’m not going to vote for him,’” he said. “So when you have everyone thinking you can’t win and not voting for you because of that, then obviously you’re not going to win and I think that really hurt him.”

Palm City resident Dennis Fano, a Santorum campaign volunteer, said he too was “disappointed,” the former senator didn’t win, but he thinks his campaign will pick up steam “if the money holds out.”

Fano is convinced the longer Santorum is in the race, the more he will resonate with people.

“He doesn’t waver,” Fano noted, “he stands for something: family. Values.”

And since he’s still relatively young, Fano said he may be considered as a vice presidential candidate or try his luck again in four years.

“Ronald Reagan didn’t make it the first time,” Fano noted. “Neither did Abraham Lincoln.”

Watson meanwhile, noted that in every presidential race since 1960, every candidate who has won Florida in the primary won the presidency.

“Once again it looks like we’re the Kingmaker in primaries,” Watson said. “And this November, we could be the Kingmaker again.”

He predicted Romney will be the Republican Party’s nominee
“I think it’s done,” Watson said. “If you go back to all the things that we use to predict the winners: endorsements, money, momentum, organization, everything points to Romney.”