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Thompson fires it up in his make-or-break state

The '08 GOP hopeful is in a very tight race in South Carolina, the first-in-the-South primary state.

By Ariel Sabar | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Fort Mill, S.C.

Fred Thompson strode into the midday crowd at Beef O'Brady's restaurant here and positioned himself beneath a mounted deer's head and a University of South Carolina Gamecocks pennant. These were his kind of people, Southerners like him, and, to judge from his buoyant tone, he was feeling good.

"South Carolina is extremely important to me," he told the packed room, as diners took a break from cups of sweet tea and baskets of curly fries. "I consider it my neck of the woods, and I hope the people here feel the same way."

A lot is riding on whether they do. Since entering the race for the GOP presidential nomination two months ago, the former senator from Tennessee has struggled to gain ground in national polls, where he remains a distant second or third to Rudolph Giuliani.

South Carolina's Jan. 19 primary is a must-win for Mr. Thompson. The first in the South, it represents his best chance to halt a parade of likely victories by rivals in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Michigan.

His visit this week – four stops across the state in under 24 hours – was unusually busy for a man often tagged as lazy. He drew large crowds and lingered for small talk for longer than he has seemed comfortable in other early-voting states. "It's mighty good to be back in God's country," he said to wild applause at Tommy's Country Ham House in Greenville Wednesday.

The ramped-up work ethic reflects what GOP leaders here say is the reality that he cannot take South Carolina for granted. While Thompson's down-home drawl and conservative message have played well in this Bible Belt state, he has visited just three times and has yet to break away from the pack of front-runners.

An early lead in the polls has withered in recent days into a statistical dead heat with former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who has made 17 visits, and Mr. Giuliani. And the chancellor of one of the state's largest evangelical institutions, Bob Jones University, last month looked past his opposition to Mr. Romney's Mormon faith to endorse the former governor.

"I'm not voting for a preacher," Bob Jones III said told a Greenville newspaper. "I'm voting for a president."

The endorsement sent a "strong signal," says Samuel Harms, chairman of the Greenville County Republican Party. "There were a significant number of evangelical Christians who were not sure how they were going to handle the issue of a Mormon running for president."

Romney remains Thompson's chief rival among social conservatives here, and exchanges between the camps have grown increasingly acid. At meet-and-greet events across the state this past week, Thompson accused Romney of trying to "buy South Carolina" with TV ads bankrolled by the former governor's personal fortune.

"I haven't bought one TV ad yet and haven't bought one radio ad yet, and yet I seem to be in the lead," Thompson, who plays a district attorney on NBC's "Law & Order," told a crush of reporters in Fort Mill, an upstate town some 20 miles south of Charlotte, N.C. "So, you know, from a management standpoint, I think I'm getting a little bit more for my money right now."

His comments drew a swift retort from Romney, whose poll numbers have shot up here since Thompson entered the race in early September. "Support from voters is earned through hard work and new ideas," a Romney spokesman said in an e-mail. "Unfortunately for Fred Thompson, he has never shown any passion for either."

Thompson has drawn criticism from some conservative leaders for his infrequent churchgoing, his brief stint as a lobbyist for an abortion rights group, and his opposition, because of a belief in states' rights, to a constitutional ban on gay marriage.

But those concerns do not seem to have trickled down to ordinary voters. Thompson placed first last month in a national CBS News poll of white Evangelicals who planned to vote in a Republican primary or caucus, ahead of Giuliani, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, and, in a tie for fourth, Romney and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

In interviews in conservative upstate South Carolina, evangelical voters, if still undecided, said Thompson was in step with their values. Many said national security, stronger borders, and lower taxes – pillars of Thompson's stump speeches – are a bigger priority this election season than social issues.

"He's certainly made known his Christian beliefs, and he's certainly a conservative," says Lily Lenderman, a retired office assistant from Spartanburg, who is wavering between Thompson and Rep. Duncan Hunter of California and wore a lapel pin that read, "Press 1 for English, Press 2 for Deportation."

Bruce Rochester, a paramedic, echoed a common view here in saying he didn't care about small differences in candidates' positions on abortion and gay marriage. "I just don't think those are major problems now," he said before a Thompson campaign stop at The Beacon Drive-In in Spartanburg. "The main problems are the war and immigration."

Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, a conservative faith and policy group, said, "If there's any stumbling block for Thompson among Evangelicals, it's the same stumbling block among other Republicans: Is he committed to the long campaign? It's the fire-in-the-belly issue."

Aides said they were pleased with Thompson's progress in South Carolina and said his stagnant poll numbers were a product of his short candidacy. "We've got to do better," James Livingston, chairman of Thompson's South Carolina steering committee, said after a campaign event for war veterans at the State House in Columbia. "But, you know, he got into the race late, so we're cranking it up now."

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