The stand-off between Mitt Romney and the Republican base continues

Glenn Altschuler
Vice President for University Relations at Cornell University

A sign spray painted on snow indicates a polling station for Alaskan voters on Super Tuesday. EPA/Michael Dineen

For Democrats, the Republican presidential primaries remain the gift that keeps on giving.

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, the front-runner for the Republican nomination, once hoped to seal the deal by Super Tuesday, which featured primaries or caucuses in ten states.

It didn’t happen.

To be sure, Romney won six races, including a squeaker in Ohio, the most closely-watched contest. He did even better in amassing delegates to the Republican nominating convention. In Idaho, one of a relatively small number of “winner-take-all” states, he added all 32 delegates. In Virginia, where Rick Santorum, the former United States Senator from Pennsylvania, and Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, failed to get on the ballot, he garnered 43 of 46 delegates.

And in Ohio, he benefited from Santorum’s inability to submit enough signatures in some electoral districts to be eligible to offer a slate of delegates.

But his rivals refuse to go away. Santorum carried Tennessee, Oklahoma, and North Dakota. Gingrich won his home state of Georgia. Although he has yet to win a single primary or caucus, Texas Congressman Ron Paul continues to add delegates here and there.

Since many Republicans believe Romney is insufficiently conservative to be the party’s
standard-bearer, Santorum, Gingrich and Paul continue to hope that he will not be able to secure the 1,144 delegates he needs to clinch the nomination before the convention convenes in Tampa, Florida at the end of August.

And so the race continues. Next week, the candidates face a caucus in Kansas and primaries in two southern states, Alabama and Mississippi, a region in which Romney has not fared well.

Most importantly, the Republican campaign, which has been relentlessly negative, has laid bare the weaknesses of an undeniably weak field, including the gaffe-prone front-runner, who seems unable to connect with voters.

A CNN poll taken in early May, 2011 indicated 40% of Americans had a favorable view of Romney, 30% an unfavorable view, and 19% did not know enough to render an opinion. By mid-February 2012, the numbers were 34% favorable, 54% unfavorable, and 7% undecided.

Especially worrisome to the Republican establishment is the disillusionment of women and independent voters. Following Santorum’s comment that contraception was harmful to women, charges by talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh, a right-wing icon, that a law student who testified before Congress about mandates that insurance cover birth control was “a slut,” and Romney’s flip-flops on legislation granting personhood to fertilised eggs, support for the GOP among women has plummeted.

Among independents, the voting bloc that will decide the presidential election of 2012, Romney’s support is also fading fast. As recently as mid-January, Romney had a sizeable lead over Obama among self-identified independent voters. Less than two months later, polls give the advantage to Obama by as much as 9 percentage points.

Largely because the alternatives to him are unthinkable, Mitt Romney is still a good bet to win the Republican nomination. But he will emerge as damaged goods, and the positions he has taken to mollify Tea Party conservatives will vastly complicate his efforts to move to the political center in the general election.

Nonetheless, it is far too early for the Democrats to light up a victory cigar. With unemployment in the United States at 8.3%, gas prices rising rapidly, and uncertainty about the European economy, Barack Obama remains a vulnerable incumbent.
One thing is certain: now that the Supreme Court (in the Citizens United case) has, in essence, made it possible for Super Pacs to spend unlimited funds, the presidential race of 2012 will be nasty, brutish, and long.