

## A T-Paw Party?

### Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty has a better chance than you think.

**John McCormack**

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Two-term Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty says he won't decide on a 2012 presidential bid until March or April, but for over a year he's been giving every indication that he's running for the Republican nomination. Since announcing in the summer of 2009 that he would not seek a third term, he's traveled to Iowa seven times and New Hampshire five times and scooped up staffers from Washington to work on his political action committee. The week of January 10, shortly after leaving office, Pawlenty begins a media blitz for his new autobiography with appearances on *Nightline*, *Hannity*, *The View*, CNN, the *Daily Show*, and all the morning shows.

Because Pawlenty has been less coy than other likely presidential contenders about whether he'll run, he's generated less interest while the press is concentrating on who's in and who's out. And because he sparked little enthusiasm when John McCain considered him as a vice presidential nominee in 2008, he's perceived by some as unlikely to be a finalist this time. But as he steps out into the national spotlight, Pawlenty hopes his record will attract notice. He may, in fact, be the most underestimated Republican presidential candidate—one who could appeal to the Tea Party and the Republican establishment.

Low-key and likeable, Pawlenty may not have the YouTube videos of a Chris Christie, pugnacious New Jersey governor, to prove it, but he has governed his left-leaning state as a fiscal conservative. Pawlenty was one of just four governors to earn an "A" on the libertarian Cato Institute's most recent biennial fiscal report card. (Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, beau ideal of the budget hawks, got a "B.") "I actually went into doing this report card sort of thinking [Pawlenty] was mediocre on fiscal policy," says Chris Edwards, who wrote the report. "I think he's been superb about the last five years or so."

"He's been a veto king," says Edwards. Indeed, Pawlenty issued 299 vetoes during his tenure. He blocked the Democratic legislature's tax hikes on everything from income and gasoline to beer and wine. His first order of business after he took office in 2003 was to close a \$4 billion budget deficit without raising taxes. But two years later, after a nine-day partial government shutdown, he agreed to a compromise with the legislature that included a 75-cent per-pack cigarette tax, which Pawlenty calls "a health impact fee" and "one of the regrets I have." In hindsight, he says he could have avoided the "fee" by letting the shutdown run on longer.

But in general Pawlenty was tight-fisted. During his first six years in office he significantly restrained the growth of the state budget, which had ballooned under his predecessors of both parties. When the recession hit and revenues dropped, Pawlenty vetoed the legislature's tax hikes and forced it to accept a biennial budget down 10 percent from the previous two years.

Pawlenty says his fiscal conservatism is consistent with the principles of a self-described "Sam's Club Republican" who can appeal to Reagan Democrats with his conservative-populist message and up-by-the-bootstraps biography.

The youngest of five children in a Polish-German family, Pawlenty grew up in the meatpacking town of South St. Paul, a community of 20,000 next to the Twin Cities. His father was a truck driver and his mother was a homemaker; she died of cancer when Pawlenty was just 16. On her deathbed she told Pawlenty's siblings it was her wish that he would be the first in their family to go to college.

He ended up attending the University of Minnesota for both his undergraduate and law degrees. At law school, he met his future wife, Mary, with whom he has two teenage daughters. Though raised a Catholic, Pawlenty was married in and now attends an evangelical church with his wife. "She's helped out [in my career] with great advice and encouragement," says the former governor. "She stays out of policy—at least publicly."

Pawlenty's interest in current events began in high school, when he subscribed to *U.S. News and World Report* and argued with his father about politics at the kitchen table. He got involved in the College Republicans, went on to work on the campaign of Senator David Durenberger in 1982, and took a break from his law practice to serve as Durenberger's political director in

1988. Four years later, Pawlenty won a seat in the state house of representatives, where he rose to majority leader. He won his first term as governor in 2002 by eight points and his second term in 2006, a terrible year for Republicans, by one point.

While Pawlenty's background, executive experience in a state that borders Iowa, and record as both a fiscal and social conservative—he's strongly pro-life—could prove to be a winning combination, he has some challenges to overcome. With his somewhat boyish looks and regular-guy demeanor, Pawlenty doesn't seem the most likely person to command the role of chief executive. He also runs the risk of overplaying the working class shtick after his nearly 25 years as a lawyer and politician. He isn't known to be an electrifying speaker, although he's welcome and cheered at local Tea Parties.

Pawlenty will also have to account for some heterodox positions he took as governor. In a 2008 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, conservative Minnesota talk radio host Jason Lewis urged John McCain to pick someone other than Pawlenty if he wanted to appeal to conservatives. Among the heresies Lewis highlighted were Pawlenty's environmentalism, his signing a statewide ban on smoking in bars and restaurants, and his 2006 statement that "the era of small government is over."

While Pawlenty stands by the smoking ban and says it's a non-issue for most conservatives in the state, he has tacked to the right on green issues: After signing a bill to develop a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in 2007, he wrote a letter opposing cap and trade in 2009. "I definitely have altered my view of that," he acknowledges. "I looked at it carefully, thought it might be worth exploring, but have determined it's a bad idea."

Asked about "the era of small government is over," Pawlenty calls it "a big misunderstanding." He explains, "David Brooks wrote a column for the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, the subtitle of which was 'The era of small government is over,' and I quoted him in the paper." He got the local paper to issue a clarification, insisting, "We have fought to make government smaller in a really liberal place." Even conservative talker Jason Lewis now concedes, "It's hard to argue with his conservatism. . . . I think presidential ambitions changed Pawlenty."

While Pawlenty leaves office with a record that's about as conservative as could be for a Minnesota governor, he has yet to present a detailed national agenda. He talks about the need to cap Medicaid spending and block-grant it to the states. He points to modest reforms in his state as a model for making Medicare more efficient. When asked about voucherizing Medicare for younger workers, he speaks favorably but in generalizations: "We need to switch these systems, whether it's Medicare, Medicaid, education, almost anything else, to a cash bar model, not an open bar model."

For Pawlenty, though, some of the details can wait. Right now, he's just trying to get Republican voters to remember his name.

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