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Grading Pawlenty

Yes, he received an A from the Cato Institute — on one report out of four.

Tim Pawlenty is not bashful when it comes to touting the A grade that the Cato Institute gave him in 2010 for his handling of fiscal issues as governor of Minnesota.

“I was just one of four governors in the country named by the Cato Institute to get an A grade in terms of fiscally conservative discipline,” he told CBN last October. In February, during an appearance on the *Today* show, Pawlenty said, “I’m only one of four governors in the country that got an A from the Cato Institute for the best fiscal discipline and management in the United States of America.” In March, he told Fox News’s Sean Hannity that “the Cato Institute gave me one of four A grades for governors in the country, one of four.” And in case Hannity had forgotten since then, Pawlenty repeated the fact on Hannity’s show earlier this week: “The Cato Institute gave me an A grade, one of only four governors in the country to get that grade.”

No doubt, Pawlenty’s A is impressive. But it’s the only one he received, despite being graded four times. In 2005, Pawlenty received a B. He sank to a C in 2006 and rose back to a B in 2008.

While Pawlenty received a glowing write-up from Cato in 2010, other years’ assessments were mixed. In early 2005, he was praised for making “good use of his executive authority to cut spending,” but urged to propose tax cuts. The following year, the report was grimmer, stating that Pawlenty had “started looking like a big spender. His [2005] budget . . . boosted spending by close to 6 percent mainly fueled by a casino license fee.” In 2008, there was concern over his corporate-tax hike and his backing of “substantial increases in fees and charges,” but there was also admiration for Pawlenty’s “impressive” list of vetoes, “including rejecting a gasoline tax increase, a hike in the top personal income tax rate, and various bloated spending bills.”

Generally, Pawlenty’s grades were about on par with the other governors now considering a 2012 bid. Utah governor Jon Huntsman got B’s in 2006 and 2008. Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney was dinged with C’s in both 2004 and 2006. The worst grade went to Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, who received a D in 2006 for his “abysmal” tax record, including “his endorsement of higher taxes.” Daniels received B’s in 2008 and 2010.

Pawlenty, however, can point out that he is the only GOP governor considering a bid who has ever received an A. Chris Edwards, director of tax-policy studies at the Cato Institute and writer of the report in recent years, speaks highly of Pawlenty. “Based on his performance as governor, he’s likely to follow a pretty limited-government approach if he is elected president, more so than a governor who got a B or a C,” Edwards says.

He also says that Pawlenty did “very well” his last five years in office “in restraining spending and opposing tax increases.”

But ultimately, nabbing an A grade doesn’t guarantee a candidate conservative votes. Another governor who received an A from Cato? Florida’s Charlie Crist.

— *Katrina Trinko is an NRO staff reporter.*