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Pawlenty reaches out to free-market conservatives

By [Amy Gardner](#), Published: May 25

If the demurrals of Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie have left small-government conservatives aching for a standard-bearer to seek the GOP presidential nomination, former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty is hoping to persuade them this week that he's their man.

On Wednesday, Pawlenty made a direct appeal to a gathering of conservatives in downtown Washington, pledging to place a temporary freeze on public employee salaries and to cut one in two federal jobs through attrition.

The venue, the libertarian Cato Institute, was rich with the symbolism of what Pawlenty was hoping to do: fill the free-enterprise space that many Republicans had hoped Daniels or Christie would step into — and demonstrate that he was up to the task.

“We can't have federal employees getting a better deal than the people paying the bill — and that's the taxpayer,” Pawlenty said at the third stop of a week-long swing across the country that began Monday with the official kickoff of his presidential campaign.

It has been a week of symbolic backdrops. In Iowa, where the ethanol lobby has held an iron grip on political discourse, Pawlenty promised to end ethanol subsidies. In Florida, where politicians historically have courted an older population by promising to protect entitlement programs, he pledged to stem the runaway costs of Social Security and Medicare by tightening benefits. And in New York on Friday, he will take aim at the bailouts of big businesses and Wall Street, which he said helped run up the nation's debt in recent years.

“That's the kind of spirit we're going to have, which is to speak truth to what the real problem is and not have any sacred cows,” Pawlenty said. “And those are some of the examples.”

The Cato Institute was an appropriate setting for Pawlenty to emphasize not only how he hopes to rein in government spending but to talk up his fiscal accomplishments during eight years as governor of Minnesota.

“I think he probably views Cato as a symbolic venue for making it clear he's serious about spending reductions,” said Edward Crane, the institute's founder and president. “He was one of four governors last year to get an 'A' grade from our fiscal report card. And he earned it. He did a good job there against a legislature that was very much against him.”

Whether Pawlenty succeeds in rallying the free-market crowd around him remains to be seen. Crane said that many such thinkers continue to hold out hope that Christie will reconsider as the year goes on — particularly if none of the current contenders gains ground against President Obama in public polls.

Others suggested that the rise of the tea party helped decentralize the limited-government movement, meaning that Pawlenty — and others — will have to do more than give a speech at Cato to earn the support of activists.

“I don’t think you can go to one place anymore and get the blessing of a kingmaker,” said Matt Kibbe, president of free-market organization FreedomWorks. “Citizens all over the country that basically represent tea party values, they want to sacred cows challenged. They want to see real solutions to our spending and debt crisis. A lot of the candidates on the Republican side are now talking the talk. But how do you prove to the activists that you actually mean it?”

Pawlenty faced that question on Wednesday, when he said that his proposed salary freeze for federal workers would not apply to military personnel. “I’m not one who is going to stand before you and tell you we should cut the defense budget,” he said.

Crane noted that Pawlenty’s answer was at odds with Cato’s position on military spending, which Crane said is different from defense spending.

“The Constitution provides for a military to defend the U.S. — not to democratize the world,” Crane said. “One would hope that presidential candidates would consider America’s commitments overseas very seriously before endorsing those commitments.”

Pawlenty also had little to say about the Republican plan to overhaul Medicare, which some GOP leaders are blaming for the party’s loss of a special congressional election Tuesday in a heavily Republican district in Upstate New York. Asked what he thought of the Ryan plan in the wake of Tuesday’s results, Pawlenty credited Ryan for a “courageous” plan but said he would put out his own, different proposal soon.

Pawlenty also faced a barrage of criticism from Democratic Party leaders who pointed out that Pawlenty’s claims to have reduced spending and balanced budgets in Minnesota failed to mention that he did so in part with help from federal stimulus dollars.

Critics also noted that Obama froze pay for federal employees for two years beginning last fall. Pawlenty said his freeze would last until federal salaries matched comparable salaries in the private sector.

Democratic National Committee spokesman Brad Woodhouse referred to Pawlenty’s “smoke and mirrors” fiscal record as governor, which he said included “accounting tricks, a well-timed infusion of stimulus money from Washington and word games.”

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