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Expert: Huckabee would be great VP

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COLUMBIA, S.C. - Personally and on paper, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee would seem able to make a run at front-runner status in the Republican presidential nomination race.

But with his campaign polling far behind those in the top tier, some are throwing out another title in connection with Huckabee's name.

"My suspicion is Huckabee now is running for vice president," Clemson University political scientist Dave Woodard said.

And, Woodard said, Huckabee could be the perfect man for the job.

Thus far, at least, the former governor isn't polling at the level he needs to in order to secure the GOP nod early in 2008.

A recent Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll of the three early-voting states of Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina showed Huckabee lagging far behind the first-tier candidates in all three.

His best showing came in Iowa where, at 8 percent, he came in third place. In New Hampshire and South Carolina, he came in fifth place with 6 percent of the vote.

Huckabee himself brushes off the notion that he's seeking to be VP - "You have one goal, and that is to win the gold."

Woodward, though, said Huckabee has what the top-tier candidates need to round out their ticket: respect and a strong, conservative record.

An ordained Baptist minister, Huckabee has won praise from conservatives.

On Monday in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., he won the "Values Voter Debate" by far: 63 percent said he was their

favorite candidate.

Privately, even some people officially supporting other candidates for the GOP nomination have said Huckabee impresses them.

The front-runners, meanwhile, each have flaws that could give them headaches next year, Woodard said.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney continually fields questions about his Mormon faith and his shifting views on abortion rights.

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has upset some conservatives due to his support for gun control, abortion and gay rights.

New to the race, former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson is facing scrutiny over his past lobbying activities, which include an abortion-rights group as a client, and was sharply criticized by James Dobson, a leader among social conservatives, this week.

Huckabee, meanwhile, consistently wins praise from conservatives.

He participated in a forum and straw poll Thursday sponsored by the Palmetto Family Council, an anti-abortion group in this early-primary state.

Prior to the event, Woodard predicted, "He might come out of there as the darling."

And a darling of the conservatives may be exactly what the top-tier candidates will need to convince Republicans to come out to the polls in strong numbers next November, Woodard said.

For all the praise heaped on him, Huckabee is running out of time to convince a majority of GOP voters that he's their guy.

Voting in early-primary and early-caucus states begins in less than four months.

Huckabee insists that his "slow, steady" campaign is where he wants it to be.

"I'm happy to be the tortoise, knowing that in the story, the tortoise did win the race," he said.

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