



A president from Walmart?

Jeremy Lott

March 17, 2023

Asa Hutchinson, 72, has announced that he's considering running for the Republican nomination for president, casting a spotlight on his record as much as on his judgment that former President Donald Trump would be a disaster as the party's standard-bearer in 2024.

In Congress and in the Arkansas governor's mansion, Hutchinson tended to be a reliable fiscal and social conservative — with one Walmart-shaped asterisk.

Domestically, Hutchinson was skeptical of much taxing and spending and new programs. The League of Conservation Voters gave him a lifetime score of 13% over his tenure in the House of Representatives in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The American Conservative Union ranked those years more highly, at 83%.

Another Arkansas Republican governor, Mike Huckabee, had warred with the libertarian Cato Institute over its less-than-glowing evaluation of his tenure in an annual gubernatorial report card. Instead of doing that, Hutchinson embraced his B grade in 2022, his final full year of two four-year terms in office.

“According to [the Cato Institute], Arkansas is one of the top 10 states for limited-government fiscal policy,” he wrote on Twitter. “Over the past eight years, I’ve worked with the General Assembly to cut taxes to record lows, reduce the size of state government, and ensure we have reserves if needed.”

This had all led to “job growth and more people moving to Arkansas.” Moreover, they were beating the pants off over their neighbors. “We received a higher ranking than every state on our border, as well as Alabama, Georgia, and Florida,” he said.

At the same time, Hutchinson has been a big booster of the war on drugs, serving in the Drug Enforcement Administration as an administrator. As governor, he renewed the use of the death penalty after Arkansas had stopped executing prisoners. He signed legislation that would outlaw abortion in his state pretty much across the board if *Roe v. Wade* were ever to be overturned by the Supreme Court, which it then was in the 2022 decision of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

But when it came to a religious freedom bill on his desk that might incidentally hurt the ability of gay Arkansans to bring discrimination lawsuits, he didn't want to go there. "Arkansas Gov. Yields to Walmart, Celebs and His Own Son: Does Not Sign 'Gay Discrimination' Bill," read a *People* headline in 2015.

The Southern governor had declined "to sign a controversial religious-freedom bill similar to the one that has bedeviled Indiana Governor Mike Pence since he signed his into law last week," reported *People*. "Instead, Hutchinson, citing his own son Seth's opposition to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, asked the Arkansas legislature to recall or rewrite the measure so that it mirrors federal law."

It is not likely that the son's opposition was the decisive factor here, as Hutchison stated flatly, "This is a bill that in ordinary times would not be controversial. But these are not ordinary times."

The two things that made it controversial were: 1.) the shellacking that Pence took in the press over signing a piece of legislation in his state that he didn't think would get anyone up in arms and 2.) Walmart's very publicly stated opposition to the bill and its request for a veto.

"Passage of HB1228 threatens to undermine the spirit of inclusion present throughout the state of Arkansas and does not reflect the values we proudly uphold," Walmart CEO Doug McMillon said in a statement. "For these reasons, we are asking Governor Hutchinson to veto this legislation."

Hutchison didn't quite veto it, but he did the next best thing by sending it back to the Arkansas legislature for redrafting and narrowing. He eventually signed a measure that made very little difference one way or the other to the state's gay residents.

In 2021, Hutchinson had two bills on his desk related to transgender issues. One, on not allowing trans athletes to compete in sex-segregated sports other than their biological gender, he signed. The other, which would have banned gender-affirming therapy or surgeries for trans youths in the state, he vetoed.

Hutchinson's veto, later overturned by the legislature, dovetailed with Walmart heir Tom Walton's objections to the bill. "We are alarmed by the string of policy targeting LGBTQ people in Arkansas," Walton wrote on behalf of the Walton Family Foundation, which is essentially the charitable arm of Walmart. "This trend is harmful and sends the wrong message to those willing to invest in or visit our state. We support Gov. Asa Hutchinson's recent veto of discriminatory policy and implore government, business and community leaders to consider the impact of existing and future policy that limits basic freedoms and does not promote inclusiveness in our communities and economy."

Hutchinson has, on many occasions, praised Walmart. For instance, when the megaretailer announced that some of the windfall from the Trump tax cuts would go toward raising employees' starting wages, expanding parental leave, and bonuses, he wrote: "Walmart's quick reaction to the new law is exactly the response we expected under the tax cut. I'm proud that

Arkansas's largest corporate citizen is leading the way in putting more money in the pockets of its hard-working employees.”

Some of this is to be expected. Walmart is the largest employer in Arkansas. According to Walmart's own figures, the company has 53,945 “associates in Arkansas” in a state of 3.02 million people. The company leaves a large footprint on much of the rest of the country as well. It, and former President Bill Clinton, are likely the state's two most well-recognized exports.

Much in the same way that senators from Washington state get tagged as “the senator from Boeing” because of the large aerospace footprint on their home turf, pols from Arkansas have been called “the [fill in title] from Walmart” on many occasions.

If Hutchinson decides to throw his hat into the presidential ring, expect to hear more about his Bentonville ties as the primary debates and the mudslinging intensify.