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FACTBOX-Key issues for possible US 2012 Republican candidates

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Source: Reuters // Reuters

April 12 (Reuters) - Republicans who are considering a possible run for the White House in 2012 each come with their own set of defining issues.

Here is a list of potential Republican candidates and their main policy issues as they consider whether to seek their party's nomination to challenge Democratic President Barack Obama next year.

TIM PAWLENTY

The first prominent Republican to take a formal step toward becoming a candidate, Pawlenty is credited with tackling a \$4.3 billion deficit without raising taxes while Minnesota governor. He espouses the principle that government should never spend more money than it receives in tax revenue.

He has weighed into the next big federal budget fight, urging Republicans in the U.S. Congress to block an increase in the government debt limit in the coming weeks. He has asked them to pass legislation putting interest and debt payments ahead of other federal spending to ensure that tax revenues go to creditors until spending can be cut back dramatically.

Pawlenty favors a balanced-budget amendment and wants restructurings and reforms for entitlement programs, including means-tested cost-of-living adjustments for Social Security and a performance-pay system for Medicare, the health insurance program for the elderly.

Pawlenty's biggest issue may be his own public persona as a soft-spoken nice guy. Pundits say his candidacy could lack the force of personality necessary to persevere in the cut and thrust of presidential politics.

MITT ROMNEY

The former Massachusetts governor would run a campaign on the all-important issues of job creation and economic growth, drawing from his long and successful track record in business consulting and investment.

But his business-oriented world view could be a double-edged sword. As chief executive of the private equity firm Bain Capital, Romney oversaw hundreds of job cuts and the shuttering of two manufacturing plants at a company his firm acquired in the 1990s.

Obama's healthcare overhaul, despised by many Republican voters, also presents Romney with a challenge. As governor, he signed a similar reform that expanded health coverage in Massachusetts through a system of subsidies and mandates.

As a one-time moderate who has embraced conservatism, he would also be vulnerable to the same "flip-flopper" label that dogged his unsuccessful 2008

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presidential campaign on hot-button issues including abortion.

Like Pawlenty, Romney has formed an exploratory committee for a possible 2012 run.

NEWT GINGRICH

The former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives faces challenges on social and moral issues -- he is married to his third wife, with whom he had an affair while he was married to his second wife.

He professes strong religious beliefs but has perplexed anti-abortion activists by saying that abortion should not be legal without calling it a crime.

On the issue of gay marriage, he favors a constitutional amendment "to protect the traditional family" but believes homosexual couples should have some legal rights.

Asked if he believed homosexuality is a sin, Gingrich told one Christian conservative interviewer: "I think you have to. But I also believe that all of us are sinners."

HALEY BARBOUR

Like Pawlenty, the current governor of Mississippi would enter the race with a strong track record for balancing budgets by cutting spending and holding the line against tax rises. He can also claim success at creating jobs by attracting business investment and handling the Hurricane Katrina disaster well.

But his fiscal record is not without its critics. The libertarian Cato Institute gave him low to middling grades on state finances, saying per capita spending increased during his tenure and that he raised taxes on cigarettes and reinstated a lapsed hospital tax.

Critics have also sought to define Barbour as a Washington insider who worked as a lobbyist for Big Tobacco and headed up the Republican National Committee. Last year, he encountered a firestorm of criticism after appearing in an interview to play down civil rights era racial tensions in Mississippi.

MITCH DANIELS

Daniels, who directed the White House Office of Management and Budget under former President George W. Bush, is a two-term governor defined by expertise on budgets, jobs and the economy.

When he became governor of Indiana, state finances showed a \$645 million deficit and \$170 million in IOUs to schools. But Daniels' tight fiscal policies led to a AAA bond rating for Indiana in 2008, while his strategy of offering tax incentives for new business investments claimed credit for creating tens of thousands of new jobs.

But the accolades have not been unanimous among tax purists. Daniels proposed a rise in sales taxes as an incentive in exchange for capping property taxes. He has also not been wholly successful at limiting government spending.

He drew fire last year for saying he could be open to a new value-added tax as part of an overhaul of the U.S. tax system.

SARAH PALIN

One of the most prominent Republicans on the national stage, Palin commands a strong profile on staple conservative issues from balancing the budget and energy deregulation to gun-owner rights and abortion.

The former Alaska governor, who converted her status as the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee into media celebrity, withdrew from the policy spotlight after missteps that followed the January assassination attempt against Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords.

Palin was widely criticized for using the anti-Semitic term "blood libel" in response to accusations that she should be blamed for the shooting after placing the image of a rifle cross-hairs over Giffords' congressional district as a 2010 campaign gimmick. Giffords is Jewish.

Palin's political future is also clouded by questions about her qualifications for national office and poll numbers that show high unfavorable ratings.

MIKE HUCKABEE

The former Arkansas governor and ordained Baptist minister is a favorite among Christian conservatives, particularly in the early voting state of Iowa, for the populist conservative views that define him as a public figure.

He credits his clergyman's experience in dealing with the crises and tragedies of human life as providing him with special insights as a politician.

But Huckabee lacks experience on defense and foreign policy issues and even his vaunted social conservatism limits his appeal among independent and Democratic swing voters without whom no Republican can hope to capture the White House from Obama.

He is also dogged by controversy over clemency orders he signed as Arkansas governor, including the release of a convicted burglar who was later shot dead by police while being sought in the murder of four police officers.

JON HUNTSMAN

The former Utah governor cannot join the political stump circuit while serving as Obama's U.S. ambassador to China, which he remains through April.

But he is already on record as governor in favoring the legalization of same-sex unions, a position that is bound to alienate social conservatives in states like Iowa.

White House officials say Huntsman supported Obama's domestic agenda, including healthcare reform. (Reporting by David Morgan; editing by Mohammad Zargham)

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