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Tea time for T-Paw

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Tim Pawlenty's big address to a prominent tea party group Saturday is his biggest audition yet to a constituency for which he's hardly an ideal fit — stylistically, at least.

The former Minnesota governor doesn't lob rhetorical grenades like Sarah Palin. He's not unapologetically blunt like Chris Christie, nor is he a conservative power broker like Jim DeMint.

That's why scoring the prime speaking slot at the Tea Party Patriots' policy summit in Phoenix was such a coup — and why it's a key opportunity for Pawlenty to continue what's been something of a teeth-sharpening exercise of recent weeks.

The mild-mannered Pawlenty has been less so of late, as he tries to dispel the “too nice” label that follows his presidential ambitions. And when it comes to his own credentials as a fiscal conservative, his supporters argue he's got the goods as much as any tea party favorite.

That appeal will be put to the test during his address to roughly 2,000 grass-roots activists Saturday and a presidential straw poll the following day. Pawlenty's more pointed rhetoric recently has won at least some fans in the movement.

“He came out so strongly against [raising] the debt ceiling,” said Jenny Beth Martin, a national coordinator for Tea Party Patriots. “That's very attractive to a lot of our supporters.”

Pawlenty backers say he's been espousing tea party values since before the movement even took shape. He was one of just four governors to earn an A on the libertarian Cato Institute's most recent fiscal report card. He balanced a \$4.3 billion budget deficit without raising taxes, and held out during a long transit strike to win health care cost concessions from bus drivers. And during his two terms in St. Paul, he issued 299 vetoes, blocking tax hikes on everything from gasoline to beer. He does acknowledge regret for enacting a compromise 75-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes during a partial government shutdown.

“People don't know this side of him very well, but when he was a state legislator, he was the rabble-rouser for House Republicans in Minnesota,” former deputy chief of staff Brian McClung said. “He was the guy with the one-liners and the quick wit, who took the rabble to the Democrats directly.”

During tomorrow's speech, Pawlenty will again advocate against increases in the debt ceiling, as well as for repealing President Barack Obama's health care reform law, an aide told POLITICO. He'll share stories of his own successes cutting costs and battling unions in left-of-center Minnesota, the aide said, and will also thank the tea party for its passion: The movement captured the House, he will say, and elected GOP leaders elsewhere like Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker.

For some tea party activists, Pawlenty — shortlisted for vice president in 2008 and former

vice chairman of the Republican Governors Association — is just too enmeshed with GOP leadership to be trusted. “He’s more establishment,” said Jennifer Leslie, a Tucson, Ariz., coordinator for the conservative women’s group Smart Girl Politics.

“I like him, but I’m wary of any of them right now,” said Ginny Rapini, head of the NorCal Tea Party Patriots. “He might be on the right track now, but who knows how long he’ll stay there? Sometimes they drink the water of the Potomac.”

Pawlenty is competing for the spotlight this weekend with long-shot presidential hopeful Herman Cain and libertarian folk hero Ron Paul. The thin list of attractions is a big opportunity for Pawlenty to continue dishing out the conservative red meat he’s grown more comfortable serving recently. He’s lashed out public sector union workers as the “most protected, coddled employees in the country,” and called Obama’s spending policies a “Ponzi scheme.”

“Now, I’m not one who questions the existence of the president’s birth certificate,” he said recently at CPAC. “But when you listen to his policies, don’t you at least wonder what planet he’s from?”

Not everyone is happy with T-Paw’s new tack. David Frum, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, lamented a lack of seriousness. “Pawlenty is running a campaign of gimmicks and slogans that do not meet scrutiny,” he wrote recently.

Saturday’s speech is a chance for Pawlenty to strike the right balance.

“Instead of being rally speeches or protest speeches which excite the crowd,” said Martin, the Tea Party Patriots’ national coordinator, “they’re going to be more thoughtful, policy-oriented speeches.”