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Pawlenty has the edge on Republican populism

By Michael Gerson, Published: May 16

The [refusal of Mike Huckabee](#) to enter the 2012 presidential race leaves a gap — and not just a gap of social conservatism. Huckabee was also the Republican Party's leading practitioner of economic populism.

Compared to his GOP rivals four years ago, Huckabee sounded like William Jennings Bryan — a comparison that would probably offend Huckabee less than it would most Republicans. He complained about overpaid chief executives and talked sympathetically of “people at the lower ends of the economic scale.” His own up-from-poverty struggle lent credibility to his message.

Free-market purists went hard after Huckabee's record as Arkansas governor — his tax increases, his statewide smoking ban, his 21 percent increase in the state minimum wage. Conservative activist Richard Viguerie tagged him a “Christian socialist.”

But Huckabee gave at least as good as he got. He dismissed the libertarian Club for Growth, which ran ads against him, as the “club for greed.” After an attack by Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform, [Huckabee responded](#), “Grover's never been in government, doesn't have to balance a state budget. . . . Grover's never been in a situation where he couldn't borrow money so he didn't have to raise taxes or tell old people he's just going to take them out of the nursing home and drop them on the curb.”

During his 2008 presidential run, Huckabee's themes were more developed than his policies. His “fair tax” proposal — replacing the progressive income tax with a national sales tax — was not a natural populist cause. But when the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers came to make their [presidential endorsement](#), they picked both Hillary Clinton and Mike Huckabee.

Nowadays there is limited Republican demand for economic populism. Among the current crop of GOP candidates, past activism on issues such as health reform is a more damaging scandal than past adultery. But beyond the primaries, a Republican nominee will require a more hopeful message than just budget cuts. A failing education system and a skills deficit have left America with lower socioeconomic mobility than many European countries. A winning candidate will need to talk not only about austerity but about opportunity.

Which Republican has the best chance of crafting a general-election message of economic mobility? A serious case can be made for Tim Pawlenty.

Pawlenty is both less vivid and more conservative than Huckabee. In Minnesota, he was a budget-balancing, anti-tax governor who presided over his own government shutdown. He received an [“A” on the](#)



[fiscal scorecard](#) of the libertarian Cato Institute. [Huckabee got a “D.”](#) The former Minnesota governor was introduced at the 2010 CPAC conference by Norquist, who stated that Pawlenty had “governed as a conservative.”

But Pawlenty also governed as a reformer with populist instincts — an approach he calls “Sam’s Club Republicanism.” As governor, he raised education standards, supported the reimportation of prescription drugs from Canada, agreed to increase the state cigarette tax, proposed subsidies for alternative energy and pushed for innovative, market-based health reforms. This agenda allowed Pawlenty to win (narrow) victories in a blue state. “If you look,” he has argued, “at the brilliance of Reagan and Teddy Roosevelt and Lincoln . . . they weren’t status quo people. They were change agents. They were populists — with conservative credentials.”

Pawlenty is attempting to demonstrate the “conservative credentials” portion of that formulation by appealing directly to Tea Party audiences. Given his admirable handicap of Minnesota niceness, Pawlenty’s attempts at partisan outrage can seem awkward. He could get a “Don’t Tread on Me” tattoo and still not secure a majority of Tea Party support. But gaining a significant minority is not hopeless. His fiscal credentials are strong. And many in the Tea Party movement — by some estimates, nearly half — are religious conservatives, of whom Pawlenty is one. The strongest argument for Pawlenty’s candidacy is his acceptability to some Tea Party voters, to mainstream Republicans and eventually to independents. His support may lack gusto, but it has great potential breadth.

In a general election, Pawlenty could return to populist themes with an ease many of his competitors could not. His blue-collar background gives him standing. His record as governor shows evidence of creative outreach — the application of conservative and free-market ideas to the task of increasing economic mobility. He does not view empathy as an ideological crime.

Pawlenty will not be confused with William Jennings Bryan. But he may be the strongest Republican populist who can also secure his party’s nomination.

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