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## Mapping Pawlenty's path

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**Tim Pawlenty** kicked off his presidential campaign Monday with a [two-minute Facebook video](#) that highlights his blue-collar background. He's running as a conservative populist, the son of a truck driver, a kid who grew up in the stockyards of South St. Paul.

But the former two-term Minnesota governor's path to the GOP nomination might have less to do with his working-class roots than with the space he occupies in the [2012 field](#): Pawlenty, the first bona fide GOP hopeful to formally create an exploratory committee, has an opening as the least objectionable candidate.

The idea is to present himself as a compromise candidate for fiscal and social conservatives, without the baggage of his rivals.

"He is a guy who can comfortably unify the entire conservative coalition, and it's important to think of it in those terms," said former Minnesota Congressman Vin Weber, one of Pawlenty's most prominent supporters. "He can unite the coalition that it takes to elect a Republican probably as well, or better, than anyone I can think of."

"He has a record on fiscal issues as governor that will make him quite attractive to the tea party fiscal types, to the anti-tax people," Weber added. "He's also a member of an evangelical church, pastored by the president of the National Association of Evangelicals."

Pawlenty, 50, is betting that jumping in early will improve his name ID and position him as a top tier contender in a wide open race that lacks a strong front-runner. It's a contest he's been preparing for intently since John McCain passed him over for the vice presidential nomination in 2008.

By forming an exploratory committee, Pawlenty can begin raising money that can directly fund a presidential race.

For the former governor, early success in [Iowa](#), which neighbors his home state, will be critical to his hopes of sustaining his candidacy through next February. [Mitt Romney](#), the former Massachusetts governor, is the favorite to win the following week in New Hampshire.

Former Republican National Committee political director Mike DuHaime, who ran New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's presidential campaign in 2008, said Pawlenty will be in a position to win Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses.

"A win in Iowa would allow him to compete in the rest of the early states and then in the second round," said DuHaime, who has not committed to any candidate for 2012. "If you're Tim Pawlenty, you don't need to win every one of the early states. If he were to win Iowa, then he has the potential to be one of the two or three people who come out of the early states."

With a softer rhetorical style that he couples with strong pitches to each constituency of the conservative movement, Pawlenty doesn't alienate any wing of the party and has some

appeal to all of them. He's addressed a recent Tea Party Patriots conference, rallied evangelical audiences in Iowa and attended small house parties in New Hampshire.

"I can see him appealing in Iowa as sort of a Midwestern, awe-shucks type guy...but he's also got enough feistiness that the people in New Hampshire will like," Greg Mueller, a veteran conservative political consultant who is uncommitted, said of Pawlenty. "Those two things will be very important, and it's going to be very important to project those."

The biggest knock on Pawlenty, though, is that he's an unexciting candidate—not nearly charismatic enough to win the nomination. One well-known Republican consultant, who didn't want to speak on record because he's still trying to decide who to work for, said he likes Pawlenty personally but isn't sure he can break through as a candidate.

"The populist I-relate-to-you, I-understand-you piece is compelling, more compelling now than it would have been a couple years ago," he said. "The question is, in a crowded field, how do you define yourself in a way that preserves your authenticity? ... When he tries to be excitable it comes across as inauthentic, which is even worse."

Pawlenty's advisers insist that humble likability is an asset in an era of flashy and polarizing candidates. Many supporters insist that he's not as dull as the stereotype holds, and that he has a more authentic voice in speaking to average voters than someone like former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

True to the "Minnesota nice" image, Pawlenty has been reluctant to attack other likely 2012 contenders. He tiptoes around criticism of former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and he's avoided criticizing Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels' proposed "truce" on social issues. He's brushed off repeated questions about the Massachusetts health care law that has conservatives so suspicious of Romney.

One serious Pawlenty problem will be fundraising. The self-described Sam's Club Republican never made much money as a lawyer in private practice since he's been in politics for nearly two decades. So he lacks the personal wealth of Mitt Romney or the fundraising network of former lobbyist and Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour.

Phil Musser, who heads Pawlenty's political action committee, told donors on a Monday morning conference call that they should hold off on giving until April 1—a deliberate move to dampen expectations for the fundraising numbers that Pawlenty will need to file for the first quarter, which ends March 31, 2011.

Pawlenty's other serious obstacle: He remains largely unknown. When asked their opinion of Tim Pawlenty, about six in 10 Republicans replied "don't know," according to a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll.

His main pitch will center on his eight-year record as governor. In his telling, Pawlenty never raised taxes and allowed a partial shutdown of state government in 2005 to face down a Democratic-controlled legislature.

He vetoed four income and other tax hikes during the recession, a stance that earned him an "A" from the Cato Institute last September—making him one of only four governors to get the best grade. While state spending increased an average of 21 percent every two-year budget cycle from 1960 to 2002, Pawlenty held spending growth to an average of less than two percent annually during his time on office.

The former governor will also be able to talk about his challenges to public sector labor unions. On education, he battled the state's powerful teachers' union to pass the first statewide merit-based pay program for teachers. He also held out during a 44-day transit worker strike in the Twin Cities and took away lifetime health benefits for some bus drivers.

The video that Pawlenty posted Monday stressed his fiscal hawk credentials but anti-abortion activists and evangelicals also praise his record.

Because Pawlenty doesn't wear his faith on his sleeve, Weber argued that his social conservatism won't drive fiscal-oriented voters away.

"He's an evangelical of the Midwest persuasion, not the Southern persuasion. And there's a difference," he said. "He's a little more reticent, and I think that will give the non-social conservatives in the Republican Party a higher comfort level than someone that's a little bit more emotive."

Pawlenty has worked as hard as anyone to lay the groundwork for a campaign, which led to criticism during the last two years of his governorship that he was neglecting Minnesota to burnish his national profile. He published a well-received memoir in January that allowed him to hit the early states on an ambitious book tour.

In the 14 months before the midterm elections, he participated in 187 political events during the course of 79 trips to 31 states. His Freedom First PAC raised \$3.5 million and donated \$380,000 to 208 candidates before Election Day.

"They've done a fabulous job getting him into the spotlight as one of the major contenders," said Mueller. "The next escalation of that will be the Iowa straw poll. That's the real test of whether you're resonating in Iowa."