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LaPlante: What Governor Pawlenty predicts about President Pawlenty

*JOHN LAPLANTE**/ The Michigan View.com*

Editor's note: In the wide open race for Republican nominee, one nominee has emerged paradoxically as the blandest and boldest candidate in the field. Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, widely panned as vanilla in a suit on the stump, has boldly staked out an anti-ethanol policy in farm-state Iowa, apologized for past missteps on cap and trade, and the , just this week, put forward a courageous proposal to eliminate investment taxes and simplify the tax code to two tax brackets. Who is this Pawlenty and is he vanilla - or Chunkey Monkey chocolate fudge whirl chip? The Michigan View's own John LaPlante is a resident of Minnesota and has followed Pawlenty through eight years as governor.

St. Paul, Minnesota - Presidential coverage obsesses on the horse race: Who has the most money? Who made the latest gaffe? Who is most electable? But I have different question: How would the candidates govern?

Specifically, how would my former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty - the hot new commodity on the 2012 shelf - fare in the White House? As a ten-year Minnesota resident, here's what I think: He's a genuinely conservative guy - but who can be too temperamentally conservative for his own good.

First, a little political background. Republican Pawlenty twice won the governor's office. That's an accomplishment in itself given Minnesota's liberal heroes: Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Walter Mondale, and others.

Even in a liberal state, Pawlenty received higher marks from the libertarian Cato Institute than most of his colleagues - Democratic or Republican - on fiscal matters. He took a "no new taxes" pledge before his first gubernatorial run and by and large honored it. Republican governors before him were not known for being firm on taxes, and tax-and-spend Democrats controlled all or part of the Legislature during Pawlenty's tenure.

He can rightfully boast of moving Minnesota out of the list of the ten most-taxed states. But "no new taxes" is not enough to fix the major fiscal problems facing Minnesota and the nation.

During the '90s, Minnesota started heading for a structural deficit. That deficit has arrived, and both Pawlenty and the Legislature share the blame for not addressing it. The governor used accounting shifts to avert the need for major tax increases, and Democrats used them to avert the need for major structural reform.

Some question whether Pawlenty is in fact a conservative. I don't doubt that is ideologically conservative. But his temperament often gets in the way of being a force for conservative reform.

Too engaged when it's easy, not enough when it's hard

Pawlenty is smart and engaged on policy questions, able to understand a problem and its nuances. Unfortunately, that opens him to the charge of being a micromanager. Being a nerd, like Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, can be a good thing. But can Pawlenty successfully engineer a fix to the problems he sees?

I give him an incomplete. He has pushed some minor reforms to completion, but political observers - and not just conservatives - would have liked to see some major changes in the state's direction.

Why didn't Pawlenty accomplish more during his eight years? Defenders point to the Legislature, but I think

he was too risk-adverse. He was well-known for launching a reform initiative - then dropping it. Late in his term, for example, he suggested a spending cap. But within a month, the issue had disappeared off the radar.

In my conversations with fellow Minnesotans, I've hear the phrase: "he throws people under the bus." The most notable case may be that of Cheri Pierson Yecke, his one-time education chief. She helped undo a set of curriculum standards widely despised by conservatives. For her trouble, she was tossed from her job by a Senate that refused to confirm her. Pawlenty used little political capital to save her.

The Overton Window

Pawlenty's severest conservative critics call him a big-government Republican - a chameleon. They cite, for example, his advocacy of cap-and-trade and ethanol mandates.

To understand Pawlenty consider the Overton Window (developed by the Mackinac Center, for which I've written on occasion). To oversimplify, the Overton Window says that politicians do what is within the boundaries of ideas that are widely acceptable at the time. Think tanks, advocacy groups and popular movements may cause the boundaries to move (for example, school choice is now much more accepted), but politicians are seldom the ones to cause those boundaries to change.

I suspect Pawlenty developed a genuine interest in environmental issues, and at the same time thought that the Overton Window was moving to make cap-and-trade acceptable. But he received significant push back from his own party, and he has now recanted his support for cap and trade.

Being sensitive to political consequences isn't necessarily a bad thing. Politicians who act on their convictions - the public be damned - bring us abominations like Obamacare. I'm glad Pawlenty is now speaking out against ethanol subsidies - even if he is doing so because he thinks it is politically useful.

President Pawlenty would need to exhibit less "Minnesota Nice" and more junkyard dog.

But as we say about many things in Minnesota: we could do worse.

John R. LaPlante, a native Michigander, now lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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