

Evangelicals finally find their candidate: Huckabee

by John Marelius

DES MOINES, Iowa - The rocketlike rise of a once-obscure former Arkansas governor and Southern Baptist minister to the front ranks of the Republican presidential campaign owes much to the likes of Don Swisher. Chatting between Sunday services about the campaign in the foyer of First Assembly of God Church, Swisher said he plans to vote for Huckabee Thursday night at the Iowa precinct caucuses, the first official nomination contest of the 2008 presidential campaign.

"I like Huckabee," the semiretired West Des Moines resident said Sunday. "He's pro-life, a Baptist minister, so he's Bible-based." Evangelical Christians are a formidable force in the Iowa caucuses: They are believed to make up more than 40 percent of the Republican electorate.

Religious issues have dominated the campaign to an uncommon degree even in a state where televangelist Pat Robertson placed first in the GOP caucuses in 1988.

The debate hasn't centered just on issues such as abortion and gay rights that are important to religious conservatives. Much of the discussion has involved the personal religious faiths of the two leading Republicans - Huckabee and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Mormon.

"I'm really surprised how much religion has been an issue in the campaign," said Bruce Nesmith, a professor of political science at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who studies religion in politics.

Throughout most of 2007, evangelicals were deeply split, with pockets of support for Romney, former Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee, Sen. John McCain of Arizona and even former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, despite his support for abortion rights and a turbulent personal life that includes three marriages.

But many evangelicals stayed on the sidelines in the hope that a candidate they found acceptable would emerge.

For many of them, that person - Huckabee - was there all along. It just took people a long time to notice.

"They were deeply split until about a month or so ago. There is no one particular candidate who seemed like the obvious candidate to them," said Dennis Goldford, a political science professor at Drake University in Des Moines.

"They liked what Romney said about social issues but didn't trust how sincere he was. They wanted to like Thompson, but Thompson entered with such a splat. What happened, of course, was Huckabee slowly but surely made an impact."

Huckabee won supporters thanks to his amiable campaign style, a succession of well-received debate performances and unflinching views on abortion and gay rights - in contrast to other Republican contenders whose social-conservative credentials are suspect to evangelicals.

For Huckabee, being a former minister who often wears his religious values on his sleeve closes the sale with some evangelical voters.

"I'm a born-again Christian," said Eleanor Bauer, a retired graphic artist in Ankeny, Iowa. "And if I see something in life that I have a question about, I ask God about it. I feel like we are being led by God.

"Where someone else tries to go by their own wisdom instead of God's, we just get in trouble. Huckabee would turn to God." But others, such as retired pastor Phil Carroll, a McCain supporter, thinks that when it comes to religion, Huckabee lays it on too thick.

"He's a good man, but pastors get called to the ministry by God," Carroll said. "Did God call him to be president? I don't think so.

"John McCain, being a Christian, does not play the God card. He thinks that's unethical, and I agree with him."

Huckabee, interviewed on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday, said he had no religious tests as governor of Arkansas when it came to public policy issues and would not as president.

"I never proposed a bill to remove the Capitol dome and replace it with a steeple," he said. "We didn't do tent revivals on the grounds of the Capitol."

But critics question whether religion influenced Huckabee as governor to push for the early parole of a convicted rapist who went on to rape and kill two other women. They suggest Huckabee was swayed by a friend who was also a pastor who befriended the prisoner, Wayne DuMond, along with the rapist's contention

that he had been "born again." Huckabee says he did not pressure the parole board to act.

For months, it appeared that Iowa was Romney's for the taking. The former Massachusetts governor's campaign spent millions on television ads for much of 2007 and methodically built the kind of extensive grass-roots organization needed to turn voters out to caucuses, which essentially are local political party meetings, in 1,800 precincts.

The Real Clear Politics Web site posts a running average of publicly available polls, and it shows that Huckabee zoomed from barely registering in Iowa in July to reaching 30 percent in December. At the same time, Romney dropped from more than 30 percent in September to 20 percent in December.

However, the latest Real Clear Politics average indicates Huckabee may have peaked. It shows Romney averaging 28.2 percent to 27.6 percent for Huckabee.

After months of paying no attention to Huckabee, the Romney campaign and Washington interest groups have leveled a succession of attacks against him for raising taxes, favoring college scholarships for the children of illegal immigrants and paroling criminals.

Gentry Collins, Iowa director for the Romney campaign, said Huckabee's breakthrough results from "a misunderstanding of who he is."

"People know very few things about him," Collins said. "They know he's affable and that he's done well in the debates, and they know that he's a Baptist minister.

"And from there they sort of extrapolate some assumptions and they take at face value his claim that he's a conservative, which is patently false. The guy's essentially a pro-life Democrat." Romney, meanwhile, has been criticized for a succession of politically timely changes of position on abortion, gay rights, illegal immigration and other issues.

Gerald Graves, a Des Moines computer consultant and the senior usher at First Assembly of God, put it delicately Sunday: "I like what he says. His record of living up to it is a little shorter than I would like."

Huckabee was more pointed on "Meet the Press." "You're not going to find something on YouTube where I said something different on the sanctity of life 10 years ago," he said.

On Saturday, Huckabee said, "If a person is dishonest in his approach to the job, do you believe he will be honest in telling you the truth when he does get the job?"

Romney delivered a high-profile speech this month in an attempt to put questions to rest about his Mormon faith, especially among evangelical Christians. Judging from interviews Sunday at First Assembly of God, he didn't.

"A friend of ours is married to a Mormon," said Vicky Searcy, who works in a Des Moines real estate office. "There's a lot more to it than people know."

Swisher expressed similar wariness.

"I have a problem with his religion," Swisher said. "His religion runs counter to what we believe here."

CNS correspondent George E. Condon Jr. contributed to this report.

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