

## We can do better than Kasich for president

Ohio Governor John Kasich recently became a candidate for President in 2016, and managed to get nudged into the “top ten” for Fox News’s first prime-time primary debate. This entertaining event was also surprisingly revealing, allowing clear distinctions to be drawn.

What first got my attention were I’ve been paying attention to the extremes of how different candidates GOP presidential hopefuls see the role of religion in politics. While Mike Huckabee seeks to impose the severe doctrines of Old Testament literalism upon Americans of all beliefs, Ohio Governor John Kasich draws upon his more humane New Testament faith to guide his personal outlook, specifically mentioning “unconditional love” and “compassion for the poor.” A sharper distinction between religious tyranny and religious freedom is hard to imagine. Kudos to Kasich on that count!

However, Kasich’s record as Ohio’s governor is mixed. His positive action on the Affordable Care Act helped make the dream of health insurance a reality for many of Ohio’s working poor. Yet his tax policies as governor hurt low-income families: Reducing income taxes while boosting sales taxes shifts the overall tax burden, from the wealthy (who save much of their income) to the poor (who must spend most of their income to survive).

Kasich is eager to take credit for Ohio’s recovery from the economic crash of 2008. Yet nearly all states followed the national pattern of recovery from the Great Recession. But some more than others: Ohio’s recovery ranks among the weakest in the nation. The mostly low-paying jobs acquired can’t compensate for the ongoing hemorrhage of quality jobs and middle-class purchasing power, whether figured in terms of prosperity or revenues.

Notwithstanding, Governor Kasich has balanced Ohio’s budget. How? He cut state services, thus shifting costs of public education, infrastructure, and emergency services to

already overburdened local communities. This economic “miracle” is thus exposed as sleight-of-hand manipulation, robbing Peter to pay Paul.

As a congressman in the late 1990s, Kasich also helped balance the federal budget. Great! Still, it’s relatively easy to balance a budget during an economic boom, when tax revenues are high and the need for government services low. What he proposes now is balancing the nation’s budget—but under low-revenue, high-need conditions—in hope of invigorating a still sluggish recovery. This had been tried before, in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s, each time plunging a feebly recovering economy back into recession. Anyone who’s been paying attention now understands budget balance is an effect, not a cause, of economic vitality. Attempting the former to achieve the latter is like pushing a rope. History shows it only makes things worse.

We might hope our leaders would learn from history. But the conflicted mythology of balanced budgets and tax cuts as magical economic fixes has become entrenched in conservative dogma. And Kasich has taken it to heart, despite its repeatedly demonstrated harm to those for whom he professes compassion.

I don’t doubt John Kasich’s sincerity; I think he believes what he says. What I question is his naïve adherence to a counterfactual ideology, rendering him (and others who share it) a poor choice for national leader, considering the extent to which the competence of economic policy affects not only all of our lives, but also the health and strength of our nation. True, we could do worse. But we could also do better. And we need to try.

“GC\_Kasich.doc”, created 2015-02-06, last modified 2015-09-19, submitted 2015-08-31 for publication 2015-09-18 as an “Ideas & Voices” guest column.