

Easy win for Trump in Nevada caucuses

By Steve Peoples and Nancy Benac, AP

Notching three in a row, Donald Trump decisively won Nevada's Republican caucuses Tuesday as Marco Rubio bid to elbow out Ted Cruz for second place in an increasingly urgent effort to slam the brakes on the Trump juggernaut.

Trump now can claim victories in the West, the South and Northeast – a testament to his broad appeal among the mad-as-hell voters making their voices heard in the 2016 presidential race.

"We're winning, winning, winning the country," Trump declared. "Soon, the country is going to start winning, winning, winning."

Ticking off a list of upcoming primary states where he's leading in preference polls, Trump predicted he'll soon be able to claim the GOP nomination. "It's going to be an amazing two months," he told a raucous crowd at a Las Vegas casino. "We might not even need the two months, folks, to be honest."

Six in 10 caucus goers said they were angry with the way the government is working, and Trump got about half of those angry voters, according to preliminary results of an entrance poll.

With time running out, Nevada was a critical test for Rubio and Cruz, the two senators battling to emerge as the clear alternative to the GOP front-runner. Rubio was out to prove he can build on recent momentum, while Cruz was looking for a spark to help him recover from a particularly rocky stretch in his campaign.

Lagging far behind the two senators in the Nevada vote were

Ohio Gov. John Kasich and retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson.

Rubio, already campaigning in Michigan as caucus results rolled in, sought to project confidence that he can consolidate the non-Trump voters who have been splintering among an assortment of GOP candidates, saying, "we have incredible room to grow."

But after finishing third in Iowa, fifth in New Hampshire and second in South Carolina, Rubio needs a win soon to support the idea he can beat Trump.

Cruz, a fiery conservative popular among voters on the GOP's right, finished a disappointing third in South Carolina after spending much of the past two weeks denying charges of dishonest campaign tactics and defending his integrity. Another disappointing finish in Nevada would raise new questions about his viability heading into a crucial batch of Super Tuesday states on March 1.

The election calendar suggests that if Trump's rivals don't slow him by mid-March, they may not ever. Trump swept all of South Carolina's 50 delegates, giving him a total of 67 compared to Cruz and Rubio who have 11 and 10, respectively. There were 30 delegates at stake in Nevada, and a whopping 595 available one week later in the March 1 Super Tuesday bonanza.

The billionaire businessman, in his victory speech, dismissed the notion that if more GOP candidates drop out of the race, they'll coalesce around an alternative.

"They keep forgetting that when people drop out, we're going to get a lot of votes," he said.

Nevada's caucusing played out in schools, community centers and places of worship across the state – a process that's been chaotic in the past.

Count Tracy Brigida, fed up after her husband was laid off

from his mining job, among those caucusing for Trump.

"I want a businessman to run the biggest business in the world," Brigida said as she caucused at a Las Vegas high school.

Jeremy Haight drove straight from his marketing job to caucus for Marco Rubio at the same high school.

"He's the most level-headed. He hasn't said anything stupid or crazy ... which is really what I think the country needs," Haight said.

It was Cruz for Megan Ortega, who declared: "He's consistent, he's bold and he's a class act."

Preliminary results of the entrance poll found that about 3 in 10 early caucus goers said the quality that mattered most to them in choosing a candidate was that he shares their values, slightly more than the quarter who said they want a candidate who can win in November. About a quarter said they want a candidate who can bring change. About 2 in 10 want one who "tells it like it is."

The GOP field that included a dozen candidates a month ago has been reduced to five, with former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush the latest to drop out after a disappointing finish in South Carolina. Kasich and Carson could play spoilers as Trump, Cruz and Rubio, battle for delegates with an increasing sense of urgency.

Indeed, Republican establishment heavyweights have been flooding to Rubio in recent days, including Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis and Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch. South Florida's three Cuban-American members of Congress announced their support for him in the hours before the Nevada contest.

Nevada marked the first Republican election in the West, the

fourth of the campaign. And it's not one that's gotten much attention from the GOP candidates.

Through Tuesday, the Republican candidates and the super PACs supporting them had spent a combined \$3.8 million on television and radio advertisements in Nevada – less than a tenth of the \$39.3 million spent ahead of last weekend's South Carolina primary, according to Kantar Media's CMAG data.

The entrance poll survey was conducted for the Associated Press and the television networks by Edison Research as Republican voters arrived at 25 randomly selected caucus sites in Nevada.