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Santorum stops in King City

GOP presidential hopeful speaks to crowd at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport

BY DAVID BELCHER
MT. VERNON LIFESTYLES EDITOR

MT. VERNON — Looking toward Tuesday's Illinois primary election, Republican presidential nominee Rick Santorum compared himself to Illinois native Ronald Reagan.

"I'm running against the establishment like Ronald Reagan did,"

Santorum said in a campaign rally Saturday at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport hangar.

"They said the country needed a moderate, that Ronald Reagan was too conservative and he doesn't connect with people. They said he was a throwback from a different era, that we needed someone who is in touch with the times. That's the same argument we hear today."

Santorum said, like Reagan, he is a true conservative. He asked if there were any conservatives in Illinois. A instant barrage of enthusiastic cheers answered his question.

Santorum was not as gracious with all presidents with Land of

Lincoln ties — specifically, the incumbent president and former Illinois U.S. Sen. Barack Obama. Santorum blasted him as a "weak horse" and "appeaser in chief."

"We have a president who simply appeases and negotiates with evil," Santorum said. "Ronald Reagan knew you don't negotiate with evil."

"The people of Illinois have a particular obligation to get it right this time," Santorum said with a mischievous grin, accompanied by knowing laughter from the approximately 660 people in the hangar. "The people of Illinois really have the opportunity to really send shockwaves on Tuesday."

He compared Obama to his chief rival for the GOP presidential nomination, Mitt Romney.

"People ask me why I am the best candidate to run against Barack Obama," Santorum said. "I feel like in some respects like I am running against Barack Obama here in this primary because Mitt Romney has the same positions as Barack Obama in this primary." In a number of key issues, Santorum said, Obama and Romney agree with each other.

While Romney served as governor of Massachusetts, Santorum said the state enacted an insur-

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Winning Ill. may be difficult task for Santorum

SPRINGFIELD (AP) — Conservative Republicans can win primaries in Illinois — just look the GOP's last candidate for governor. But presidential candidate Rick Santorum may find it's easy task.

Major conservative leaders staying neutral in the primary, Santorum has raised relatively little money in Illinois. Conservative blogs and Facebook pages are giving more attention to congressional races than the presidential primary. Key counties don't show a surge in registration or early voting that might suggest a wave Santorum support.

Illinois' Republican voters are also very different than the ones who pushed Santorum, a former Pennsylvania senator, to victory over Mitt Romney in states like Mississippi and Alabama. TV recent polls show Romney with a slim lead in Illinois, which has a long history of nominating moderate Republicans.

"It's clearly, I would say, Romney's race to lose," said Bru Behrend, a consultant for the conservative group For The Good Illinois.

No matter who wins the votes Tuesday, Santorum and Romney are both likely to emerge with a healthy number of delegates. That's because Illinois selects them congressional district by congressional district, giving each candidate a chance to pick up delegates in the parts of the state where he's strongest.

For Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, that's urban and suburban areas, most around Chicago.

Romney certainly describes himself as conservative and is conceding the votes of the party right wing. But he is widely se-



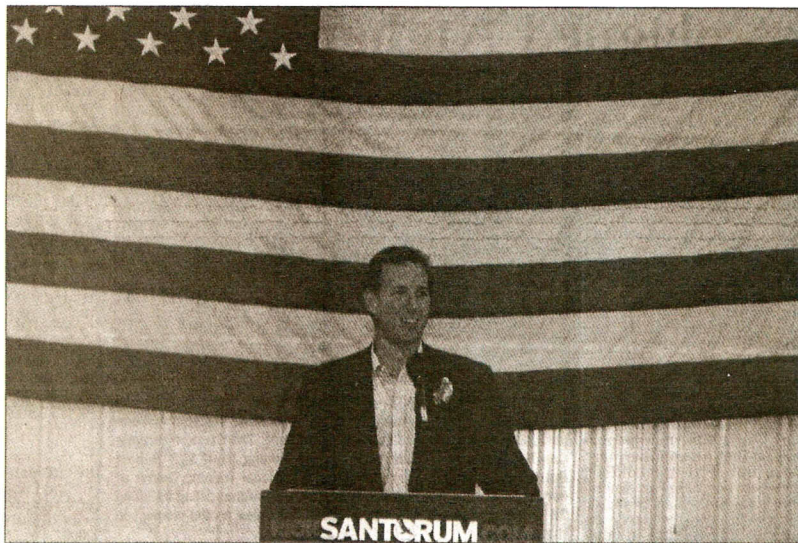
SANTORUM SIGNING — Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum autographs campaign materials after speaking at a campaign rally Saturday at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport hangar.



GOP SPEECH — Rick Santorum rally organizers estimated 660 people crowded into the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport hangar Saturday afternoon to hear the Republican presidential candidate speak.

Sentinel Photos/DAVID BELCHER

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS VISIT —
Rick Santorum, Republican presidential nominee, made a pitch for his candidacy Saturday during a campaign rally at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport hangar. Santorum visited the Lando of Lincoln looking for votes in Tuesday's primary.



Sentinel Photo/DAVID BELCHER

Santorum:

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ance mandate that some regard as a template for the national law foes deride as "Obamacare." If "Obamacare" is implemented in 2014, Santorum warned, "every American" will be dependent on the federal government for health care.

He said he sees television advertisements from Romney charging he is not a conservative. Then, moments later, he said he sees television commentators say he will not get the Republican presidential nomination because he is too conservative.

Romney maintains a big advantage in the race for Republican National Convention delegates, with 495 to Santorum's 252, but is still a distance away from the 1,144

needed for nomination.

VOTERS COMMENT

Dave Holdeman had to choose from driving 12 miles from his Highland home to see Mitt Romney in Collinsville or 65 miles to see Rick Santorum in Mt. Vernon Saturday afternoon. Without hesitation, he chose the latter.

"I really appreciate his position on family values," Holdeman said. "I definitely agree with him on pro-life and his very solid NRA [National Rifle Association] record. He has the NRA endorsement.

"One of the reasons I am concerned with Romney is in respect to health care," he added.

Santorum's stand on family values and electability in the November general election were cited by many of those who crowded the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport hangar to hear the Republican presidential nominee.

Mt. Vernon's Bill Roberts

said although he is "still open" on how to cast his ballot in Tuesday's primary election. "I am leaning more toward the conservative. I think he [Santorum] is much more conservative than our current president."

"I think he is strong for family values," Duane Davis of Mt. Vernon said.

Don Bigham of Mt. Vernon said he drove to the airport because "I want to see Santorum and to hear him talk." Although presidential candidates are easily visible on television, Bigham says he likes to observe "body language. I think we have an opportunity see a presidential candidate in person and that is something every American ought to do."

Tommy Dastamanis of Bradenton, Fla., is so taken with Santorum that he is taking a break from his college studies to travel him with sell such campaign souvenirs as hats, shirts and buttons.

"He is a great candidate and I think he is the only who can beat [President Barack] Obama," Dastamanis, who has been following Santorum ever since the Iowa caucus, said.

He said he has met and talked to the former Pennsylvania senator several times. "Just a great guy, very generous," he said.

"I really feel Rick Santorum is the best candidate. He has a lot of the same views I do, especially the social issues," said Michael Butler of Dahlgren.

"I wanted to come and see him," Woodlawn's Emily Shands said, adding, "I really like his stand on family values and I like the direction he wants to take our country."

Joan Beckman of Mt. Vernon called herself a "conservative Republican" who "likes Rick Santorum's message."

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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