

# Huckabee's dark-horse appeal - more myth than substance

Club for Growth attack 'Tax hike Mike' over fiscal record in Arkansas

**Daniel Nasaw in Washington**  
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With his affable manner and oratory prowess, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee is winning over the media and pundits who see him as a promising dark-horse candidate for the Republican presidential nomination.

In a field that features a cross-dressing social liberal, a Mormon and a good conservative who's widely been seen as a disaster as a candidate, Mr Huckabee has benefited from a recent reassessment. New York Times columnist David Brooks called him "the one candidate acceptable to all factions".

There are signs that Mr Brooks's statement, made on October 19, is congealing into conventional wisdom. But there's one problem: it isn't true.

A fiscal conservative group, the Club for Growth, has criticised Mr Huckabee's 10-year record as governor of Arkansas, showing that Mr Huckabee's social-conservative bona fides aren't enough for other factions of the Republican base.

"We believe in lower taxes, limited government and limited government spending," Club for Growth spokeswoman Nachama Soloveichik said. "As governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee has done the exact opposite."

The group has portrayed Mr Huckabee as "Tax Hike Mike" in television advertisements and a website. They note that taxes and the size of state government increased during Huckabee's 10 years in office. "He's shown no evidence on the campaign trail that he'll abandon his economically liberal record as governor," Soloveichik said.

Mr Huckabee disagrees. "My record says otherwise," he said at a luncheon with reporters in Washington October 30. "Careful management of government, a balanced budget. The fact that the Club for Growth wants to argue, well, I'll deal with it."

Mr Huckabee ascended to the governor's office in 1996. He had been lieutenant governor when predecessor Jim Guy Tucker, who succeeded Bill Clinton, resigned from office after having been convicted of fraud and conspiracy in connection with the Whitewater case.

Mr Huckabee was only the third Republican Arkansas governor since reconstruction. He was re-elected to two full terms, leaving office in January because term limits prevented him from running again.

During his tenure, Mr Huckabee battled with a state legislature dominated by Democrats. He also had to contend with a state Supreme Court that ordered large increases in education spending and a downturn in the economy led the legislature to raise taxes in 2003 and 2004.

On the trail, Mr Huckabee touts 90 tax reductions the Arkansas legislature passed on his watch. The largest of those was a \$90.6 million income per year tax reduction enacted in 1997, which was championed by the Democratic legislative leadership. Others about which he boasts were as small as a sales tax exemption for purchases by the Salvation Army totalling \$15,000 per year.

The state passed several dramatic tax increases while Mr Huckabee was governor. Those include a \$69 million per year increase in motor fuel taxes to fund highway improvements passed in 1999, \$500 million per year in sales, tobacco and other taxes to pay for court-ordered education spending increases and cover a cooling economy that hurt state revenue receipts. Those were enacted in 2003 and 2004.

While Mr Huckabee was governor, the state legislature raised taxes more \$505 million per year, a figure adjusted for inflation and economic growth, according to the state's department of finance and administration. The average Arkansan's tax burden grew from \$1,969 in the fiscal year ended June 30, 1997 to \$2,902 in the fiscal year ended June 30, 2005. Meanwhile, during Mr

Huckabee's tenure the state added about 8,000 new fulltime workers to its payroll.

Mr Huckabee describes the tax increases as a pragmatic. Indeed, in 2003, when the state was dealing with a painful revenue shortfall, he begged legislators not to oppose a tax increase on ideological grounds.

"I governed," Mr Huckabee explained at the luncheon. "That's what governors do. We can't print or borrow money. If you look at the education budget and you realize that if you're in contempt of court for not having an equitable or adequate financing system, it's going to cost more money to finance schools. These are things that are part of actually leading and governing a state".

Lu Hardin, a former Democratic state senator, Mr Huckabee cabinet member and now president of the University of Central Arkansas, said Mr Huckabee is conservative but also "progressive".

"He did not betray the schoolchildren of Arkansas because of a cookie-cutter ideology," said Mr Hardin, who was director of the state Department of Higher Education under Huckabee.

He said it's easy for critics to say Mr Huckabee should have cut spending rather than raise taxes, but "Arkansas is a very lean state in terms of funding. There just really is not a place to cut".

Mr Huckabee's main base of support seems to be social conservatives dissatisfied with GOP frontrunners Rudy Giuliani, a former New York City mayor supportive of abortion rights and sympathetic to gays, and Mitt Romney, a Mormon former Massachusetts governor.

Mr Huckabee touts strong showings in straw polls in Washington, South Carolina and Florida organized by Christian right activist groups.

"That's a base that he really connects with," Huckabee spokeswoman Alice Stewart said. "He's big on family values and issues that are important to them, such as pro-life, strong families and the institution of marriage."

Oran P Smith, president and executive director of the Palmetto Family Council, a Columbia, South Carolina-based activist group, said socially conservative voters there are attracted to Huckabee's background as a minister but less die-hard Christian conservatives likely will wait to see if he can post a strong finish in early primary contests in Iowa and New Hampshire.

"If he shows even a hint of viability he can do well here," Mr Smith said.

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