

Huckabee Surges Ahead in Iowa

Christians lack consensus on who they will support for president, but this week's results in the Iowa polls is showing that many are rallying around Mike Huckabee.



At the start of the primary season conservative Christians are united in their anxiety over the possibility of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton becoming president. But their harmony ends there.

No presidential candidate has managed to rally the complete support of the evangelical voting bloc, which in 2004 comprised 40 percent of the vote for President Bush. And although polls show that most Americans believe it is important for a president to have strong religious beliefs, the two front-runners—Clinton and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani—are seen as the least religious candidates from their respective parties.

Yet an increasing number of evangelicals are rallying behind former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who has long been considered a dark horse for the Republican nomination. This week, Huckabee attracted heavy media attention when he overtook Gov. Mitt Romney in Iowa, placing first in a Des Moines Register poll. He hit double digits in a CNN national poll last month.

Adding to the Huckabee momentum, actor Chuck Norris, *Life Today* host James Robison and American Family Association founder Don Wildmon have all endorsed the one-time Baptist pastor while Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren, who has known Huckabee for nearly 30 years, said he is “definitely presidential material.”

But more than 20 percent of evangelicals said they did not have a favorite presidential candidate. The recent Associated Press/Ipsos poll also found that 24 percent would vote for

former Sen. Fred Thompson, and 20 percent supported Giuliani despite his failed marriages and support of abortion and gay rights.

The lack of consensus has been most evident among ministry leaders known for their political activism. In November Christian Broadcasting Network founder Pat Robertson announced his support for Giuliani, saying he was the best candidate to defend the nation against terrorism.

Meanwhile, the National Right to Life Committee, the nation's largest pro-life group, endorsed Thompson, while Moral Majority co-founder Paul Weyrich, Bob Jones University Chancellor Bob Jones III and pro-life leader John Willke threw their support behind Romney, despite his Mormon faith. And former GOP candidate Sam Brownback endorsed Sen. John McCain, who once called right-wing Christian leaders "agents of intolerance."

Among conservative Hispanic Christians, Huckabee and McCain stand out, said Samuel Rodriguez, a Pentecostal minister and president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

The immigration debate will sway Hispanics away from the Republicans, he noted, but Huckabee's positions on immigration, social justice, life and marriage make him "not your typical white conservative" but one "in the vein of Ronald Reagan."

He added that McCain also has appeal because he "has spent more political capital on immigration than any other."

On the Democratic side, Clinton has yet to attract any prominent evangelical support, but her main contender, Sen. Barack Obama, has made inroads into Christian circles. Obama garnered an endorsement from popular pastor and singer Donnie McClurkin and the Rev. Stephen Thurston, president of the National Baptist Convention of America. He also was invited to

Warren's annual summit on AIDS, as were Clinton, Huckabee, Romney and Giuliani.

However, despite Obama's emphasis on faith, some socially conservative black Christians perceive him as too liberal because of his support for abortion and gay rights, said Harry Jackson, an African-American pastor and the chairman of the High Impact Leadership Coalition, a group promoting faith-based leadership among blacks and Hispanics.

Last fall Christian leaders, including James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Gary Bauer, a Christian activist and 2000 presidential candidate, organized a meeting in which they agreed that if neither major party nominated a candidate "who pledges himself or herself to the sanctity of human life," as Dobson later wrote in a New York Times op-ed, they would vote for a minor party candidate.

"Voting according to the possibility of winning or losing can lead directly to the compromise of one's principles," Dobson wrote. "Winning the presidential election is vitally important, but not at the expense of what we hold most dear."

The group even considered creating a third party, but reached no consensus.

Bauer said differences among Christians are understandable given the unprecedented way the candidates are reaching out to evangelicals. "The one thing I'm worried about is that as Christians we will be angry with each other because we've picked different candidates and that'll make it harder for everybody to join together once there's a final nominee," he said.

Jackson said despite the apathy among many conservative Christians, evangelical voters may still decide the election. "At the very least we're going to be a spoiler vote," he said. "For example, if Hillary Clinton was the person we all said 'we're not voting for Hillary no matter what,' it would be

hard ... for her to win.” —AMY GREEN