

Antipoverty campaign?

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In January, a CBS poll found Rick Santorum running a distant third in the Republican presidential race. After his February 7 victories, CBS polled Republican voters again—and found the former senator from Pennsylvania on top. The now serious possibility that Santorum will win the nomination could have at least one positive outcome: a general election campaign in which the candidates actually talk about poverty.

As a U.S. senator, Santorum didn't cross the aisle much for major votes on taxes or social spending, but he did stand up for foreign aid, and he was a key player in the effort to fight AIDS in Africa. Whenever a bipartisan bill sought a middle way in addressing domestic poverty, Santorum's name was usually on it.

This primary season, Santorum has frequently talked about poverty. He correctly dismissed Herman Cain's regressive tax plan as "not good for low-income people." He also offered this: "We need to talk . . . about people at the bottom of the income scale being able to get necessary skills and rise." He then highlighted, quite rightly, the need for reinvestment in American manufacturing.

Santorum's approach reflects his Catholic formation. He avoids the biblical proof-texting typical of many American politicians, appealing instead to the natural law tradition. While he doesn't share the collectivist spirit of some Catholics, he critiques Western culture's individualism, positing the family, not the individual, as society's

essential unit. He argues for a decentralized, "bottom-up" approach to creating social well-being, beginning with the family and the local community. This echoes the Catholic principle of subsidiarity.

However, the example he uses is Clinton-era welfare reform, which left many poor people behind—a fact Santorum neglects to mention. Real subsidiarity favors local means to social ends, but not at the expense of the ends themselves. Add to this Santorum's documented unfamiliarity with the phrase "preferential option for the poor" and it's clear that as a putative standard bearer for Catholic social teaching, he leaves a lot to be desired.

So do his specific proposals. Santorum blames financial regulation for the economic crisis, calling for still less of it. He once said, "I have no problem with economic inequality." In commenting on reduced benefits for those with low incomes, he observed that "suffering is . . . not a bad thing." He credits abstinence-only education with preventing poverty, though the evidence indicates that it doesn't even prevent sexual activity. He posits marriage as a crucial step toward escaping poverty while ignoring evidence—such as a September study by the Economic Policy Institute—showing that marriage reflects, not causes, economic stability.

In other areas, Santorum's prescriptions dutifully match those of his party: he wants cuts in social spending, less federal control and much lower taxes.

Still, if Santorum is the Republican nominee, his concern for those living on the economic margins might challenge President Obama to engage him on the issue. That could steer the candidates to look beyond the anxieties of the middle class and do something rare in recent politics: talk about how to end poverty in the world's wealthiest nation.