



Gressette Holt, 10, from Greenville, S.C., takes a picture of Republican presidential hopeful, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, as he speaks at a campaign event at Furman University in Greenville, S.C. Wednesday, Jan. 9, 2008. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)



## Huckabee Aims for Evangelicals in SC

By ERIC GORSKI – Jan 10, 2008

Propelled in Iowa by evangelicals' support, Mike Huckabee is trying for a repeat victory in South Carolina, where religion is woven even more tightly into the fabric of life.

A win there in the Jan. 19 primary would keep the former Southern Baptist minister and Arkansas governor in strong contention for the Republican presidential nomination, no matter how he does in the Michigan voting that comes first.

"He is tailor-made for South Carolina voters, better so than Bush in 2000," contends former South Carolina Gov. David Beasley, a Huckabee backer. But Huckabee's hardly alone in seeking — and gaining — support from evangelicals.

Mitt Romney and Fred Thompson have won important endorsements. John McCain is trying to mend fences after a difficult primary experience in South Carolina in 2000.

As in Iowa, where he won the Republican caucuses, the cash-strapped Huckabee is relying on pastors to help get out the vote. And he also has the support of some in the political establishment — Beasley is one — giving him organizing power he lacked in other early voting states. That could make a difference to pragmatic evangelical voters, who want a candidate who could actually win the nomination.

His background has given him some advantages. He spoke in early November at a "pastors' policy briefing" similar to those staged in Iowa and New Hampshire, where local pastors can meet with national Christian Huckabee supporters.

"He's had wonderful opportunities to talk to the 'grasstops,' these pastors who preach to hundreds of people, while not spending any money," said Oran Smith, executive director of the Palmetto Family Council, an anti-abortion group that has remained neutral on the presidential race. "Being a Baptist minister and a candidate for president, no one would want to turn him away."

White evangelicals account for 53 percent of the state's likely Republican voters, according to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

Still, they "are not a monolithic group here and don't always vote together," cautioned Danielle Vinson, a political science professor at Furman University in Greenville. "Their leadership isn't giving them very clear signals this time, either."

South Carolina's political and religious elite have scattered endorsements across the GOP field:

\_ Huckabee has the support of Republican Rep. Bob Inglis, who represents one swath of the state's northwest corner, or Upstate — the Bible Belt of South Carolina. Some influential Southern Baptist ministers have spoken warmly of Huckabee but are avoiding endorsements.

\_ Bob Jones III of the fundamentalist Bob Jones University has endorsed Romney, helping the former Massachusetts governor as some evangelicals worried about his Mormon faith. Romney also was endorsed by Sen. Jim DeMint, an Upstate politician who is influential in the Presbyterian Church in America, headquartered in neighboring Georgia.

\_ Fred Thompson, who is pinning his campaign survival on a strong South Carolina finish, was endorsed by South Carolina Citizens for Life. The endorsement came when Thompson was running second to abortion rights supporter Rudy Giuliani. Holly Gatling, the anti-abortion group's executive director, said this week her group still strongly backs Thompson, though its main goal is to prevent the former New York mayor from winning.

Another question is the resurgent McCain, who has sought to mend relations with evangelicals after his bitter South Carolina defeat in 2000. McCain has a strong advocate in Lindsey Graham, the state's other U.S. senator.

In 2000, the Christian Coalition was credited with boosting George W. Bush by distributing material spotlighting "disturbing facts about John McCain," including his stances on stem-cell research and campaign finance overhaul. In one sign of how South Carolina's evangelical dynamics have changed, the weakened coalition is sitting out this primary altogether.

Huckabee supporters are quick to point out that many of the state's endorsements came before their candidate emerged as a conservative contender.

Among the state's 700,000 Southern Baptists, support for Huckabee is mixed, but many now view him as an electable candidate who shares their evangelical values, said Southern Baptist Convention President Frank Page, a pastor in Taylors, S.C. "Baptists are pragmatists who support those who they believe to be electable and consistent with pro-family policies," Page said in an e-mail to The Associated Press.

Some evangelicals are wary of Huckabee, believing he is too liberal on issues such as poverty, health care and the environment. Page, while not endorsing anyone, dismissed those criticisms, calling Huckabee a "caring, genuine, humble person."

In the final campaign stretch in South Carolina, Huckabee backers will distribute voter guides and air radio announcements urging Christian pastors to speak out on moral issues and encourage people to vote, said Janet Folger, a Florida-based talk show host and co-chair of Huckabee's Faith and Family Values Coalition.

In Iowa, pro-Huckabee pastors reported receiving unsigned letters warning them that getting involved in the race would endanger their churches' tax-exempt status — and Folger said she expects more of the same.

During a rally Wednesday at a hotel ballroom in Spartanburg, Huckabee found a receptive audience that included a homeschooling mother, abortion rights opponents and a woman who said she learned only recently Huckabee was a minister.

Jessie Davis, a 27-year-old mother of three from Inman, S.C., held her youngest, 8-month old Abbie, in her arms. Davis said the No. 1 thing that attracted her to Huckabee was "Christian values."

"He's going to ask God what do before he asks somebody else," Davis said after the rally. "God designed everything. He knows how it's supposed to work."

*Associated Press writers Jim Davenport in South Carolina and Rose French in Nashville, Tenn., contributed to this report.*