



January 2008

The GOP's Time for Choosing

By Henry Olsen

Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee's pro-faith, pro-government message is similar to the platforms of conservative political parties on the European continent. But is the Christian Democratic party model one that the GOP should consider emulating?

Mike Huckabee's stunning victory in the Iowa caucuses does more than change the GOP nomination race. With a platform explicitly grounded in his Christian faith and a populist economic message, Huckabee offers the Republican Party a new political narrative, light years removed from the limited government principles governing the GOP in the Reagan and post-Reagan era.

This pro-faith, pro-government message may sound strange to American ears, but it is a staple of conservative political parties on the European continent. Huckabee, in other words, essentially gives Republicans a choice: does the GOP want to become a Christian Democratic party? To answer that question, Republicans should look carefully at Christian Democracy to see if it is a model worth emulating.

Christian Democracy is a reaction to the classical liberalism and socialism that came of age in late nineteenth-century Europe. Both of these movements threatened the faithful with their secularism and economic theories. Classical liberal emphasis on unfettered markets evoked fears of untrammelled greed and exploitation of workers; socialism made many fear for the future of private property.

Christian Democratic parties have always distinguished themselves from liberals and socialists, favoring private property and traditional values while supporting government regulation

and taxation to ameliorate what they perceive to be capitalism's defects. The German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), for example, is quite explicit about this, claiming it is the "party of the political center."

These parties uphold marriage and the traditional family as the bedrocks of society. They also advocate economic policies typified by the CDU's ideal of a "social market economy," which emphasizes the need for both government-provided welfare and capitalism. Contemporary Christian Democratic parties are also some of the staunchest supporters of rapid reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. They reach this conclusion from the principle of "Christian stewardship," which the Norwegian Christian Democrats say "implies that the resources of the earth should be taken care of for the best of present and future generations."

Christian Democracy is a different beast than Reagan-era conservatism, which drew upon the traditions of the Founding Fathers—who were extremely suspicious of government power, regulation, and redistribution. It is virtually impossible to imagine a Christian Democratic leader inveighing against government intervention in the economy as Reagan did in his first inaugural address. ("In the present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.")

American conservatism also differs from Christian Democracy in its attitude toward faith. Reagan conservatism is faith-friendly, supporting the free exercise of religion and traditional morality.

Henry Olsen is a vice president of AEI and director of the National Research Initiative. A version of this article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 5, 2008.

But it does not define its political principles with reference to its faith; in this view, Christianity is consistent with proper political principles but is not the primary wellspring of those principles.

While virtually no one on the American right explicitly calls for the adoption of Christian Democracy, others besides Huckabee admire and advocate similar principles. For example, former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum's book *It Takes a Family* echoed the Christian Democratic emphasis on placing the health of the family ahead of the health of the economy as a political principle.

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary apostle for these views is former White House speechwriter Michael Gerson. In his recent book, *Heroic Conservatism*, he argues that a conservatism that fails to embrace the energetic use of government power for good will be both immoral and unsuccessful.

Immoral losers—that is quite a charge to levy against Reagan conservatives. But perhaps Gerson is correct: perhaps a more European approach to governing from the Right is better. So let us look at the record.

Every country that has been primarily governed by Christian Democrats since World War II (Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands) is poorer than the United States, with substantially higher unemployment rates and slower economic growth. The differences are not even close.

The per capita, purchasing power-adjusted GDP of the richest of these countries—Holland—is 15 percent lower than that of the United States. The GDP of every other country is at least 20 percent lower. The U.S. unemployment rate in 2006 was 4.6 percent; the average of the Christian Democratic four was over 7 percent, and it was that low only because the Netherlands diverts many of its unemployed to a disability program that enrolls nearly 10 percent of the workforce.

Incomes are more equally distributed: America's Gini coefficient, a widely used measure of income inequality, is much higher than in any of these countries. But that is simply the flip side of the other statistics. Christian Democratic countries choose lower incomes and higher unemployment as the price for their commitment to social welfare.

But these countries also fare worse on common measures of family well-being. German and Belgian divorce rates are higher than those in America, and the Netherlands' rate is roughly comparable. The 2005 out-of-wedlock birth rate was slightly lower in Germany (29 percent)

than the United States (37 percent), but it was higher in Belgium (49 percent) and about the same in the Netherlands (35 percent). The overall birth rate in the United States is about 2.1 children per woman in her lifetime, about the level needed to keep the population stable. None of the Christian Democratic countries come close to that; Italy's birth rate is a meager 1.2.

It is not the case that Christian Democrat-led countries fare better at sustaining faith. According to a 2006 Harris poll, 73 percent of Americans believe in God. Similar polls taken in 2005 and 2006 show only 62 percent of Italians, 43 percent of Belgians, 41 percent of Germans, and 34 percent of Dutch believe. A 2003 Harris poll found that 44 percent of Americans attend religious services at least once a week. According to the 2004 European Social Survey, fewer than 15 percent of Dutch and Belgians, and 10 percent of Germans, attend services that frequently.

Is a faith-based, pro-government party necessary for political success? It is hard to draw inspiration from Christian Democratic victories, which are largely due to Europe's proportional-representation electoral systems. The most successful parties win between 25 and 40 percent of the vote and form a government because a majority coalition cannot be formed without them.

But America's "first past the post" system encourages factions to combine into a single party so that they are likelier to get over 50 percent of the vote, a level of support that an American Christian Democratic party is unlikely to attain. The 2004 exit poll showed that only 42 percent of American voters attend religious services at least weekly, and that includes African Americans, Jews, and other minorities very unlikely for historical reasons to support a party of the Right. Getting to 50 percent would require a Christian Democratic party to make compromises with nonreligious voters, something that would weaken the very impetus animating the party.

The political debate for the last decade has been between a Democratic Party that essentially argues America should be more like Europe—more statist, more secular, more pacifist—and a Reagan-influenced GOP that argues that America should be more like its historical self. The Mike Huckabee/Christian Democratic movement is an attempt to break this logjam by looking to a different European model, one that says we can be more statist without being more secular or pacifist. In deciding how to react to the Huckabee challenge, Reagan's GOP descendants now face their own time for choosing.