

IN THE STATES

Santorum surge requires reset for Romney

By KASIE HUNT
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Staggered by Rick Santorum's surge, Mitt Romney is trying to reset his presidential campaign by defining himself as a strict conservative.

The former Massachusetts governor had focused on his business credentials and played down his ideology four years after he failed in his attempt to win the GOP nomination by running as a social conservative.

"I was a severely conservative Republican governor," Romney told the Conservative Political Action Committee's annual gathering Friday.

It was a speech that, advisers said, Romney viewed as an important chance to speak directly to the conservatives who rejected him in three contests last Tuesday. He insisted he is a conservative in both record and background, trying to convince the GOP's skeptical right flank that he is acceptable as the party's nominee.

"My path to conservatism

came from my family, from my faith and from my life's work," Romney said.

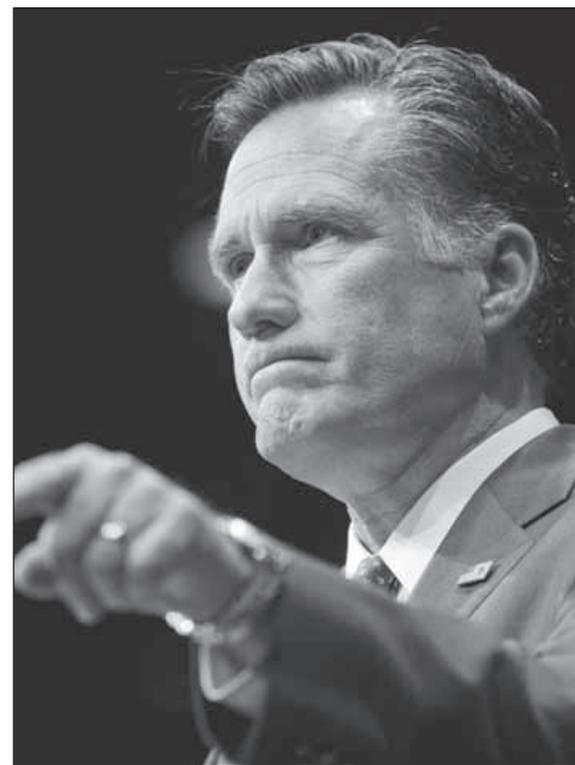
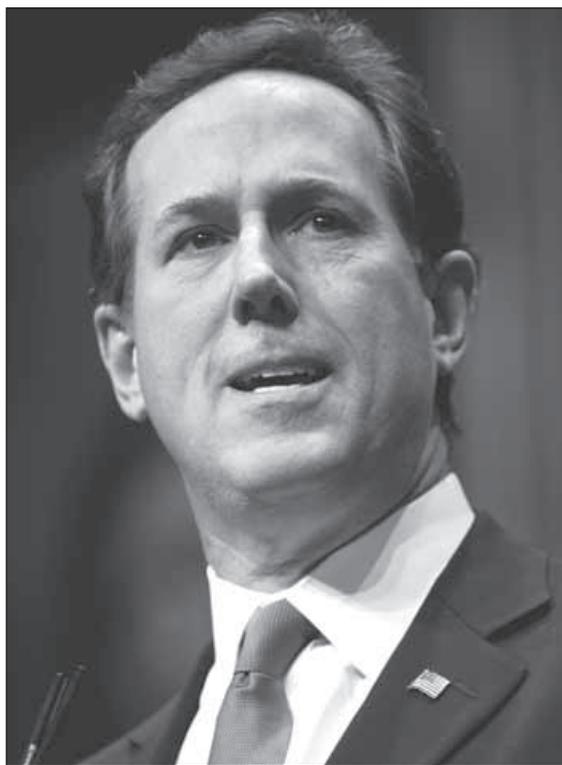
He's working to gain trust from the activists who make up the GOP base and who drive the Republican primary contest. They view him skeptically because of his past shifts on a variety of issues, including his previous support for abortion rights.

Conservatives generally view Romney's chief rivals, Santorum and Newt Gingrich, as having views more in line with their own.

Romney's new message comes as he's trying to prove he can win over a broad spectrum of Republicans. He has yet to win a majority of GOP votes in any of the contests he's won so far, and he's looking to emerge strongly from Super Tuesday, March 6, when 10 states hold nominating contests.

In offering the defense, though, Romney drew attention to the problem he's faced throughout the primary contest.

"I've never heard anybody say, 'I'm severely conservative,'" con-



PHOTOS BY EVAN VUCCI/AP

Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney, right, and Rick Santorum both gave speeches during the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington on Friday.

servative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh said Friday.

Romney's conservative opposition remains divided — the former House speaker has won one state, and the former Pennsylvania senator has won four. But Santorum is suddenly threatening Romney's dominance in states where his team had previously felt comfortable.

Last week, Santorum won contests in Minnesota, Missouri and Colorado. In a sign it's nervous about continued losses, Romney's team abruptly added campaign events in Maine, where results

from the caucuses were to be announced Saturday. Romney's team is preparing an aggressive push against Santorum in Michigan, where Romney was born and where Romney is a household name and where his advisers had hoped for an easy victory.

Romney all but ignored Santorum ahead of the latest contests. Advisers say that will change, with Romney taking on Santorum's record on union issues during his time in the Senate from heavily unionized Pennsylvania. Santorum joined a filibuster of a national right-to-work act and

voted to defend legislation that sets pay for public sector workers. He defends that record as an issue of states' rights.

Romney has planned a more aggressive campaign schedule in Michigan in the coming weeks. He will hold events in Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids on Wednesday and stay in the Midwest through the end of the week. He's likely to spend some time campaigning in Ohio, which holds its primary on March 6, Super Tuesday, and is the first Rust Belt state to hold a nominating contest.

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