

**Romney wins 2012 straw poll of conservative activists**  
**Reuters**  
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WASHINGTON, Feb 12 — Mitt Romney won a presidential straw poll of Republican conservative activists yesterday in a boost to his suddenly hard-fought battle against Rick Santorum.

But Sarah Palin, a conservative Tea Party champion, expressed what could only be considered bad news for Romney. She called for an extended battle to choose the Republicans' nominee to face Democratic President Barack Obama in the November 6 general election.

Romney has been hoping to wrap up the nomination as quickly as possible but has struggled to convince conservatives that he is one of them.

"I believe that the competition has got to keep going," Palin said to cheers at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington shortly after the poll results were announced.

The poll was conducted among attendees of the Conservative Political Action Conference, a group of party activists from across the country. It is strictly symbolic but does show Romney's organizational strength and demonstrate he is capable of appealing to conservatives who have lacked enthusiasm for him.

Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, won 38 per cent support among the 3,408 who voted in the online poll, defeating Santorum, who took 31 per cent. Former US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, whose campaign has been fading, had 15 per cent, and libertarian Congressman Ron Paul, who won last year's straw poll, tallied 12 per cent.

It was a coup for Romney after he spoke to the group on Friday and called himself "severely conservative," a verbal contortion that puzzled some commentators.

Santorum is a former Pennsylvania US senator and social conservative whose victories in Colorado, Minnesota and Missouri last Tuesday gave him momentum. He has emerged as Romney's chief threat after Romney seemed headed for the Republican nomination with victories in Florida and Nevada.

Romney tweeted he was honored to win the CPAC straw poll, saying, "I'm heartened that so many friends here agree with me about the need for conservative change."

The Washington Times, which helped organise the poll, said Romney's 38 per cent was the highest total of any candidate since George W. Bush took 42 per cent en route to winning the party's presidential nomination in 2000.

Poll organizers said Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio was the top choice to be the Republican vice presidential nominee, picked by 34 per cent, followed by New Jersey

Governor Chris Christie at 9 per cent.

Also mentioned by some voters were Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell and US Representative Paul Ryan, author of a budget plan popular in Republican circles.

The straw poll was announced just before Palin, a former Alaska governor, took the stage at the CPAC gathering. She won some of the loudest applause of any speaker, presidential candidates included, during the three-day conference.

Palin, the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee who decided not to seek the presidency in 2012, seemed to call into question the depth of Romney's conservative beliefs though mentioning no one by name.

She had called on South Carolina voters to back Gingrich in their January 21 primary, which Gingrich won decisively over Romney. Her husband, Todd Palin, has endorsed Gingrich.

"Our candidate must be someone who can instinctively turn right to constitutional conservative principles. It's too late in the game to teach it or spin it at this point. It's either there or it isn't," she said.

Palin, a champion of the Tea Party conservative movement, said a lengthy nomination battle would make the ultimate nominee stronger.

"We're hearing now, we've all heard from these experts — 'We've got to name our nominee right now, wrap it up, no debate for you,'" she said. "As if competition weakens our nominee."

"And in America, we believe that competition strengthens us," she said.

Whoever wins, Palin added, "for the sake of our party we must stand united." — Reuters

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