

Kerry claims wins in both Virginia and Tennessee

The front-runner decisively swept both states, beating rivals on their home turf

By Steven Thomma
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

FAIRFAX STATION, Va. — Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts swept primaries in Virginia and Tennessee on Tuesday, decisively defeating two Southern rivals near their home turf and all but assuring that he will be the Democratic Party's nominee for president.

Kerry won easily in Virginia, taking about 50 percent of the vote, followed by Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina with 26 percent and retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark of Arkansas with 9 percent.

Kerry was also declared the decisive winner in Tennessee by the television networks as soon as polls closed at 8 p.m. EST, based on exit polls of voters there.

Kerry's victories, his first in the South, gave him a new jolt of momentum as he heads into a showdown next week in Wisconsin that could make him the acknowledged nominee of his party.

He enters the coming week having won five states in four days and 12 of the 14 that have voted thus far. With Tuesday's wins, he has shown political strength in every region of the country and among Democrats from all demographic, economic and racial groups.

More importantly, he approaches next Tuesday's Wisconsin primary without any clear threat to his nomination.

Clark was teetering on the edge of political collapse Tuesday evening, and Edwards lost back-to-back in the region that he boasted was his "backyard." Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, winless in 14 states, didn't even contest Virginia or Tennessee and is hoping for a comeback in Wisconsin that shows no signs of materializing.

"Once again the message rings out loud and clear," Kerry told supporters in Fairfax, Virginia. "Americans are voting for change. East, West, North and now in the South."

With the nomination virtually within his grasp, Kerry focused on President Bush rather than Democratic rivals as he ticked off states vital to a fall election victory.

"From Missouri to Wisconsin to Ohio, from the heartland to both coasts, the wreckage of the Bush economy is all around us," Kerry said. "To all of America we say tonight, get ready, a new day is on the way."

Kerry picked up the majority of the 151 delegates awarded Tuesday, ending the day with a total of 484. That's about 22 percent of the 2,161 needed to secure the nomination.

Through Tuesday, Dean had 182 delegates, Edwards had 146, Clark had 84, the Rev. Al Sharpton of New York had 12, and Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio had 2.

Though it will take several more weeks of voting for Kerry to clinch the nomination mathematically, Tuesday's voting confirmed that Democrats around the country are largely ratifying the choice made in the first two states to vote, Iowa and New Hampshire.

And with an accelerated primary calendar set up by the party to wrap up the nomination quickly, voters in late-voting states could be left without a voice in the process.

"Kerry is in like Flint," said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. "He can get started on a very tough campaign in the fall."

Sabato said Clark was "obliterated" with his distant third-place finishes. He also said Edwards "is out, too. When you get beat 2 to 1 in two states next to yours by a Massachusetts liberal and you're the Southern candidate, it's impossible to defend."

Kerry won strong support Tuesday among all types of voters and on all types of issues. He won just less than half of the white vote in Virginia and nearly two-thirds of the black vote.

He also led his rivals regardless of whether voters said their top concerns were jobs, health care, Iraq or overall experience.

And he built a large lead among those Democrats who said the main quality they looked for in candidates was the ability to defeat President Bush. Among those voters in Virginia, 3 out of 4 voted for Kerry, according to exit polls. Among those voters in Tennessee, Kerry edged Edwards by a margin of nearly 2-1 and Clark by a slightly larger margin.

Aides speculated that Clark could quit the race as early as Wednesday. He had considered quitting last week until his narrow victory in Oklahoma kept his hopes alive. Since then, Clark had poured most of his effort into Tennessee, trying for another win close to his home state of Arkansas.

Yet Clark never gave voters a compelling reason to back his late-starting campaign. On issues such as war and taxes, he resembled Kerry and Edwards. And on his claim that his record in uniform made him uniquely suited to lead a war on terrorism, voters seemed to prefer Kerry's record as a Vietnam War hero. Among veterans in Tennessee, 58 percent voted for Kerry, 23 percent voted for Edwards and 11 percent voted for Clark, according to exit polls.

As the disappointing vote totals came in, Clark's senior staff traveled from their headquarters in Little Rock, Ark., to meet with him in Memphis, Tenn.

Edwards, whose one victory came in South Carolina a week earlier, vowed to stay in the race despite his losses Tuesday.

He flew to Milwaukee on Tuesday night to get a quick start courting Wisconsin voters. His aides speculated that Clark would withdraw, leaving Edwards alone to challenge Kerry — but they didn't include Dean in their political calculus.

"With a narrower field, we'll get to Wisconsin, where we'll be better able to distinguish ourselves," said David Axelrod, an aide to Edwards. "We've always viewed this as kind of an elimination tournament. The field winnows down and then you'll get down to a final two. We anticipate being one of those final two."

He called Kerry's momentum "pretty impressive." But he said Kerry would be slowed as the field of candidates narrows and voters have fewer choices.

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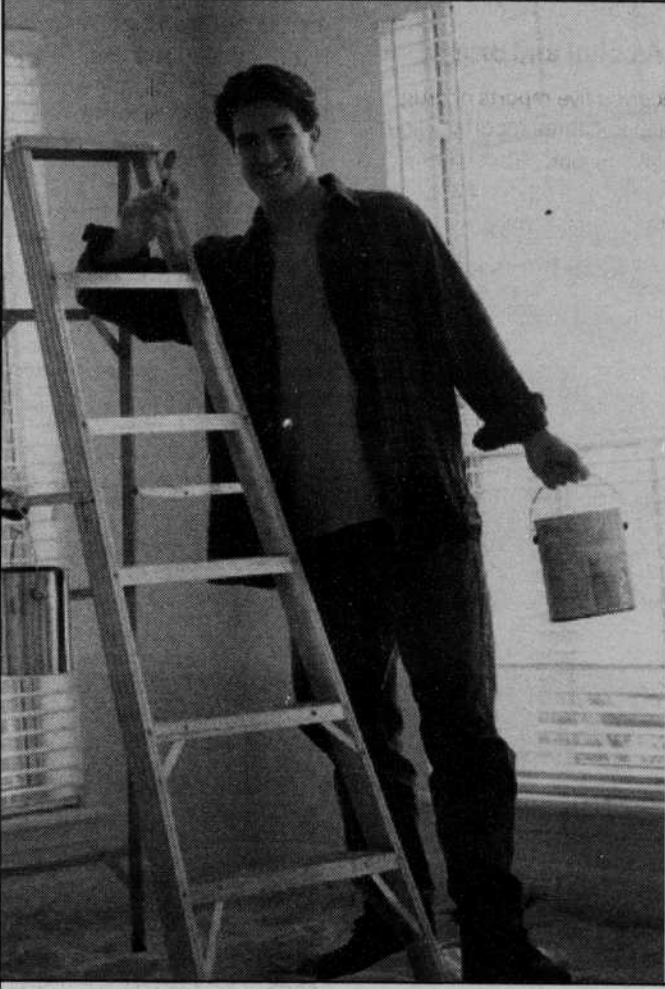
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