Pressler denies Santorum endorsement was rigged

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HOUSTON (ABP) – The host of a weekend gathering of religious conservatives seeking consensus on an alternative presidential candidate to GOP front-runner Mitt Romney denied charges that balloting was rigged to give Rick Santorum the nod over rivals Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry.

Paul Pressler, a former judge and architect of the "conservative resurgence" movement in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s, disputed a *Washington Times* article about a weekend gathering at Pressler's ranch near Houston claiming that organizers manipulated votes to guarantee that Santorum, a former senator and Roman Catholic, would come away with the group's endorsement.

Paul Pressler

"It is people that did not have the meeting go the way they wanted to that are spinning it and lying about it," Pressler said on *The Michael Berry Show* on KTRH news radio in Houston.

The newspaper article said Santorum won a first ballot over Gingrich but the margin was too close for organizers to claim consensus. A final ballot with more than 70 percent in favor of Santorum was said to have been taken after many backers of other candidates had left to catch flights home.

The article quoted Doug Wead, former President George H.W. Bush's one-time liaison to evangelicals, saying by the end of the weekend "it was clear that this had been definitely planned all along as a Rick Santorum event."

Another evangelical political organizer said he witnessed a possible

incident of ballot-box stuffing when a participant was seen writing Santorum's name on four separate ballots and casting all four.

Pressler said the allegation of stuffing the ballot box was traced to a young man who worked for a couple who had to leave early and asked him to cast ballots for them when the time for voting came.

"So he filled out three, not four, ballots," Pressler said. "He did it on the first ballot but not on the second and the third, because he thought it was not correct."

Pressler agreed the couple's request for the young man to vote in their place was "questionable."

"It shouldn't have been done, but it was not stuffing the ballot box," Pressler said. "It was a mistake, but it didn't affect the ultimate outcome.

Pressler said he voted for Texas Gov. Rick Perry on the first of three ballots taken during the event but switched to Santorum "since it was obvious that Rick Perry would not prevail."

Pressler said the purpose of the balloting was "to come to a consensus and let the consensus be known" and not a binding pledge about how to vote in the primary.

"It was informational," Pressler said of the invitation-only gathering of about 160 social conservatives. "People heard what other people were doing and why. I think that it will have some influence on what people do hereafter, but it was not an implication that if you come you must support anybody. It's just perhaps you will get enough information in this meeting that will cause you to change your thinking or adapt or something."

"It was not a forced meeting," he said. "It was an open forum, and one of the things we did most was pray. We had an hour of prayer there on Friday

night. It was open for everybody praying, and we started every meeting and closed every meeting with prayer and prayed in between, and it was not partisan prayers."

Pressler said he thinks the group's dissatisfaction with Romney, who is a Mormon, is not due to a "religious problem" but rather about his record as a governor and the fact "he is a Northeasterner and really does not identify with people of the forks of the creek."

"I think this group was much more concerned about his health plan in Massachusetts and other things like that," Pressler said. "I think Romney has come a long way, and I will support him enthusiastically if he gets the Republican nomination. And I think everybody or almost everybody there will do the same thing."

Pressler said the gathering was more diverse than just a group of evangelicals. "We had a Roman Catholic priest pray, opening or closing one of the sessions," he said. "Some of my closest Catholic friends were there. I'm sure there were some Mormons there. I don't know."

Pressler said he has "never seen evangelicals so aroused" in an election season and predicted greater involvement by that bloc than ever before.

"Here I am, a person who spent 25 years in elective office — always elected as a Democrat — and for the first time in my life I don't know one single person that supports the Democratic Party and Obama," Pressler said.

"I personally believe that this group is destroying the nation economically and morally, and if it is allowed to continue we have a very bleak future as a country." Pressler said of the current administration. "I travel a great deal and I see what's going on in the world, and I shudder to think what is coming to America if we don't stop this right now."

–Bob Allen is managing editor of Associated Baptist Press.