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By GILBERT PRICE

Call and Post staff writer

COLUMBUS — After a stunning, 2-1 victory over Massachusetts' Governor Michael Dukakis in the Michigan caucuses, it is clear that Jesse Jackson, the "country preacher," is no longer merely preaching to the converted, but beginning to save a few souls.

Now, politicians in Ohio have begun to assess the ramifications of a Jackson candidacy — and of the scenario of the Ohio primary, which, in a deeply divided field,

will loom more and more important to the fate of whomever is the Democrats' ultimate nominee.

What is so stunning about Jackson's win is not just its margin — 55 percent of the caucus vote, to 28 percent for Dukakis and 13 percent for Missouri Congressman Richard Gephardt — but the breadth and depth of Jackson's support. Early polls showed Jackson in a virtual tie with Dukakis prior to the results from the polling places in Detroit, where Jackson beat Dukakis by margins as high as 12-1.

"I think that Jesse Jackson's the

front-runner," James Ruvolo, chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party, said in the wake of Jackson's mammoth victory.

"It's a long way to go, but it looks like a two-man race," between Jackson and Dukakis," Ruvolo added.

Indeed, it is clearly a two-man race. With Representative Richard Gephardt's withdrawal from the race, Rev. Jackson gains an additional 20 delegates from Missouri, surging into a 617.55 to 603.55 delegate lead over Gov. Dukakis. That lead could change if Dukakis wins Connecticut,

which borders his native Massachusetts. No other candidate is within 250 delegates of the front-runners.

Ruvolo has ascribed Jackson's front-runner status to "a remarkable ability to be a powerful communicator with a good message."

"He's not winning with slight of hand," Ruvolo continued. "He's winning because he's attracting votes across all kinds of lines."

Information from the Michigan caucus indicates that is true. Jackson actually carried predominantly white cities like Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Lansing and Saginaw, and gained between a quarter and a third of the total white vote. He was helped in the Michigan campaign by support from some factions of organized labor, particularly within the hard-hit Michigan automotive industry.

Jackson's campaign has made a point of attacking the "economic violence" which causes multinational corporations and merchant bankers to close American plants and export jobs overseas.

State Rep. Ray Miller of Columbus, who heads Jackson's Franklin County campaign, said that one of the most positive benefits of the Jackson candidacy is that it has served to redefine Democratic principles.

"What has been lacking in the Democratic Party in recent years is that we've sort of been a party trying to define itself," Miller said.

"What Jackson has done is to define very clearly to Democrats why they support the Democratic Party — social justice, economic justice, and caring for those

who can't care for themselves.

"It's a message that's coming through clear."

But the path for Jackson remains filled with challenges. Jackson faces primaries in Connecticut, New York, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania before he gets to Ohio on May 3.

Ruvolo believes that the Democratic Party's ultimate nominee will be the person who wins those primaries, particularly the three over New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio. Those three states will choose between them more than 600 delegates.

Lack of a clear-cut victory in those states, Ruvolo believes, could result in a brokered convention.

Miller asserts that, paradoxically, Jackson's big win could even make it more difficult for him the rest of the way. The candidacies of Paul Simon and Richard Gephardt, which had served to draw some support away from Dukakis, could be in jeopardy, Miller reasoned, and their voters were likely to fall in behind Dukakis.

Already, many national Democratic leaders who had been sitting on the fence have declared for Dukakis, apparently fearful of Jackson's rising credibility.

Despite Jackson's primary successes, one question remains: Even if Jackson is ultimately the Democrats' nominee, can he win?

Gov. Richard F. Celeste had been quoted recently as doubting whether America is ready to elect a Black man as president, and recent polls seem to indicate that he might be right. Voters in a recent Newsweek magazine poll

showed Jackson faring worse against possible Republican nominees George Bush and Robert Dole than any other candidate, although the poll was taken prior to Jackson's Michigan win.

Ruvolo, however, does not necessarily buy the political logic or the polls.

"If he can win big in the spring, who's going to say he can't win in the fall?" Ruvolo asks, arguing that for white Democrats to be afraid of Jackson's popularity is "silly."

Whether America is ready for a Black candidate, Ruvolo says, "will be proven on the campaign trail, and it shouldn't be prejudged."

One thing is clear: Jackson has already wildly surpassed his performance of 1984, when he gained only 400 delegates. He is expected to more than double that, and probably gain at least 1000 of the more than 4000 at the convention. And from there, anything is possible — particularly after his showing in Michigan.

In a related matter, the Ohio State University Organizing Committee of the Student Action Coalition for Jackson, in association with the Organizing Committee of the Black Student Alliance and the Coalition to Realize the Dream, will hold a campaign rally for Jackson on Monday, April 4 — the 20th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King.

The Rally will be held at 7 p.m. in the conference theater of the Ohio Union. Speakers will be Rep. Ray Miller, Dr. Frank Hale, Rev. Tyrone Crider, Dr. Charles O. Ross, and the OSU Gospel Choral.