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Bachmann's order of business is change

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WASHINGTON – Her first order of business is well-known: Repeal “Obamacare.”

That’s the issue that thrust Michele Bachmann into the national spotlight and has provided a rallying cry for her White House campaign.

But that’s only the tip of a Tea Party-style agenda that has helped frame the GOP presidential race so far, even as Bachmann has fallen precipitously in the polls.

Bachmann’s views on taxes and spending, her rejection of federal food safety regulations and her denouncements of the Arab Spring uprisings are all signs of how she would wield power in Washington very differently from those who have gone before.

The massive tax and spending cuts she is championing on the campaign trail, for example, are more radical than any Congress or the White House has ever seriously considered.

“The first bill I would send to Congress would be the one to turn the economy around, and that would be dealing with the tax code,” Bachmann said at a recent campaign stop in Virginia. Her administration would start with dramatic cuts in corporate taxes, she said, then move to “lower the regulatory burden” on companies, including the Wall Street reforms passed in response to the nation’s financial crisis and the insurance requirements imposed under President Obama’s health care law.

“The repeal of Obamacare needs to be a part of that package as well,” Bachmann said.

But friends and foes alike say that given the current partisan gridlock, Bachmann’s Tea Party opposition to this summer’s debt ceiling compromise would be politically problematic as president. For example, analysts across the political spectrum agree her strategy for avoiding national default — largely limiting federal payments to interest on the debt — would require a minimum 35 percent across-the-board reduction in the size of the government.

“Congress wets its pants and the special interest groups cry bloody murder if you just tell them that their budgets can be increased only 5 percent instead of 7 percent,” said Cato Institute economist Daniel Mitchell, a conservative who is sympathetic to Bachmann’s reform efforts. “So a 35 percent actual reduction, that is a real spending cut — not a phony cut — might be economically desirable, but politically I don’t see it happening.”

‘You would see a firestorm’

To Bachmann’s Democratic critics, that would be a good thing. “There would be a huge fight,” said Minnesota budget expert Steve Francisco, a veteran federal lobbyist and aide to the late Rep. Bruce Vento. “When you start seeing hard numbers applied to specific programs and if it results in slashing Medicare, Medicaid and possibly Social Security benefits, I think you would

see a firestorm that might make the health care debate look like a picnic.”

Bachmann has been mostly silent about specific cuts she would make as president, apart from her frequent references to turning out the lights at the Department of Education and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Earlier this year she detailed \$430 billion in potential budget cuts. A conservative wish list of federal programs laid out what she would like to see downsized or eliminated, from farm subsidies to homeland security grants. But that would be a tiny down payment on the small-government agenda she has preached on the stump.

One guide would be her vote for the House GOP budget plan drafted by Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. That plan would cut the deficit by trillions over a decade and turn Medicare into a voucher program. But it still would not eliminate the nation's debt in the four to eight years Bachmann could occupy the White House.

To stay under the current debt ceiling, a Bachmann White House would have to cut much deeper than the Ryan plan, to the tune of an additional \$6 trillion over the next decade.

Bachmann's critics are quick to note the discrepancy between her support for the Ryan budget and her opposition to raising the debt level needed to finance it. But one thing is certain: A Bachmann presidency would challenge Congress to deliver spending cuts far deeper than the ones that nearly shut down the federal government three times this year.

“To prevent any future increases in the debt, one would have to balance the budget starting right now,” said Brookings Institution scholar Bill Frenzel, a Minnesota Republican who once served on the U.S. House Budget Committee. “It is beyond the realm of possibility.”

Role of marriage

A Bachmann presidency — a long shot given her single-digit standing in the polls — could conceivably be helped by a future Republican Congress that provided a smoother path for her agenda. “It can be done with Washington leadership that is committed to rolling back the federal government to its level of a decade ago,” said Ed Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation, a prominent conservative think tank.

Still, Bachmann could not be guaranteed a pliant partnership with congressional Republicans, who tend to see her as anything but a team player and who have kept her outside their leadership circle.

Even less certain would be Bachmann's impact on the debates over abortion and same-sex marriage. Bachmann cut her teeth in politics opposing abortion and gay rights, but those battles are largely being fought in the courts and on state ballot initiatives, where the White House can do little more than work its bully pulpit.

As commander in chief, Bachmann could be expected to reinstate the ban on being openly gay in the military. But the issue of same-sex unions puts her on the edge between her opposition to gay marriage and her support for states' rights. She supports a federal constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman, but has said that, as president, she “would not be going into the states to overturn their state law.”

Some religious conservatives might expect more, Twin Cities ministry director Gary Borgendale said. “I think there'd be more pressure, and there should be, because of the support that comes

out of the evangelical base.”

Perhaps the biggest question Bachmann’s campaign leaves unanswered is the role her husband would play as “first gentleman,” a phrase he used in a recent fundraising pitch in which he assured supporters that a potential President Bachmann “will not be influenced by lobbyists, special interest groups or the Washington bubble of elitists.”

He did not spell out what influence he would wield in a Bachmann White House. Bachmann has told audiences that in her biblical view of marriage, she has deferred to his marital authority. But she also told a group of Christian students at Liberty University recently that she sees the presidency as a secular position that would give her no “spiritual authority over a man.”

The Bachmann campaign did not respond to an inquiry about the role he would play in her administration.

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