

# Conservative movement still seeks frontrunner

By Kirsten Singleton | *Morris News Service*

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COLUMBIA - Search the slate of GOP presidential frontrunners, and it's impossible to find a darling of the social-conservative movement.

That - plus the fact that the Iraq war, and not domestic policy, is the key issue of the race - is leading to speculation that the religious right is at a crossroads in terms of its political power, and that the extent to which social conservatives hold sway in the next election and beyond might be determined in the next few weeks.

"I think a lot of people are wondering where the evangelicals are, when you have someone like Rudy Giuliani as a frontrunner," Winthrop University political scientist Scott Huffmon said.

"What I think is it's sort of teetering as to whether they're going to come (out) in full force in this election," he said.

Among the GOP candidates who habitually score highest in national and early-voting state polls:

- Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has been criticized for his support of abortion and gay rights.

- Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, has been dubbed a flip-flopper on abortion, accused of taking a firm, pro-life stand only around the time he considered a run for president.

- Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., opposes a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage unless the Supreme Court overturns state bans, and he supports federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research.

- Fred Thompson, the one-time senator from Tennessee who'd like to swoop in as the savior of conservative Republicans, has been taken to task for his past lobbying on behalf of an abortion-rights group and was scolded last week by Focus on the Family founder James Dobson in an e-mail obtained by the Associated Press.

"There is some (conservative leaning) with the top tier, but not as much as I would like," Carolyn McDonald, of Columbia, acknowledged, while attending Thursday's Palmetto Family Council's forum for presidential candidates.

During the event's straw poll, Ms. McDonald voted for California Congressman Duncan Hunter, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee walked away with the win with 38 percent, and Ron Paul came in second place at 33 percent. Mr. Thompson came in a distant third at 8 percent.

Straw polls are an unreliable indicator of who will win the Republican nod when primary and caucus voting begins in less than four months.

But it's evidence that the religious right is torn and not fully committed to any frontrunner, University of South Carolina political scientist Blease Graham said.

Candidates themselves are trying to attract the GOP's religious base, but are leery of alienating other constituencies, particularly in light of Republican losses in 2006, Mr. Graham said.

"It may well be ... that in the (wake) of that election, in order to build coalitions, Republicans may have to start from a moderate position," he said.

Much of the social-conservative base has lined up behind one of its own, such as Mr. Huckabee, an ordained Baptist.

That potentially puts people such as Mr. Huckabee in a strong position to wield power in the next Republican administration if they can bring in the conservative vote to whomever wins, Mr. Graham said.

Ms. Huffmon believes social conservatives have about two months to change the nature of the primary/caucus race, if they can get issues such as abortion and gay marriage - instead of just Iraq and security - back in the discussion.

If they are successful, it could vault someone such as Mr. Huckabee into the first tier of candidates, he said.

"They would decidedly change the balance of power," Ms. Huffmon said.

Social-conservative leaders insist that their influence hasn't diminished since the height of the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, it has simply gone mainstream.

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