

Mike Huckabee: smart enough to be the Republican nominee

*Last week, the former Governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, announced that he is running for the Republican nomination in the 2016 presidential race. **Richard Brodsky** writes that Huckabee is the favorite of many GOP primary voters, partly because of his strong positions on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. His recent statement in support of entitlements, which goes against the grain of his Republican rivals, may yet help him to win over the middle classes as well.*



The 2016 Republican primary campaign is turning into something of a food fight with over a dozen candidates looming. Emerging from the pack is a problem for everyone but Jeb Bush. The candidates themselves run from the truly scary to the thoughtful. But, after all, we live in a democracy and voters will decide who is the nominee. That's the problem. The GOP primary voter is a red-meat, no compromise, rear-end-kicking, hard right-winger. The candidates in 2016 are being forced to the hard right, no matter what that does to their general election chances. Just like Romney in 2012.

None of them have quite figured out how to win the nomination without alienating swing voters. The demands of satisfying the Tea Party, evangelical, corporate big boys and related groupings seems insoluble.

Comes now Mike Huckabee. This is one smart cookie. He has always been able to find ways to keep the hard conservatives happy, and yet speak to the concerns of a much broader swath of voters. It's what made him a successful governor in Arkansas. It's the only possible path to success in 2016.

Keeping the base happy comes first. Huckabee has a history of very strong positions on Republican social issues, particularly abortion and same-sex marriage. On those, and other parts of the right-wing catechism, he is the favorite of a lot of Republican primary voters, particularly the evangelical Christian wing of the party. That's as much as 25 percent of the electorate. He's been clear, uncompromising and focused on their issues. They love it.

That's given him an electoral base, but it's also limited his appeal to a more moderate brand of Republican voter. And it is certainly not enough to win the nomination. Pundits have described him as likely to do well in Iowa, South Carolina and other outlier pockets of evangelical voters but not able to capture the swing states that a winner needs, and not able to raise big money. Which is what happened to him in 2008.

Huckabee understands all this. His response this week was striking and potent. Unlike almost every other Republican, Mick Huckabee came out for entitlements: "I'll never rob seniors of what our government promised them and even forced them to pay for."

Say what? No means test for Social Security and Medicare? No benefit cuts? No "makers" and "takers"? The Republican establishment has talked themselves into the view that America's real problem is programs that protect the economic security of seniors and average citizens. It's not only false, it's politically toxic.

That's led to a mostly unanimous bashing of Social Security and proposals to privatize everything, as the Koch Brothers and the corporate rich guys demand. Most of the other candidates need this cash cow to build a credible voter base. And those guys don't like Huckabee one bit: "It seems to me like campaign opportunism or demagoguery," **said David McIntosh**, the president of the Club for Growth about the Huckabee promise.

Who cares what they think. Not Huckabee. "People are looking for a presidential candidate who reminds them of the guy they work with rather than the guy who laid them off." Bam, game on.

Huckabee's plan is clear and in retrospect obvious and brilliant. Rely on evangelicals to keep him in the high teens in the polls, then his pivot toward economic populism and the needs of the middle class. That's a voter base that won't disappear in New Hampshire. Hmmm.

It's the first sign that one of the Republican candidates is trying to find a way out of the box that ultimately crippled Romney's ability to make a case against Obama. It's much too soon to predict success or failure. But coalitions are what win fragmented elections, and ultimately even Republican voters will want to now more than what a candidate is against. If you want to draw a Republican roadmap that takes you to the White House, hire Mike Huckabee.

A version of this article [first appeared at the Huffington Post](#).

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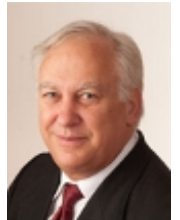
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