

Ben Carson Outpacing Many Republican Rivals

Ben Carson, a renowned neurosurgeon with no experience in the cutthroat world of Washington politics, is riding a surprising wave of support among conservatives that has placed him near the top of contenders for the Republican presidential nominee in 2016.

The soft-spoken 63-year-old Carson, an African-American who only officially became a Republican last year, has found an opening in the wide-open race in which 13 candidates are running for the White House. His resume of having performed 15,000 surgical operations is the most unusual of anyone in the field.

In polls, Carson outperforms most of his fellow candidates, who often have much bigger media profiles, much more political experience and in many cases have track records as governors or senators. While the spotlight has been on opponents like former Florida governor Jeb Bush and Florida Senator Marco Rubio, Carson has been quietly building a grassroots following.

His surprising popularity in the polls has translated into a high number of individual donations that has not been previously reported. Interviews with supporters and conservative activists suggest he is benefiting from a weariness among some Republicans with establishment politicians.

Much of his appeal centers on his lack of connection to Washington and his off-the-cuff speaking style: He eschews prepared speeches in favor of thoughts he jots down on index cards to which he may or may not refer.

His supporters are not troubled by his lack of political

experience and indeed welcome the fact that he is new to the public stage. His support is particularly strong among Christian conservatives, who like the fact that his half-dozen books and speeches are infused with discussions about his faith.

Carson told a crowd in Sioux Center, Iowa, last week that he didn't really want to run for president, but there were so many people clamoring for him to get into the race that he felt the call.

"I started praying about it, asking God for guidance, and I finally concluded that 'Lord, as long as you open the doors I'll walk through them. And if you shut the doors, I'll gladly sit down.' Well, he has continually opened the doors," Carson said.

Popular Choice

A *Reuters/Ipsos* poll this week showed that Carson was the third most popular choice among Republican primary voters (11 percent). Only former Florida Governor Jeb Bush (17 percent) and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (15 percent) placed ahead of him.

A *WSJ/NBC News* poll places him fourth in the Republican race, while a poll by the conservative group Citizens United of the group's members found Carson in first place with 18 percent among 4,300 respondents.

"He's certainly positioning himself to make a very serious run at it," said Dave Bossie, president of Citizens United. Bossie nonetheless said Carson still faces some big hurdles.

"He has to show he can raise money. But at the end of the day he's got to translate grassroots support across the country into votes and that's a tough thing to do," he said.

Carson campaign officials say Carson is receiving a surge in

small-dollar financial donations, up to 185,000 so far and on track for 200,000 by the end of the month, with an average of \$52 apiece.

Campaign finance expert Brendan Glavin said 185,000 was a big number if all were unique donors. In 2011, President Barack Obama's re-election campaign said it had 493,697 unique donors.

Carson's speeches on the campaign trail include the standard conservative calls for getting the government off the backs of the people without a whole lot of specifics.

But there's also an element of faith-healer optimism based on his life, from rebellious Detroit street youth who tried to stab a friend at age 14, to accomplished physician who in 1987 led a surgical team that successfully separated conjoined twins.

Anxious Moments

His staff is never quite sure what Carson is going to say publicly since he does not speak from a text, a stark difference from today's carefully scripted candidates.

"It makes for some anxious moments for his staff, I can promise you that," said Carson communications director Doug Watts. "But that's his style."

While it would be easy to write off Carson as simply enjoying a brief shining moment, his rise is not based on a sudden burst of publicity from, for example, a good debate performance on national television.

Instead, Carson is riding high based on what has been a far smaller stage that includes support from people who have seen him on cable TV, watched the 2009 movie "Gifted Hands" about his life or read one of his books.

Interviews with more than a dozen Carson supporters show that

it is his unique background that is helping him get traction in the race for the Republican nomination.

All of them said it does not matter to them that he has no experience in government, a measure of how much dissatisfaction there is with politicians in Washington.

"I think it would be a plus," said Kenneth Hunter, 59, of Georgia. "I think we have too many career politicians in the race."

Christi Taylor, an internal medicine doctor from West Des Moines, Iowa, said she first felt the pull of Carson when she saw him speak more than a year ago at a medical conference in Texas. She and her husband are now co-chairs of the Carson campaign in Iowa.

"It's truly what I would call a groundswell," she said of the popular support for Carson. "The most encouraging thing to me is that we have people who haven't been involved in politics and some who haven't voted in years because they have become frustrated and felt their voices haven't been heard."

Carson broke through on the national stage when he upbraided President Barack Obama over his signature healthcare law at a National Prayer Breakfast in 2013. Obama was at the breakfast.

If Carson rises further in the polls, chances are his positions on the issues will get more scrutiny. In Iowa, he called for presidents to have only one six-year term instead of two four-year terms, which can only be done through the extremely difficult task of amending the U.S. Constitution.

Carson is trying to pull off the virtually unthinkable: To become the first non-politician to be elected president since World War Two hero General Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. Republican strategists say, however, he is extremely unlikely to secure his party's nomination.

