

Where's the Love for John Kasich?

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By [Margaret Carlson](#)

Dear Republicans: What's the matter with Governor John Kasich of Ohio? Why didn't he jump to the top of your list of 2016 presidential contenders with his stunning re-election in the ultimate swing state?

But he hasn't and for one reason: He doesn't have enough of the sit down and shut up, stick it to President Barack Obama attitude to appeal to the purists. An impressive 64 percent win should have cured that.

Yet Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, with a much [narrower re-election margin](#), catapulted ahead, largely because he went through with his collective-bargaining takedown of the unions, and survived a recall.

Kasich, however, pivoted to a pragmatic, more moderate mode of governing after his anti-union effort failed, and he subsequently won a majority of union voters. For [Walker](#), forget the expense, the distraction, the spitting anger that the recall evoked, he showed moxie. For that, the base loves him.

The love also goes to other Republican luminaries: Kansas Governor Sam Brownback, who held on by his fingernails; Governor [Chris Christie](#) of New Jersey, ever on the prowl to show that Republicans aren't going to take it anymore; Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, with his gusto in using Monica Lewinsky against Hillary Clinton; Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, itching to shut down the government over slights real and imagined. Then there are all those who ran noisily against Obama so no one would notice what they would do if elected. Kasich spent almost no time attacking the president, perhaps the only Republican not to do so.

Kasich is suspect as a squish, maybe even the last surviving example of that earlier species of Republican, the compassionate conservative. Despite having the personality of an excitable St. Bernard, he lowered the rhetoric and built coalitions, moving the Buckeye State from 48th in job creation to eighth (second in the Midwest), according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Unemployment went to 5.6 percent from 9.1 percent. Income growth is 9.8 percent. There's a budget surplus and an improved debt rating. Poverty decreased three times faster than the national rate, in part because Kasich adopted a version of the Earned Income Tax Credit, the best way to tell the hamburger-flipper and hotel maid that work pays.

He didn't hug Obama and get drummed out of the party forever, like former Florida Governor Charlie Crist, but he did take his [Medicaid expansion dollars](#). Aides who want the governor to

keep his party card have since hedged his position but he is explaining why full repeal of the Affordable Care Act is a Republican pipedream.

“The opposition to it was really either political or ideological,” [he said](#) in October. “I don't think that holds water against real flesh and blood, and real improvements in people’s lives.”

Talk like that, even if it is only about Medicaid expansion, put Kasich at the bottom of Republican governors as ranked by the [Cato Institute](#).

Kasich is the son of a postal worker and became more intensely religious after the death of his parents in a 1987 automobile accident. He has always seen himself as looking out for the little guy, even when he served in Congress and was the go-to balanced-budget guy. Now he talks about helping those who "[live in the shadows](#)," the jobless, the poor, the mentally ill, ex-cons and drug addicts.

He increased education spending and guaranteed that third graders wouldn't be shuffled to the next grade without being able to read. He also defended the radioactive [Common Core](#) education standards, which the Republican base sees as an Obama plot to indoctrinate the country's children with liberal mush. Kasich defused the issue, reminding Ohioans that Common Core was the best a group of 40 governors could devise to provide a standard for what students across the country had to know.

At the Republican Governors Association meeting in Boca Raton, Florida, this week, the winners will be the loud, the strident, the implacable -- the likes of Christie and Walker and the re-elected Florida governor, Rick Scott, who stopped a debate because he objected to his opponent's use of a fan.

Too bad for Republicans. By ignoring Kasich, they will be ignoring that he is the only potential presidential candidate to accomplish the one thing the party must do: He expanded the base of voters. In addition to winning the union vote, he won three-fifths of women, a majority of voters under 30, two-thirds of independents and a quarter of black voters.

Still, it's hard to see how Kasich could navigate a crowded presidential primary field in which conservatives won't have to demonstrate that they can govern, only that they are angry enough to shut down the government to get concessions on Obamacare and stop the president from carrying out immigration reform through an executive order. They're emboldened because they didn't pay a price in the midterms for the shutdown a year earlier. The Senate leader, Mitch McConnell, and Speaker John Boehner are cowering before their conservative cohorts. There is no room in the party for a guy like Kasich.