



On budget, Santorum looks to out-cut rivals

By Erik Wasson - 01/09/12 05:00 AM ET

Republican White House hopeful Rick Santorum is proposing cuts to the federal budget that are firmly to the right of Republicans in Congress and his rivals for the GOP nomination.

Santorum's goal of cutting \$5 trillion in federal spending over five years exceeds any budget-cutting proposal put forward by the congressional GOP. He would cut federal spending faster and deeper than the budget plans from House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and the conservative House Republican Study Committee.

The cuts in Santorum's budget even trump Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who has proposed eliminating four Cabinet departments.

The House-passed 2012 GOP budget would cut spending by over \$1 trillion over five years, while the RSC would cut it by \$2.3 trillion and Paul's would cut it by \$3 trillion, when compared to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) baseline.

Santorum, a former Pennsylvania senator, has tried to distinguish himself from his rivals for the GOP nomination with his budget plan. But the approach also carries political risks, as his plan would almost certainly require immediate benefit cuts for current retirees, leaving him vulnerable to charges that he would destroy the safety net for seniors.

Mitt Romney, who beat Santorum in the Iowa caucuses by only eight votes, has said he supports a "cut, cap and balance" plan that would bring spending down to 20 percent of the economy from the current 24 percent.

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This plan puts him in line with the numbers in the House-passed budget, which was the basis of the House's "cut, cap and balance" bill this summer. The House budget gets to 20 percent over 10 years by cutting \$5 trillion.

Candidate Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), who is also polling strongly in the GOP race, has released a full budget proposal that would eliminate five Cabinet departments, but that four-year plan would rack up only \$4.1 trillion in cuts by 2016, compared to the CBO baseline.

To get the level of savings Santorum wants, he is calling for the House plan authored by Ryan to be sped up when it comes to changes to Medicare.

The Medicare plan in the House budget, which includes premium support payments to help cover the healthcare costs of seniors, would only apply to retirees from 2022 onward.

But Santorum would need the premium-support plan to start in the next few years to reach his \$5 trillion target, experts say.

The candidate does not offer a complete budget proposal on his website. Instead, he says he would scour proposals from The Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, CATO Institute and the report of President Obama's fiscal commission for more ideas.

His list of 22 ideas includes freezing spending on major poverty programs like Medicaid, housing assistance, education, job training and food stamps.

The list also includes a four-year pay freeze for federal workers, and halving the number of foreign aid workers. Experts said those proposals, which also appear in the RSC budget, do not get Santorum to \$5 trillion in cuts.

Santorum said Thursday he would not cut any funds from the Pentagon budget. Without defense cuts or revenue increases, which Santorum opposes, Medicare would be the only viable place left to find large budget savings.

Steve Bell, a former GOP aide now at the Bipartisan Policy Center, said the steepness of the cuts means the plan "will never happen, even if Santorum were elected president."

"If Santorum wants to cut projected deficits by \$5 trillion the next five years, I personally believe that is extremely difficult to do, unless he is willing to cut present entitlement beneficiaries and raise some net new revenues," Bell said. "Now, theoretically, of course you can put numbers down on a piece of paper that yields \$5 trillion."

"It is a laundry list. It is not really a budget," Bob Bixby of The Concord Coalition said. "It is just a lot of bromides. ... You have to do all this stuff and more."

The deficit hawk said Santorum is to be commended for trying to deal with entitlements, but cutting trillions so quickly would be “instant austerity” that could kill the economy.

Bixby said Romney’s plan to cap spending at 20 percent of gross domestic product is “the safer route.”

Santorum’s plan “is so far out of the realm of realistic that I don’t spend too much time worrying about it,” Bixby said.

“It’s hard not to laugh,” Becky Theiss of the liberal Economic Policy Institute said of the Santorum numbers. “Just looking at CBO’s baseline budget projections, \$5 trillion in five years would mean essentially eradicating the entire discretionary budget, or around half of the mandatory budget.”

“Five trillion from 2012-2016 is literally getting rid of federal spending on Medicare, Medicaid, health insurance subsidies and exchanges, and [children’s health insurance]. I’m not quite sure that would fly with the American people,” she added.

“Our economy would completely nosedive and our government would be a shell of its former self,” Theiss said.

The Santorum campaign did not respond to requests for comment.