

# John Kasich: The GOP's Hobbled 2016 Dark Horse

By W. James Antle III  
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The Ohio governor is about to score a landslide win in a state Republicans need to win the White House. But will conservatives ever support him?

After Ohio's governor cruises to a second term Tuesday, expect Republicans with visions of 2016 dancing in their heads to at least entertain the question: why not John Kasich?

Ohio is a must-win swing state for Republicans if they are to reclaim the White House. Kasich is more likely to carry his home state in a presidential election than Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who is facing a much tougher reelection race and still could lose, or New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

Like both of those fellow governors, Kasich has picked his share of fights with unions in a state where organized labor is indispensable to the Democratic Party. And as a nine-term veteran of the House, Kasich boasts a combination of executive and legislative experience that will be difficult for most other GOP presidential prospects to match.

Yet many conservatives will find the answer to "why not John Kasich?" blindingly obvious: in their view, the onetime budget-cutter has gone soft. The Associated Press [recently quoted](#) Kasich as saying of Obamacare repeal, "That's not gonna happen."

"Republican John Kasich just got extremely real on Obamacare," [blared](#) liberal commentator Jonathan Chait, whose praise typically isn't helpful in Republican primaries. Chait especially liked Kasich describing the opposition "as really either political or ideological," with the governor adding, "I don't think that holds water against real flesh and blood, and real improvements in people's lives."

Kasich pushed back hard against the AP story. "The AP got it wrong," Kasich [tweeted](#). "Ohio said NO to the Obamacare exchange for a reason. As always, my position is that we need to repeal and replace."

The AP, he subsequently said, "screwed up. Let me make my position simple. Repeal Obamacare."

There are two reasons the story struck a chord, however. Kasich admits that he was talking about Medicaid expansion, which notwithstanding his office's [bizarre attempt to claim otherwise](#) is a key component of Obamacare. And while ramming that Medicaid expansion through over [conservative objections in Ohio](#), Kasich engaged in increasingly strident attacks on limited-government conservatives.

At times, it was unclear whether Kasich was attacking such conservatives from the left or the Christian right. "I had a conversation with one of the members of the legislature the other day," Kasich [recalled](#). "I said, 'I respect the fact that you believe in small government. I do, too. I also know that you're a person of faith.'"

"Now, when you die and get to the meeting with St. Peter, he's probably not going to ask you much about what you did about keeping government small," But he is going to ask you what you did for the poor. You better have a good answer."

This is almost a complete 180-degree turn from where Kasich stood in Congress. Kasich made his bones in Washington as a budget-cutter. He rose up the ranks from conservative backbencher railing against excessive spending to chairman of the House Budget Committee at the beginning of Newt Gingrich's "Republican Revolution," a precursor of sorts to Paul Ryan.

Like Ryan, Kasich started out introducing alternative budgets that slashed federal spending, but these blueprints went nowhere. His first, which would have cut Medicare and frozen discretionary spending, was defeated by 393 to 30 in 1989, receiving few Republican votes.

Finally, a spending cuts package he worked on with Minnesota Democratic Rep. Tim Penny—90 specific reductions totaling more than \$100 billion—came within five votes of passing the House while the Democrats still ran the place in 1993. Soon a Republican House and Senate would send his spending bills to President Bill Clinton's desk, where many of them were promptly vetoed—especially when he tried to reform and restrain the growth of Medicare.

Kasich's crusades against government spending didn't always follow the usual partisan script. He teamed with left-wing California Democratic Rep. Ronald Dellums in an attempt to scrap the B-2 bomber. He described himself as a "cheap hawk" on national defense who warned, "You can't listen to the flacks in the Pentagon and the hack ideologues over at party headquarters, or you'll end up with a bunch of weapons that don't work."

The son of a mailman, Kasich always saw himself as looking out for the little guy, even when it meant having unlikely allies like liberal consumer advocate Ralph Nader. But back in the 1990s, that usually took the form of fighting corporate welfare, of which he was an early GOP critic.

"Kasich wields his ax much less selectively than do most of his party colleagues," the *New York Times Magazine* [reported](#) in 1998. "He flails away at Federal social programs—including Medicare, which he has proposed from time to time to subject to a means test."

Back then, the *Times* described Kasich in a headline as “A Republican with rough edges.” Since he found religion on government social spending, the *Gray Lady* [has made him the subject](#) of such headlines as “Ohio governor defies G.O.P. with defense of social safety net.”

Twenty years ago, Kasich’s faith-based defense of big government would have seemed out of place. He has always been a reliable social conservative and he became more intensely religious after the death of his parents in a 1987 automobile accident. He was a popular speaker on the Christian Coalition circuit in the Pat Robertson-founded organization’s 1990s heyday and a frequent defender of conservative evangelicals’ entry into GOP politics.

But Kasich wasn’t exactly a moral crusader when the crusade wasn’t curtailing the growth of the federal government. “He mentions abortion seldom, Monica Lewinsky never,” the *NYT Magazine* noted in 1998, quoting him complaining about the “goody-two-shoes” who “have ruined religion.”

Kasich was probably better known for [dancing in a mosh pit](#) with then California Democratic Rep. Gary Condit at a Pearl Jam concert than hobnobbing with social justice types. “I like baseball, I swear a lot, I like Pearl Jam—and I have a personal relationship with God,” he defiantly told *The New Yorker* in the 1990s. “But I think He likes Pearl Jam, too.”

The John Kasich of the 1990s was a perfect fit for the Tea Party GOP of today. In fact, he might have been well suited to mediate the disputes between libertarians, religious conservatives and national-security hawks now roiling the party. So why does he instead sound like Jeb Bush or even Jon Huntsman, whose rhetoric was practically designed to distract voters from his [past conservative accomplishments?](#)

Perhaps the answer can be found in Kasich’s last years in Congress, precisely at his moment of triumph. He was among the Republicans who negotiated with the Clinton administration a deal that led to the first balanced federal budget since 1969 while cutting taxes. But it also blew through the spending caps promised by the 1994 Contract with America and nearly matched Clinton’s own request for nondefense discretionary spending in 1997.

For the first time, Kasich found himself in fiscal conservatives’ crosshairs. In [his book](#) about the collapse in Republican budgetary discipline during this time period, conservative policy wonk Stephen Slivinski recounted a meeting between a disappointed Tom Coburn—then a Republican congressman from Oklahoma—and Kasich over the spending accord.

“Tom,” Kasich said in what Slivinski described as a “slightly defensive tone,” “it’s the best we could get.” Bruised and battered by the government shutdowns in which Kasich’s own spending bills had played a role, he seemed to be joining other Republican leaders in throwing in the towel on budget-cutting. Soon Kasich and Indiana Republican Sen. Dan Coats would write in the *Washington Times*, “The fact that government programs have not worked is no excuse for those in government not to act.”

Kasich had planned to run for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination. He gained little traction as George W. Bush consumed all the political oxygen. Abandoning his campaign before

it really began, [he paid homage](#) to Bush as his “soul brother” and praised compassionate conservatism—a phrase that seemed at odds with everything he had tried to do in Congress.

Why not dress up conservatism with more compassionate rhetoric rather than green eyeshades? Even the most adamant Obamacare opponent must acknowledge, as Kasich has, that its coverage expansion has helped some people.

Kasich’s shift is not merely rhetorical, however. The libertarian Cato Institute’s [annual report card](#) has Kasich tied for worst-ranked Republican governor, with eight Democrats outperforming him on controlling taxes and spending. And if you take seriously his attempt to separate the Medicaid expansion from the rest of Obamacare, he is essentially arguing that we should leave in place \$800 billion in new spending over the next decade while repealing many of the taxes and Medicare cuts intended to help pay for it.

If Kasich emerges as the establishment candidate, like Mitt Romney, or cultivates stronger ties to the Christian right, like Mike Huckabee, he could perhaps overcome fiscal conservatives’ skepticism. George W. Bush brought the establishment and the Christian right together in 2000 and won in a walk. But Kasich doesn’t exactly have his soul brother’s political profile.

So far, Kasich is a divider on the right, not a uniter.