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## Values voters a major force within GOP

**Religious conservatives likely to play key role in S.C. primary**

By JOHN O'CONNOR

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Wearing motorcycle leather and carrying an anti-abortion sign declaring "the first right, (is) the right to life," Piedmont resident Benny Queen is among the many South Carolinians who will weigh his religious beliefs when voting for a presidential candidate.

Queen, attending a Columbia right-to-life rally Saturday, said he has yet to decide who gets his vote in the state's upcoming presidential primaries. But, he added, a candidate's values matter.

"I would want to know what kind of background they have, what they're for in terms of spiritual well-being of the people."

Queen, who said he definitely will vote, is among the tens of thousands of S.C. voters who say religion influences their vote. Those voters are likely to play a major role in who wins Saturday's Republican primary.

"You gotta pretty much figure out that they're a pretty large cohort," said Dave Woodard, a Clemson University political scientist and political consultant. "I tell the clients I advise, 'You better have a picture of you and your preacher.'"

According to some estimates, Christian conservative voters make up 40 percent of expected GOP voters. Woodard, who also conducts polls for Clemson, puts the number even higher — at 60 percent.

More than 600,000 people are expected to vote in South Carolina's GOP primary. Which candidate religious conservatives choose could decide who wins this state's Republican presidential primary.

Unlike other states, said Oran P. Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, South Carolina's Christian conservative voters are not a separate sect of the Republican Party — they are the party, from leadership to grass roots.

Smith notes his organization's board has vocal supporters of most of the Republican presidential candidates.

Republican candidates have spent time and effort to recruit those votes. Each touts his bona fides to the faithful:

- Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee is an ordained Baptist minister.
- Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani won the support of Pat Robertson, host and founder of the 700 Club television show.
- Fred Thompson has won support from the National Right to Life Committee and its S.C. affiliate.
- Mitt Romney was endorsed by Bob Jones III, president of Greenville's fundamentalist Bob Jones University.
- U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona was endorsed by state Sen. Mike Fair, R-Greenville, who emphasizes his pro-life positions.

Huckabee is a natural fit to attract Christian conservative voters, including 58-year-old Manning resident Mac Hemingway.

"I made up my mind years ago. I didn't know the names, but I knew the issues," said Hemingway, an ordained Baptist minister. "He (Huckabee) sees things the way I do."

Other GOP candidates — not as comfortable a fit as Huckabee — have won the support of S.C. evangelicals for one main reason: fear of a second Clinton White House. Jones III said as much in endorsing Romney, a Mormon.

But most notable is the number of Christian conservative voters, including Queen, who have yet to make up their minds.

Columbia resident Elizabeth Loeffler, 43, said she is deciding between Giuliani and Romney.

"Human rights absolutely, abortion being one of the top" issues, Loeffler said of the concern she considers most important.

Clemson's Woodard, readying a Clemson poll to be released later this week, said a high number of voters have told him they could change their minds before Saturday.

The Palmetto Family Council's Smith says he sees the same thing.

"It's a remarkable phenomenon," he said. "There is not a lot of consensus."

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