

'Preacher' John Kasich could be wild card of 2016

by [Linda Feldmann](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) John Kasich is a man of many passions.

Ask the governor of Ohio about drug addiction, and he'll give you a sermon. Ask about the environment, and he'll say it matters because "the Lord gave it to us." Ask about his controversial (for a Republican) decision to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, and he'll talk about helping the "downtrodden."

Kasich, who enters the presidential race today, could also be called "John the Evangelist," for the faith-driven sensibility he brings to public life. But don't pigeonhole him as a religious conservative. In fact, some religious conservative leaders see him using faith inappropriately, as a path to big government. And don't call him a "compassionate conservative," à la former president George W. Bush, a label Kasich reportedly hates.

Here in New Hampshire, where he did a two-day swing last week, one man had another idea on what to call him.

"Governor Kasich, I first met you in 1999, when you ran [for president] for a bit, and I thought you were more mavericky than a certain mavericky senator from Arizona," he told Kasich as he walked down Main Street in Newmarket, referring to John McCain, who ran for president in 2000 and 2008.

Kasich didn't agree or disagree. The man defies labels: a moderate on many issues, such as his support for Common Core education standards and openness to a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants; and an arch-conservative on others, such as his drive for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution.

He could be the wild card of the 2016 race. Kasich is the two-term governor of the seventh-largest state in the country, a must-win battleground state. And unlike the other sitting governors in the race, he's popular at home, his famously short fuse notwithstanding.

Kasich also faces competition. He's the 16th Republican to announce for 2016, and with an average of 1.6 percent in national polls of GOP voters, he's in 12th place. As of now, that's not good enough to make the main stage in the first Republican debate August 6 on Fox News, which is inviting just the top ten candidates in the polls.

But speaking to the three reporters covering him in Newmarket last week, Kasich disagrees he's getting in too late. The first-in-the-nation New Hampshire primary is next February, after all, and he's working the state hard. He's already run a TV ad here. Right after his announcement today in Columbus, Ohio, he is headed back to New Hampshire for five town-hall meetings in three days.

So how does he win here?

"Be in everybody's home, and hopefully people will like you," he said. "If they do that's great, and if they don't, I'll still be governor of Ohio."

'Almost like preaching'

Just moments before, Kasich was speaking to a group of voters who had been invited by a state representative to meet with him at a restaurant in Newmarket, and they seemed receptive to his views.

Responding to a question on the rise in drug addiction, Kasich rattled off statistics about the high percentage of Ohio prisoners with substance abuse problems and mental illness. He talked about mothers bringing him pictures of their sons as high school athletes, now dead from drug overdoses. He talked about his own children, twin teenage daughters, and how they know what he's about to say: don't do drugs.

"I don't even feel like this is politics," Kasich said. "This is almost like preaching for me, all this stuff."

He talks about doubts in minority communities about achieving the American dream, and the fears of middle-aged workers who could get laid off at any moment and may not be able to retrain for a new career. And he riffs on the need to "reignite the concept of citizenship" and how "it's up to us to be part of healing the world."

Kasich also speaks the language of common ground, a pitch to voters increasingly tired of Washington's hyperpartisan ways.

“I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere if all we’re doing is talking Republican, Democrat, red, blue,” he said. “Everybody’s concerned about the same things.”

One voter asks how he can stand out in such a large GOP field.

“I think the record in a big, big state matters, and my work in Washington, both on balanced budget and the defense committee,” said Kasich, who was a U.S. House member for nine terms (1983 to 2001) and chaired the Budget Committee the last time the federal budget was balanced. His panel also produced the welfare reform bill that President Clinton signed.

“So that’s what I have to offer—that and my brilliant sense of humor and sometimes-caustic remarks,” he said.

If Iowa’s low-turnout, activist-driven caucuses favor conservatives, New Hampshire’s high-turnout primary could work for more establishment-oriented candidates like Kasich. The question is whether his moderate views are a good fit for today’s GOP.

The Ohio governor has signed on some high-end help. Former Sen. John E. Sununu (R) of New Hampshire is running his super political action committee, New Day for America. And Kasich has hired maverick adman Fred Davis, famous for his “demon sheep” and “I’m not a witch” ads in previous cycles.

'I'm like C. S. Lewis'

But Kasich’s biggest coup in New Hampshire so far may have been his invitation to attend the 90th birthday party of Ruth Griffin, the grande dame of New Hampshire Republican politics. The July 12 event at the Elks Lodge in Portsmouth was attended by some 200 people, including much of the state’s GOP elite. Kasich was the only aspiring or announced presidential candidate there and was invited to address the crowd.

He spoke about meeting Griffin—and her newly adopted stray cat, Nicodemus—a few weeks prior. Did Kasich know who Nicodemus was? she asked him. Nicodemus was the biblical Pharisee who had been born again, he replied. Later, Kasich said, he called her to talk about the book of Ruth.

Kasich may earn Griffin’s endorsement. But when asked in Newmarket about the larger New Hampshire electorate, where people may live their faith but don’t talk

about it, he has a ready answer.

"I'm like C. S. Lewis. All the principles that I believe in I can barely keep," said Kasich, who was raised Roman Catholic. He became Anglican after a tragedy in his life, when his parents were killed by a drunken driver.

"I'm just going to be me," he said. "You know, I wrote a book on faith when I was running for governor, and all my political handlers said, 'Hey, you can't do that.' And I said, 'Fine, they can vote against me.'"

"I'm not worried about it. My view on faith is real simple. The Lord gave us a handbook; it's got two parts to it. He told us, if you want to read it, great, if you want to follow it, great, if you don't want to, your choice."

But, Kasich said, "You ought to read it, because I think it's the key to having a better life, even though none of us can keep it."