

Is 'compassionate conservatism' obsolete?

by [Amy Sullivan](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue

The GOP primary candidates competing for the affections of Republican voters have plenty of labels with which to tar each other: Influence peddler. Failed politician. Cayman Islands account holder. Aspiring polygamist. But perhaps the worst smear they could lob at an opponent would be to call him a "compassionate conservative."

There's no place for compassion in this race, which has featured debate audiences cheering the death penalty and booing the Golden Rule.

Candidates have jostled to take the hardest line in opposing government-funded programs to help the poor, with Newt Gingrich calling Barack Obama a "food stamp president" and Rick Perry blasting "this big-government binge [that] began under the administration of George W. Bush."

Just three years after Bush left the White House, compassionate conservatives are an endangered species. In the new Tea Party era, they've all but disappeared from Congress, and their philosophy is reviled within the GOP as big-government conservatism.

Is this just a case of the Republican Party wanting to distance itself from the Bush years—or is compassionate conservatism gone for good?

Bush was not the first person to use the phrase "compassionate conservative," but his adoption of the label in the 2000 campaign made it instantly famous. Bush and his advisers sought to soften the GOP's image, which

had taken a beating during the years of Gingrich's speakership and the Clinton impeachment. Bush's faith-based initiative was the signature policy to grow out of his compassionate conservative philosophy.

In 2008, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee also ran for the GOP nomination as a compassionate conservative, refusing to apologize for supporting state tuition breaks for the children of illegal immigrants: "You don't punish a child because a parent committed a crime." Huckabee was fond of saying that he was a conservative, just not angry about it.

Like the Ecuadoran horned tree frog, a handful of compassionate conservatives can still be found—if you know where to look. Sen. Dan Coats (R., Ind.), who was involved with faith-based initiatives before Bush ever heard about them, is one. And former Bush aide Michael Gerson continues to preach the gospel from his perch as a *Washington Post* columnist.

After the Iowa caucuses, both Gerson and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks hailed former senator Rick Santorum as the second coming of compassionate conservatism. And it's true that in his victory speech in Iowa, Santorum sounded very much like a populist, arguing that Republicans need to offer more than tax cuts and balanced budgets to Americans who are struggling.

But when it comes to specifics, there aren't many government policies—particularly domestic programs—that Santorum supports to help alleviate poverty. He cheered most of the harsh cuts in hunger and housing programs that House Republicans proposed last summer. Santorum, a devout Catholic, has said he believes that the U.S. Catholic bishops are wrong to back immigration reform, and he has confessed that he is unfamiliar with the phrase "a preferential option for the poor," which is an essential component of Catholic social teaching.

There is a meanness to the way many Republicans talk about the poor these days that was not in vogue during the Bush years. Unlike Huckabee, they are angry conservatives.

Gingrich

spits out the words "food stamps" and implies that they are gold coins showered on undeserving recipients. When debate moderator Juan Williams asked Gingrich whether his comments are "intended to belittle the poor and racial minorities," he was roundly booed by the conservative audience in South Carolina.

The conservative Heritage Foundation released a report in September arguing that those living under the poverty line in the U.S. aren't really poor because they have refrigerators and microwaves.

What happened to compassion? One answer is that it turned out to be expensive. Providing housing and food assistance, giving grants to charities that help low-income Americans, supporting job training programs—these all cost money. The federal deficit ballooned during the Bush administration, and though much of that came from funding the Iraq War and an expensive Medicare prescription drug benefit, Bush's domestic faith-based programs and tripling of U.S. aid to Africa have been tagged with the blame.

In addition, the Tea Party movement has embraced what political writer Jill Lawrence calls "Darwinian conservatism." You could also call it "Ayn Rand conservatism," after the libertarian philosopher whose work many congressional Republicans praise. In 2010, Republican Senate candidates attacked programs such as Social Security, student loans and unemployment benefits, saying they made Americans lazy.

The debates in this election cycle have also encouraged the turn away from compassionate conservatism. Led by Gingrich, the candidates have played to audiences hungry for red meat. These party faithful lustily cheer attacks and boasts, and they boo any statement that carries a whiff of moderation.

Just before the South Carolina primary, a progressive Christian group called the American Values Network released an animated

video, *Tea Party Jesus*, to mock the disconnect between popular conservative rhetoric and Gospel teachings. In a "Sermon on the Mall," a cartoon Jesus stands flanked by GOP politicians and pundits as he declares, "Blessed are the mean in spirit . . . blessed are the pure in ideology."

It didn't take long for a Tea Party site to promote the video instead of taking offense. Tea Party activists might not have gotten the joke, but if the Republican Party rejects completely the idea of compassion for struggling Americans, it will be no laughing matter.

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