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Evangelicals in S.C. not just voting on faith

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COLUMBIA, S.C.

Asked to assess the attitude of evangelical Christians as they mull over the current crop of presidential candidates, one pastor here paused, smiled and put it this way: "As Jesus said, be as innocent as a dove and as shrewd as a serpent."

White evangelicals, a significant voter segment nationally, are a political powerhouse in the conservative Palmetto State, where they represent an estimated 40 percent to 50 percent of the primary voters in an overwhelmingly white Republican Party.

But evangelicals here, and those who boosted former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee to a stunning first-place GOP finish in the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 3 and to a respectable third place in the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday, are not quite the same as they were when they helped propel President Bush into the White House in 2000.

Eight years later, many evangelicals are tougher, more skeptical and far less trusting of the politicians who woo them, said de Treville "Det" Bowers, the silver-haired pastor of Columbia's Christ Church in the Carolinas, who emphasized "shrewd" in his biblical reference to the Book of Matthew.

"I think in our community and in the South, which is what I know, evangelicals have been so burned by those who claim to be what maybe is not evidenced in the policies that come forth," said Bowers. "Because of that, there is a strength I would call it -- some might call it a hardening -- of attitudes toward the [faith] professions of candidates, what they're claiming."

Huckabee, a Baptist minister delivering a message mixing faith and populism, has survived that scrutiny so far. Coming from nowhere a few months ago, he has become a top Republican candidate here in recent weeks, leading Arizona Sen. John McCain and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in many polls.

This, despite earlier endorsements by such conservative Christian leaders as Pat Robertson of Rudy Giuliani and that of Bob Jones III, former president of Bob Jones University, for Romney.

Jones' endorsement was somewhat shocking since most Southern Baptists -- the majority in South Carolina -- consider



Romney's Mormon faith to be a cult, not a Christian religion. But the subtext appeared to be that Romney was electable and could battle New York Sen. Hillary Clinton if she were the Democratic nominee.

"I think in the South Carolina Republican primary, evangelical Christians are going to ask the same question as the average voter. Which one is the conservative who can win? Because there is no worst nightmare for typical South Carolinians than Hillary Clinton in the White House," said Oran Smith, executive director of the Palmetto Family Council, a non-profit group focused on family and conservative values in South Carolina. "There are a lot of folks here who can't stand the sound of her voice."

But many evangelicals were not convinced their best choices were Romney, who had switched his position from supporting to opposing legal abortion, or the thrice-married Giuliani, who supports abortion rights.

Moreover, the older generation of Christian leaders like Robertson and Rev. Jerry Falwell, who died last spring, is in transition to a younger group of leaders who entertain a broader agenda of issues, said John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

Abortion and same-sex marriage remain important to them, but on questions like the environment, foreign policy and social justice, they're more moderate, he said.

Huckabee's appeal

That may partly account for the appeal of Huckabee. He appears more moderate on such questions than did the old guard Christian Right, just as he is a fiscal maverick in terms of standard Republican doctrine. But, still, he is a staunch cultural conservative.

That is the kind of candidate Dianna Lydiard, data manager for a cancer screening program at the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, is looking for. "Democrats tend to be more funding of those programs than Republicans," she said of the public health initiatives she favors. "But I prefer the values and goals of the Republicans," said Lydiard, 42, noting "I think I need to vote in a way that is honoring to God."

"Up until a month or so ago, it was evident to me that the evangelical community was fractured and to some extent dispirited. Since then, though, Gov. Huckabee has done a lot about uniting evangelicals," said Green.

Huckabee's success in Iowa and New Hampshire buoyed evangelicals' confidence in his viability as a candidate. In earlier discussions with evangelicals, said Green, "I got the same answer from all of them: He looks like a really good candidate from a substantive point of view, but we don't think he can win."

A similar phenomenon appears to be occurring on the Democratic side. In a state where Republicans outnumber Democrats about 2-1, evangelicals are estimated to make up a quarter to a third of Democratic primary voters. Many of them are African-Americans, who represent about half of those voters.

While dozens of prominent pastors in the state endorsed Clinton, polls indicated black voters felt almost equally torn between loyalty to the Clinton name and excitement over the bid by Illinois Sen. Barack Obama. But Obama's first-place showing in Iowa and second-place finish in New Hampshire demonstrated his electability in two very white states, prompting black voters to reconsider him.

Trust in God

Electability isn't the only factor among evangelicals, many of whom say they trust that God will put the right person in the White House. "I'm interested in righteousness, what God sees as right," said Ann Sandifer, 56, after a noontime Ladies' Bible Study at Christ Church of the Carolinas. "You look at the strength of our country and its beginning, and

they say about half of the Congress were pastors. I think that's a good background," said the retired computer analyst, who plans to vote for Huckabee.

"When I first heard about him, I wasn't sure if he could make it to the White House or if he was just there to make a statement," said Sandifer's friend Sandy Hurst, a 53-year-old homemaker. Now, "I'm feeling God has placed his favor on him to raise him up," she said.

Will she vote for Huckabee? "We have a sign in our yard."

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