

McCain on a roll

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

John McCain's victory in California and his decisive wins in delegate-rich New York, Illinois and New Jersey cement his front-runner status. Meanwhile, the resurgence of Mike Huckabee in Southern states has undercut Mitt Romney's strategy of offering himself as true-blue conservatives' only alternative to the unorthodox McCain.

Eight months ago, this scenario would have seemed impossible. McCain's push for comprehensive immigration reform troubled many Republicans. His ardent defense of the Iraq war hurt him badly with independent voters, damaging claims about his electability. But immigration and Iraq have faded as issues, and McCain emerged from Super Tuesday with a large lead in delegates.

The bottom line: Despite weeks of bitter attacks from such conservative establishment stalwarts as Rush Limbaugh, George F. Will, James Dobson and many more, war-hero McCain's image as a feisty, straight-talking patriot remains powerful and compelling.

There have been so many surprises in this campaign that perhaps more are in store. But McCain backers have to like their chances, especially with Huckabee saving all his fire for Romney.

Should McCain wrap up the nomination soon, however, the Republican Party drama will still be far from over. Not only some establishment conservatives loathe McCain for his stands on global warming, campaign finance reform, taxes and immigration. Many die-hard conservative voters and party activists consider him a traitor.

Perhaps the prospect of another president named Clinton would bring these recalcitrant Republicans around. But in this unique election year, nothing is assured.

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