

Perry ends campaign, endorses Gingrich

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Texas Gov. Rick Perry ended his campaign for president today and endorsed Newt Gingrich as the best conservative to take on President Obama in the fall.



Texas Gov. Rick Perry announces the end of his presidential campaign in North Charleston, S.C., on Thursday as his son, Griffin, and wife, Anita, look on.

Perry's departure two days before the South Carolina primary leaves four candidates vying for the GOP nomination.

"Newt is not perfect, but who among us is?" Perry said. "There is forgiveness for those who seek God. I have no question that Newt Gingrich has the heart of a conservative reformer" and "the ability to rally and captivate the conservative movement."

Perry's announcement brought a swift end to a campaign that started with high expectations in August. After making few moves to run early in 2011, Perry jumped into the campaign in August and quickly rose to the top of Republican polls, outpacing former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. A series of poor performances in debates starting in September knocked Perry on his heels, and he never recovered in the polls despite raising more than \$17 million.

His departure eliminates one of the conservative alternatives to Romney leading up to Saturday's South Carolina primary. Former House speaker Gingrich has argued that the presence of Perry and former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum on the ballot dilutes the anti-Romney vote.

Perry decided to drop out Wednesday night and told his staff at a Charleston-area Wendy's at 8:30 p.m., said Ray Sullivan, Perry's spokesman.

Sullivan said he became "curious" about Perry's desire to keep running when he asked Perry about plans for primary night and whether Perry needed him to write any remarks for him. "No, I'm good," Sullivan said Perry told him.

Perry and aides discussed endorsing Gingrich Wednesday night, Sullivan said. Perry decided and called Gingrich with the news "about an hour" before today's news conference.

Gingrich and Santorum remain to fight each other to be the conservative alternative to Romney, who has been leading in South Carolina and national polls. Both are competing for social conservative and evangelical voters, who make up key components of South Carolina's Republican electorate.

Texas Rep. Ron Paul, who has a passionate following, also remains in the race. His support comes mostly from libertarian-oriented supporters who like his stands on the economy and foreign policy.

Gingrich said he is "honored and humbled" by Perry's endorsement.

'No viable path'

Perry, the longest-serving governor in Texas history, said he concluded there was "no viable path" for him to win the GOP nomination. He said he'll return home "neither discouraged or disenchanted."

He said he is "resolute to remain in the service of my country."

"We must rise to the occasion and elect a conservative champion to put our country back on track," Perry said. "I'm not done fighting for the cause of conservatism. I have just begun to fight."

Perry's willingness to remain in the race had been in doubt since he finished fifth in the Iowa caucuses Jan. 3 despite spending \$6 million there. That night, Perry said he would return home to "reassess" his campaign. The next day, he said he was back running and heading to South Carolina.

Perry felt compelled to try for a comeback in South Carolina because he had "the organizational resources, the financial resources and the fire in the belly" while he also recognized it was "an uphill battle," Sullivan said.

"One of the things he said the next morning after Iowa was 'I don't want to look back on this in a few years and wonder what if I stayed in through South Carolina maybe things would have been different,' " Sullivan said.

The campaign was running out of money, despite raising \$17.2 million by the end of September, Sullivan said. Perry spent more than \$6 million in Iowa, including \$2.86 million on advertising.

"We had spent the bulk of our funds, so South Carolina really was a final flag in the ground," Sullivan said.

Perry will return to Texas and then will probably head out on the campaign trail for Gingrich, Sullivan said.

Promising start

When Perry entered the race last August, he immediately changed its dynamic. He quickly soared to the top of national and early state polls, but his status as GOP front-runner didn't last into the fall of 2011.

He was first challenged by Romney over his decision to sign a Texas law allowing the children of illegal immigrants in-state tuition at Texas universities. They also sparred over their job-creation records and health care.

Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, who lost her status as the anti-Romney candidate when Perry entered the race, criticized Perry for his executive order mandating that young girls receive a vaccine fighting a virus that could lead to cervical cancer. She dropped out of the race after a disappointing last-place finish in the Iowa caucuses.

Those attacks knocked Perry off his stride in the nationally televised debates that have played such a major role in the Republican contest. During a debate in November in Michigan, Perry faltered when he couldn't remember the third of three Cabinet agencies he pledged to abolish if he was elected president.

"I began this race with a sense of calling," Perry said today. "A calling never guarantees a particular destination, but a journey that tests one's faith and one's character."

It was "unfortunate" that South Carolina voters "didn't have the opportunity to get to know the individual that I got to know," said Katon Dawson, the chairman of Perry's South Carolina campaign and a former state Republican chairman. "The winner today is the state of Texas," Dawson said. "They get the most conservative governor in the United States back."

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