

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Kasich is the GOP's best chance

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"Who was chairman of the Budget Committee when we last had a balanced budget?" former Wisconsin Congressman Scott Klug asked a fired-up supporter of Ted Cruz for president on my radio show last week.

The answer is Gov. John Kasich, but the caller didn't care. They don't care that Klug and former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson have endorsed Kasich for president. That's because conservatives who listen to talk radio think Kasich is too liberal. After all, he took more Medicaid money under Obamacare, and he says he can work with Democrats. Egads! We can't have that.

Klug defeated incumbent Democratic Rep. Bob Kastenmeier in 1990 and served as a fiscal conservative and social moderate in Congress. Pro-choice on abortion and in favor of an assault weapons ban, Klug tried to defund The Tennessee Valley Authority and Corporation for Public Broadcasting while helping to expose the House bank scandal.

Klug worked with Kasich and says the Ohio governor can actually play with others, unlike Cruz.

"Look at the number of endorsements from colleagues who worked with him," Klug said. "Kasich has a page full. Even Trump has more than Cruz, who has one lone senator endorsing him. Kasich served on the Armed Services Committee and chaired the Budget Committee the last time we had a balanced budget. He inherited an \$8 billion budget deficit in Ohio with 67 cents left in the rainy day fund, and turned it into a \$2 billion surplus. Ohio has added 500,000 jobs in the recovery, and cut taxes. John is a stand-up guy with great success in Washington and Ohio. He has the disposition and intelligence to make a good president. And like the current occupant of the White House, he has a pretty good jump shot. But unlike Obama, he passes."

Klug says he favors Trump over Cruz even though he doesn't always care for the billionaire's behavior. The problem for Kasich is he is a government insider. Trump and Senate loner Cruz are very much seen as outsiders by an angry GOP primary electorate. In the latest Marquette Poll, Cruz sits at 40 percent, Trump at 30 percent, and Kasich at 21 percent. That was taken during the time Cruz and Trump were fighting over their wives and tabloid gossip about Cruz.

In 1992, Wisconsin state Sen. Russ Feingold made a late run from way back to catch millionaire Joe Checota, who was feuding in an ugly war with Congressman Jim Moody. The bitter fight between Cruz and Trump could leave a path for the upbeat and better behaved Kasich. Unlike the other Republicans, Kasich leads Hillary Clinton head to head 49 percent to 38 percent. Clinton is tied with Cruz in the Marquette poll, while Hillary beats Trump by 10 points.

“If electability and favorability were the standards, Kasich would be leading the race,” says Marquette pollster Charles Franklin. Unlucky for Kasich, that doesn’t cut it in 2016. Kasich’s eyes light up when he tells voters Ohio has fewer repeat criminal offenders because federal Medicaid money helped pay for drug addicts to get rehab.

“That saves us money instead of paying for incarceration,” Kasich says. He also refuses to ban Muslim visitors like Trump or have police target Muslim neighborhood like Cruz. Kasich rightly says Muslim-Americans need to be brought closer to help in the battle against extremists, rather than push them into the wrong hands. But thoughtful positions like that don’t move the needle in the Republican Reality TV Sweepstakes of 2016.

I asked Klug how he thinks he would do against 2nd Congressional District incumbent Mark Pocan, D-Black Earth, now that the district is more favorable to Democrats. “I would probably lose 53 percent to 47 percent,” says the man who left the House after 8 years to watch his children grow. Now a Lobbyist, Klug still plays drums occasionally and encouraged my radio producer to play more funk after the commercials.

Like the Founders had in mind, Klug served in government for a while and came back home. For his sake, it’s a good thing he got out when he did.

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